

**THE PROCESS OF LEARNING TO READ IN ENGLISH IN
SECOND GRADE IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN
FINLAND**

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Abstract

English has become a global language of communication and reading is one of the skills learners need to master in order to be competent users. Moreover, nowadays written language is a feature of the human environment, thus this leads to trying to make sense of it through reading. This study aims to examine the process of learning to read in English in an international school in Finland. For this purpose, second grade teachers from an international Finnish school were asked to answer a questionnaire about their opinions and perceptions towards learning to read in English. Additionally, systematic observations were carried out considering different reading practices at this school. The results drew attention to offering a literate environment to the learners, consider them competent readers and use interactions purposefully in literacy lessons. Therefore, the study presents a perspective on learning to read in English in a specific context.

Key words: reading, international school, Primary education, teaching-learning process

Resum

L'anglès ha esdevingut una llengua global pel que fa a la comunicació i llegir és una de les habilitats que els seus aprenents necessiten controlar per tal de ser-ne usuaris competents. Així mateix, actualment el llenguatge escrit és una característica de l'entorn humà, aquest fet porta a intentar trobar-hi sentit a través de la lectura. Aquest estudi procura examinar el procés d'aprendre a llegir en anglès en una escola internacional de Finlàndia. Per aquest motiu, es va demanar a mestres de segon d'educació primària d'una escola internacional finesa que responguessin un qüestionari sobre les seves opinions i percepcions en relació a aprendre a llegir en anglès. A més, es van dur a terme observacions sistemàtiques de diferents pràctiques de lectura a l'escola. Els resultats van destacar la importància d'oferir un entorn de lectoescriptura als aprenents, considerar-los lectors competents i utilitzar les interaccions intencionadament a les classes de lectoescriptura. Conseqüentment, l'estudi presenta una perspectiva d'aprendre a llegir en anglès en un context específic.

Paraules clau: lectura, escola internacional, educació primària, procés d'ensenyament-aprenentatge

Resumen

El inglés ha devenido una lengua global de comunicación y leer es una de las habilidades que sus aprendices necesitan controlar con el fin de ser usuarios competentes. Además, actualmente el lenguaje escrito es una característica del entorno humano, eso lleva a intentar encontrarle sentido a través de la lectura. Este estudio pretende examinar el proceso de aprender a leer en inglés en una escuela internacional en Finlandia. Con este propósito, se pidió a maestros de segundo de educación primaria de una escuela internacional finlandesa que respondieran a un cuestionario acerca de sus opiniones y percepciones en relación a aprender a leer en inglés. Además, se llevaron a cabo observaciones sistemáticas de diferentes prácticas de lectura en la escuela. Los resultados destacaron la importancia de ofrecer un entorno de lectoescritura a los aprendices, considerarlos lectores competentes y utilizar las interacciones intencionadamente en las clases de lectoescritura. Consecuentemente, el estudio presenta una perspectiva de aprender a leer en inglés en un contexto específico.

Palabras clave: lectura, escuela internacional, educación primaria, proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje

1. Introduction

Nowadays English is considered a global language of communication, a lingua franca that more and more people around the world use for different types of exchanges. In order to make children become competent users of the language, Finnish international schools use English as a language of immersion. This fact implies that English is the language used to teach different subjects and that students are expected to use it in order to communicate while being in classroom. One of the four skills in language learning is reading and the process of learning plays a great role in Primary education. It is essential to master this skill to guarantee academic success in the following educational stages as well as in life outside the school.

Considering that the process of learning to read is determined by the materials, strategies and activities that are used to promote its development, this research had the objective of getting to know the methods and materials used to learn to read in English in an international school in Finland. The study also wanted to find out about the teachers' attitudes and points of view towards the process of reading in such a context. Consequently, the following research questions were formulated: 1. What are the strategies and materials used to learn to read in English in an international school in Finland? 2. What are the attitudes and perspectives of the teachers in an international school in Finland towards the process of learning to read in English?

