

# **Appreciation