With the objective of understanding the process of learning to read, systematic observations of reading classes and interviews with the relevant second grade teachers of an international school in Finland were used to shed light to how native and non-native speakers of the language learn to read in English.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Understanding reading

Printed language is part of our lives, thus it is natural for children to try to make sense of it and understand its meaning (Smith, 2012). The author states that since we are born, we try to comprehend what surrounds us and because written language is another facet of the human environment, children will try to make sense of it.

When people try to understand or interpret something, they relate all the knowledge they already have to this new event or situation they are in. Furthermore, recognition is not about fragmenting something into its components but integrating it into a context. Thus, learning is about understanding an aspect considering the circumstances (Smith, 2012). For instance, when readers encounter an unknown word in a text they are reading, they do not break it down into smaller units; instead they try to figure out the meaning from its context. Being able to understand speech is beneficial for learning to read, because written words and spoken words share the same kind of meanings, grammar and structures.

Although learning to read might be natural, it is not innate, because that would imply it is not necessary to teach learners how to read. However, it may be considered a natural activity in the sense that children try to find meaning in texts in a literate society. Goodman and Goodman (1979) state the following “*Readers are active participants in communication with unseen writers. They are seekers of meaning, motivated by the need to comprehend, aware of the functions of print*” (p. 138). In order to maintain or ensure this motivation or interest for reading, teaching reading implies offering a literate environment while acknowledging children as competent users of functional language.

2.2. Difficulties in learning to read in English

Some studies indicate children show more difficulties in learning the English writing system than children learning other languages that also have alphabetic writing systems (Hanley, 2010). According to Ziegler and Goswami (2005), reading in English requires extensive training on letter-sound relationships in order for learners to become skilled in English literacy, especially regarding skills that require the use of its writing system.

Word recognition is one of the skills children need to manage in their process of reading. A study carried out by Seymour, Aro and Erskine in 2003 with students of 14 countries found that learning the English writing system was difficult for children. In this study, children needed to read correctly both real words and non-words similar to real ones. Children learning English only read correctly 34 per cent of the words, while the second lowest result was 73 per cent of the words read correctly. Ziegler and Goswami (2005) justify the difficulties on learning to read in English by stating that the large amount of

consonant clusters makes the English writing system more difficult to be learnt than languages such as Italian or Spanish, whose words have simple syllabic structures in which a single consonant precedes a vowel.

Some other authors argue that, compared to other European languages, English does not have a transparent or shallow orthography¹, but an opaque or deep orthography², and this fact results in more difficulties when acquiring phonological awareness and being able to decode texts (Hanley, 2010). Besner and Smith (1992) declare that in transparent orthographies the spelling of words is uniform and reliable. Regarding these ideas, Ziegler and Goswami (2005) consider that for the learners of the English writing system, it would be much easier if they paid attention to the relationships between large units, such as onsets, rimes and morphemes, rather than to small units, such as graphemes and phonemes. For these reasons, Hanley (2010) concludes it would be truly beneficial for English learners to receive additional phonics training.

2.3. Effects of spelling skills on reading

Several researchers state there is a relationship between spelling, phonological skills and reading skills. One of the most common errors in reading consists in substituting words for others that have appeared in the text (Ehri, 1987). According to Goodman (1970), reading implies focusing and identifying each word. In order to identify words, readers need to use information from their memory related to syntax and semantics, so that they can predict words that might appear in text, for instance considering words from a specific word class or from a concrete semantic category. The information stored in the memory comes from knowledge about the language, the world and from the text (Goodman, 1970).

Besides, graphic information is also stored in the readers' memory. Ehri (1987) states this kind of information gives readers the ability to identify words when seeing their printed form. Therefore, when readers find these words in a text, the printed form of the words prompts information such as the pronunciation and meaning, and that results in the recognition of the word. Furthermore, knowing how some words are spelled can also be useful to identify unknown words by using analogy as a strategy to recognize shared letter

Transparent orthography¹: There is a one-to-one relationship between graphemes and phonemes. (Hanley, 2010, p. 118)

Opaque orthography²: There is less consistency in grapheme-phoneme relationships. (Hanley, 2010, p. 118)

patterns between the unknown word and a known word. Because of that, the author declares that spelling knowledge contributes to making sense of the words, because the readers are able to make the connections between pronunciation and spelling of the words.

Other authors, such as Foorman and Francis (1994) emphasize the connection between spelling and reading, declaring that when learners know the spelling of a word, it usually turns into the reading of the word. In view of this idea, these authors consider it could be interesting to integrate spelling instruction into the process of learning to read, because it can benefit the learners' spelling and reading skills. And the authors conclude that spelling can be useful not only to understand how the alphabetical writing system works, but also to get to know the relationship between this system and the spoken language.

2.4. Reading as a shared activity

Traditionally a text is the recipient of the author's intentions and ideologies (Smith, 2010). The meaning the readers are going to find out from the text will depend on how they interact with it, their own experiences and their points of view regarding social, cultural and intellectual aspects. According to Vygotsky (1978), language and the learning behind it are social phenomena. Because of that, he gave the same value to an individual's mind than to the society this mind is part of, putting emphasis on the community rather than on the individual learner.

Other authors during the 1970s and 80s admitted literacy was a social act. For instance, Scribner and Cole (1978) declared that different types of texts in daily life activities can have different purposes. Heath (1982) proved that even in the same area, different societies can use words in different ways giving them diverse meanings. Following this line of thinking, Street (1984) claimed literacy does not have a sole use or application, because it depends on the purposes behind it.

According to Smith (2010), in order to teach literacy more effectively and considering it a shared activity, class groups should be understood as communities of readers and writers. The benefits of activities such as pair readings and literature circles are not only that learners consider themselves readers, but they can also promote their motivation and performance (Calkins, 2000). Along this line of thought, Allan, Ellis and Pearson (2005) maintain the idea that literature circles foster reading while utilising the social

relationships within a group. This methodology encourages reading as a social and active activity, instead of an individual and private action. The teacher can ensure that by encouraging children to express their own ideas and opinions on the text. This activity promotes a further understanding and learners can also get to know other readers' opinions about the same text.

There are benefits of viewing comprehension as a shared act, such as the fact that communities of readers can enhance their understanding of the texts by sharing them. This activity also makes the comprehension visible for the teachers, because they can get to know what interpretations of the text their students have made. Smith (2010) also insists on teaching comprehension considering the circumstances under which it takes place, such as the readers, the text and the context. Moreover, she concludes this approach to reading comprehension regarding the role of the community and how learning develops within it needs to be explored in more depth.

2.5. Interaction in literacy lessons

Teaching methodologies have changed through time along with the society and its ideologies. Authors such as Flanders and Vygotsky promoted dispelling from the understanding of teaching as a unilateral process of transmitting knowledge and skills. While Flanders (1970) fostered the participation of children in the society understood as a democratic environment, Vygotsky (1978) exposed his conception of learning as a social process.

In addition to these authors, some others have analysed different types of interaction that take place in lessons on literacy. Chinn, Anderson and Waggoner (2001) studied the main differences between two types of interaction in classrooms, recitation and collaborative reasoning, in US classrooms of fourth grade students. The first kind of these two interactions consists in lessons that gather less students than the ones in the whole class group in order to focus on working on specific aspects that can be complicated for the students. And the second one creates an environment in which children share their opinions and learn to discuss using their own reasonings, information from the stories as well as from their own experiences in real life (Clark, Anderson, Kuo, Kim, Archodidou and Nguyen-Jahiel, 2003).

The study carried out by Chinn et al. (2001) revealed the following: “Giving students greater control over interpretation, turn-taking and topic may generally enhance engagement and elicit a high rate of using beneficial cognitive processes” (p. 408). The results showed that collaborative reasoning elicited more talk from the students. Moreover, other differences between the two methodologies presented in the research were in relation to the questions that were formulated by the teachers and directed to the children. Teachers asked more questions in the recitation lessons, but the number of open-ended questions was greater in the collaborative reasoning lessons. Therefore, the answers provided by the students in the collaborative reasoning lessons were more elaborated and based on different perspectives. Additionally, students made more predictions and observations in the collaborative reasoning lessons than in the recitation lessons. Thus, Chinn et al. (2001) emphasized the importance of teachers considering what kind of interactions they want to promote in their lessons, so that they can make a conscious use of these interactions as another element of the learning process.

2.6. Reading critically

It has not been a long time since models of reading have given significance on why children start to read and whether they analyse the texts they read. Comber (2010) states that before that, the emphasis on reading was given on fragmenting the text, seen as a code, understanding it and enjoying literature. Jennifer O’Brien, an early childhood teacher, invented a pedagogy that promoted critical reading.

O’Brien (2001) emphasized the importance of acknowledging the learner not only as a decoder of the text but also as a reader who has their own perspectives and who is able to interpret the text. She promoted comments and analysis from the children during their daily practice on reading, by asking them questions on why they decided to read a specific book, to differ between the fantastic and realistic aspects of the text and to foster thinking about the reasons behind specific choices from the author.

Another literacy event from O’Brien’s pedagogy that needs to be pointed out is the fact that she shared stories with the whole class. One of the reasons behind this activity was that children could make their own interventions. O’Brien encouraged them to make predictions considering elements such as the title and the cover of the book, also to

reconsider previous readings and to use prior cultural knowledge to guess possible storylines and development of the characters. Regarding this idea, Comber (2001) considers children have their own opinion on what is fair or unfair and their own preferences, because they have multiple chances to get to know real and imaginary worlds from their experiences with their family and community. Comber (2001) supports the belief that young learners can think analytically and create powerful texts. For instance, she states children can analyse commercials and even re-write them to become more honest or efficient. For this reason, the author reflects upon what the role of the teachers is, remarking that they should help children become aware of their own capacity to analyse a text, so that they can make use of these resources in texts and situations in a conscious and purposeful way.

On account of these ideas, teachers of young learners should go further than the material book when teaching reading (Comber, 2010). The author prompts both educators and researchers to view reading not only from the field of literacy but also as a skill that nurtures learning and interactions. Thus, when children become readers, teachers should keep in mind what reading is for and what readers do when they have acquired the skill.

2.7. Implications for teaching reading

Teaching is a multifaceted activity, and it changes continuously responding to the needs of the students and the context where it takes place. It is not about delivering knowledge to the learners, rather, applying knowledge in different ways considering the diversity of situations encountered in classrooms (Verloop, Van Driel and Meijer, 2001). For this reason, the knowledge that should be taken into account is the practical knowledge, because it is bound to a specific context, it is personal and not fragmented but integrated.

A determining element in teaching is the teacher's point of view, which embraces values, expectations, ideologies and knowledge. Along with this idea, Hoffman and Mosley (2010) underline the role of the teacher as a significant person who can share their passion for reading with their students. Furthermore, teachers' points of view remodel constantly in accordance with their expertise, which will be based on their teaching experiences that imply challenges and promote reconstruction. Another way to foster changes in teaching is through reflection (Hoffman and Mosley, 2010). According to Schön (1983), there are

two different types of reflection in relation to the teaching process. The first kind takes place while teaching and it entails being able to adapt while taking into account the possible consequences of being flexible, and the other one is reflecting after teaching. In order to carry out reflections on a past event, teachers should keep a record of the teaching practice through a recording device or by writing rather than using the memory alone, since these methods guarantee a more accurate view of the real practice and avoid possible bias. The purposes behind reflection are questioning knowledge and reconstructing it (Hoffman and Mosley, 2010).

Nevertheless, considering teaching does not have to be an individual activity. Wertsch (1993) defends a sociocultural perspective on learning pointing the significance of negotiating while interacting. For instance, focus groups can be an option for teachers to share and talk about experiences in classrooms. Hoffman and Mosley (2010) conclude that *“teachers have been moving towards the development of teaching knowledge together – reading together, talking together – and these interactions have supported their teaching”* (p. 242), viewing interaction as a tool that promotes reflection on the teaching practice and fosters development of the knowledge behind it.

Furthermore, prompting students to become independent readers should also be part of the teaching role (Moss, 2007). Actions such as inviting children to choose texts they want to read can guarantee that. However, teachers should support children during the process of becoming independent readers. Becoming an independent reader implies getting to know what reading is and taking decisions in relation to reading, such as when they decide to read and why and what they want to read, that is realising what reading can do for them. Because of the meaningfulness of this transition, Moss (2010) defends teachers should support the process with an explicit pedagogy and she adds children can find the process of becoming independent readers hard. Students can get to know what preferences regarding reading they have through input received from school. For this reason, teachers should offer different types of texts for the purpose of widening the reading experiences of the learners. Furthermore, it is not only about the variety of materials offered to the learners but also about the possibilities the texts offer. For instance, a text about a team sport can be shared with a group considering the context described in the text. This author concludes that when teachers ask children to choose the texts they want to read and how they want to read them, they are giving value to the learners' decisions and choices. Moreover, teachers can even go further and promote the

creation of a community of readers sharing ideas about their reading choices and their opinions on them, in addition to generating interests on a wide range of texts.

3. Methodology

The present study has two different aims. On the one hand, to get to know methods and materials used to learn to read in English in an international school in Finland. On the other hand, the second objective is to learn about the teachers' attitudes and points of view towards the process of learning to read in English in the named school.

In order to achieve the first objective, systematic observations were used to determine the strategies and materials used to learn to read in English. The notes taken helped to keep track of the lessons and reflect upon them afterwards. The systematic observations included literacy practices in English, such as Spelling, Grammar and Literature lessons besides some individual practices, such as reading experiences shared by a student and a teacher.

The second instrument used to accomplish the other objective was a questionnaire. It consisted in ten open questions about how the teachers maintain the interest of the learners to become competent readers, the difficulty of the English writing system, differences between native and non-native English speakers, the relationship between spelling and reading, reading as a social activity, interactions in literacy lessons, reading critically and making decisions as a primary education teacher in relation to reading.

The questionnaire was answered by two second grade experienced classroom teachers in the school, a Canadian one and an American one. The third teacher was a Hungarian teacher with less experience than the other two.

3.1.School context

This study was carried out in an international public school that offers education from grades 1 to 9, follows the Finnish National Curriculum and offers education in English for both international and Finnish families.

In order to become students of the school, children need to pass a test about their skills in English, because it is the language of instruction. Therefore, the education at the school

is meant for children that have English as a mother tongue, but also learners that, because of an international background of their families, are able to speak fluently in English or have achieved an adequate command of the language.

The language and culture policy of the school includes morning assemblies mainly in English, but also occasional presentations held in Finnish or other languages taught in the school. Furthermore, celebrations and all the school information letters to the families are in English. In this way, the school can guarantee a high standard of English language acquisition while prompting learners to use only English in the classrooms.

Since Finnish is the main official language in Finland, it is taught both as a mother tongue and as a second language. Moreover, because of the multiculturalism in the school, students can receive teaching in their own mother tongue if there are enough pupils who request it. Groups have been formed in 38 different languages.

4. Results and discussion

This section aims to answer the research questions presented above: 1. What are the strategies and materials used to learn to read in English in an international school in Finland? 2. What are the attitudes and perspectives of the teachers in an international school in Finland towards the process of learning to read in English?

The analysis of the systematic observations carried out with second graders shed some light on the fundamental aspects on which the school bases its reading scheme: the specific materials used to promote reading, the relationship between teachers and parents regarding the process of learning to read in English, student-teacher reading time, the strategies used by the teachers, the development of literacy lessons and also some characteristics of the public libraries in Finland. On the other hand, the answers from the questionnaire provided a general idea about the teachers' points of view in relation to the topics discussed in the theoretical framework.

The three teachers believe schools should offer a literate environment in order to maintain learners' interest in learning to read. They emphasized the idea that there should be books available in the classrooms for the students to reach when they have extra time and they should also have easy access to the school library. Along the same lines, Goodman and

Goodman (1979) claimed the importance of surrounding learners with materials related to literature while considering them competent users of language. The distribution of the furniture in the international school also supports this idea: there is a bookcase in each corridor of the school that has books of different topics and genres so that the learners can read whenever they feel like it, they have free time and/or they have finished their work. Moreover, the school has its own library that is in fact a public library open to all the citizens in the city. Along this line of thought, Smith (2012) states that children try to find meaning in written text because it is another facet of the human environment. Therefore, not only the grade 2 teachers are guaranteeing a literate environment, but also the school is ensuring it.

Another idea that came out from the questionnaire was that teachers have very similar opinions about the difficulty of the English writing system and the need for additional phonics training. All of them considered it is important to receive additional phonics training. Thus, their perspectives are in line with the idea of Ziegler and Goswami (2005), that reading in English requires extensive training on letter-sound relationships. However, one of the teachers pointed out that it is better to do it in a more engaging way rather than just training them, because she considers that if it is uninteresting or dull, it will not be acquired as long term knowledge. Another interesting answer from the questionnaire was related to the fact that some non-native English learners might not have access to English texts at home and for this reason, school should make sure they have enough resources for the children to improve their skills. Another teacher indicated that one difficulty of English was the large number of homophones and homonyms. She believes learners need to practice and be introduced to very many different letter patterns and word families in order to master English. This last idea is related to Ziegler and Goswami's statement (2005) about the need to pay attention to large units, such as morphemes, rather than to small units like graphemes when teaching learners about the English writing system. In this sense, letter patterns and word families can be understood as large units of the English writing system.

The differences between native and non-native English speakers when learning to read in English was another controversial issue for teachers, who referred to the differences between the two profiles of learners. One of the teachers expressed that it might be more difficult for non-native English learners as opposed to native speakers, because they might refer to the vocabulary from their first language and in some cases it might be hard

for them to figure out the translation. Another teacher also voiced that it might be even more challenging for children who have a language that uses a different alphabet than English as their first language. The three teachers concluded that native English speakers are stronger in reading than non-native speakers in the beginning of the process, but later the differences even out. Therefore, although this results express the difficulties of learning to read in English when it is not the L1 of the learner, they do not show whether the English writing system is more difficult to learn than other languages that also have an alphabetic writing system, as Hanley (2010) states.

The teachers have similar opinions upon offering additional training on specific skills in order to be able to read. Two of them believe they should give extra attention to specific skills especially spelling. Along this line of thinking, Foorman and Francis (1994) declare integrating spelling instruction into the process of learning to read would be beneficial. Thus, in the school we could consider Spelling is already integrated in the process of learning to read because students have a spelling lesson once a week and they learn about letter patterns, word families and how to pronounce them, and they use this information when reading. For another teacher, grammar can also contribute to the process of learning to read in English. As Goodman (1970) claimed, readers identify words using information related to syntax and semantics, because through grammar students learn about word classes and syntax. Furthermore, the third teacher also added that in the subject of English, the students learn the sounds of the alphabet, and once they have learnt them, they will be able to relate the letters to their sounds and through reading and listening practise they will become more skilled.

The answers from the questionnaire also showed all the teachers can conceive reading as a social act and they gave different examples of activities to carry out, such as literature circles, discussing about a specific part of a book with prompted questions, readers' theatre, small groups, role plays, paired reading, co-reading and buddy groups (pairs or groups of students of different ages). Furthermore, the three teachers read aloud to their students. Poems to make them aware of rhythm and picture books are the most used by them. Allan, Ellis and Pearson (2005) maintain the idea that literature circles foster reading while reinforcing the social relationships within a group. Therefore, activities such as the ones proposed by the teachers promote a view of reading as a social and active activity. However, one of the teachers argued these kinds of activities might be easier to develop when students master reading.

Interactions in literacy lessons are considered beneficial by the teachers. One of them claimed she cannot conceive the teaching-learning process without interactions. They maintained student-student interactions promote social interactions and peer helping with unfamiliar words, looking for their meanings in online resources or dictionaries as well as questioning each other on their opinions, while in student-teacher interactions the teacher can model how a sentence should be pronounced fluently and help students with their discussions. Also, in relation to the teacher-student interactions, teachers explained that they ask questions to the learners to make sure they understand the text. One of the teachers stated that before reading the text she asks questions related to the author and the illustrator, the questions she asks while reading are more related to the meaning of the words and who, what, when, where, how and why questions, and after reading she asks summative questions. Besides these questions, she asks prediction questions during the three mentioned phases. Another teacher claimed she asks comprehension questions while or after reading depending on the student, because not all of them are able to pick up the reading where they have left it after being asked a question. She added she also asks questions so the learners can relate their experiences and themselves to the characters or what they would do if they were in the situations described in the story. The fact that teachers are conscious of the different kinds of questions they ask and the intentions behind them agrees with what Chinn et al. (2001) state about the importance of making an intentional use of interactions as another element of the learning process.

Systematic observations showed that teachers try to read individually as often as they can with their students, but it is usually once or twice per month. When a learner reads with a teacher, they share a book, so both of them can follow what the student is reading. Besides asking the learner if there is any unknown word from time to time, the teacher also recasts words that have not been pronounced properly or asks the learner if they can go back to the word they have mispronounced. In order to ensure the student is comprehending the text, the teacher asks the students the meaning of expressions or words that might be unfamiliar for the student, such as *fall into despair* or *gauche* and if they do not know, the teacher explains it to them; sometimes the students express what they do not understand, for example, the meaning of a specific word. Furthermore, in a specific literacy lesson, the students were asked to make predictions about a book before reading it taking into account what they could see from the illustrations in the cover, the back cover and the title. This activity shares the same characteristics as the one proposed by

Comber (2001) when referring to critical reading. The author views that by promoting these activities, teachers give value to the use of analytic thinking and interpretation through learners' prior knowledge. In the activity proposed at the school, the learners participated by raising their hands, listening to the ideas their classmates shared and also when they were asked to participate by the teacher. Afterwards, they read the story taking turns and lastly, they were asked questions about comprehension of the text and about discussing their initial predictions now that they knew the whole story. In this sense, students are sharing the comprehension and that enhances their understanding of the text and it becomes visible for the teacher as Smith (2010) states. Students from this school are used to participating in lessons, thus they were comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas in answer to the questions throughout the whole lesson.

Another contentious topic was whether the teachers thought learners from the first stages of Primary education were able to read critically. One of them affirmed that in second grade they were able to do it and she gave an example of an activity she had previously carried out in which learners had to make decisions after reading a text and they had to share the reasons that explained their decisions. Another teacher supported this idea by declaring that although learners at this age might not read critically to the level of adults, they are able to solve problems and even ask questions to prompt the others to analyse situations; she also added she believed ethical stories are good to promote this kind of thinking. These ideas go in line with Comber's (2001) statement about learners having their own opinions and preferences, because they have had multiple chances to get to know real and imaginary worlds from their experiences with their family and community. But contrary to what Comber (2001) exposes about young learners being able to think analytically, the other teacher thinks not all the learners at second grade are able to read critically, because she considers not all of them are ready to think abstractly. However, she asserted that texts that include experiences they can relate to might be useful to promote critical reading.

The teachers expressed they were satisfied with the collection of reading books chosen by the school, the Oxford Reading Tree books, each classroom in grade 2 has their own set of these graded readers. These are the books used in the student-teacher reading time. In grade 1 they read the books from stages 1 to 6 and in grade 3 they do not use graded readers anymore. In grade 2 the books go from stage 6 to stage 16, and when students reach stage 12, they are considered *free readers*, thus the books from stage 12 to 16 are

named this way. This fact emphasizes what Moss (2010) claims about the importance of the teachers giving support to the learners on becoming independent readers. The difference between one stage and the following is the amount of text in each page, the length of the book and an increase on difficulty. Before reaching the free reader stages, students read one book per day and after that, because of the length of the books they finish each book in two or three days. In each grade 2 classroom, there is a shelf where they keep all these books distributed in different baskets that have a card naming the stage of the books. In order to go from one stage to another, students need to read all the readers in each stage and teachers assess their pronunciation and comprehension. Each student has a booklet where they keep record of the books they are reading. The teachers and the parents write comments in it about how the reading was or unfamiliar words that the learner had encountered.

In the questionnaire, the teachers also highlighted the importance of showing the learners different kinds of books, such as fiction, non-fiction, graphic, comic books and audio books amongst others. However, they emphasized there are aspects that should be considered before choosing the books, for instance the reading skills and age of the learners and whether the students have access to information they might need to understand the reading. As Moss (2010) states, students can become aware of their preferences when they get to know different types of texts and experiences related to reading. Through different reading experiences, students can discover what reading is for them and make decisions in relation to it, and that is part of becoming independent readers. Another teacher added she also tries to find books their students might like from public libraries, because she considers Finland has good public libraries and she declares the number of books in English has expanded considerably in the last ten years. Besides, the citizens in Finland in general make great use of the public libraries, for instance Oodi library in Helsinki has many resources ensuring a public cultural space available for all the citizens in Finland and that turns out to be popular and actively used. These ideas can be related to Vygotsky's (1978) point of view about language and its learning as social phenomenon, because he values the community or the learner's context rather than the learner as an individual. Furthermore, two teachers highlighted the role of the learners' families. On the one hand, they stated that in some cases, parents may not be able to support the children's interest in learning to read or they may not realise the importance of enjoying reading. And on the other hand, they believe school should offer a reading

program for the children to be able to read with their parents or recommend them access to online books which can also promote quality time between learners and their families. This last idea also agrees with Comber (2010) and her understanding of valuing reading as a skill that promotes learning and interactions.

5. Conclusions

In order to engage children in the process of learning to read it is necessary for them to view reading as a meaningful activity. There are three different facts that emphasize the significance of reading in the studied context, these are promoting the participation of the families in this process, offering a literate environment at the school and the fact that the Finnish society makes an active use of the public resources related to reading.

Furthermore, reading at the school is worked through different subjects that ensure students acquire specific skills necessary to become competent readers, including spelling and phonics training. Interactions are also another element that contribute to the process of learning to read. Therefore, they are used intentionally, and they take place not only between teachers, students and families, but also amongst students. Regarding this idea, interactions and shared reading can lead to a more profound understanding of the text. Thus, this implies going further than decodifying and enjoying the text, while considering the learner a true reader who is able to interpret the text.

Another aspect to point out about this research is that since the study solely focuses on one grade of a specific school, the number of participants that answered the questionnaire was reduced. The only participants were the classroom teachers in second grade of the school.

Carrying out this study has given me an insight to the process of acquiring one of the four language skills in a very specific context, a multicultural international school in Finland. And in spite of the particular characteristics of this environment, I truly believe as a future teacher I will use the knowledge I have acquired through this study in different surroundings and it will still be meaningful. Furthermore, as lines of future research, the study could be broadened by analysing how the reading process is worked in different grades, stages and in diverse contexts.

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Appendix

This is the questionnaire used as one of the instruments of this study.

1. It has been stated that children's interest in learning to read is natural, but in order to maintain it, they should be surrounded by a literate environment. Do you think schools should ensure that? In what ways?
2. Some authors consider English has a rather difficult writing system because graphemes and phonemes do not have a one to one relationship. For this reason, they consider English learners should receive additional phonics training. What is your opinion upon that?
3. Do you think there can be differences between children who are English native and non-native speakers in terms of learning to read in English?
4. Do you think in order to be able to identify words, and subsequently be able to read, English learners should receive extra training on specific skills, such as spelling?
5. Do you think reading can be practiced as a social act or shared activity? If you think so, how?
6. Do you read aloud to your students? If you do so, what activities do your learners do in relation to the reading?
7. Do you consider student-student and student-teacher interactions during literacy lessons can be used to benefit the learning process? Can you think of activities carried out during your literacy lessons that imply interactions?
8. Do you ask questions to your students while or after they read? In case you do, what kind of questions do you ask them?
9. Reading critically implies thinking critically, which involves analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Do you think learners at the first stages of Primary education are able to read critically? Can you think of tasks or activities that might prompt reading critically?
10. As a Primary teacher you constantly need to take decisions and make choices. What criteria do you take into consideration when choosing books for your learners?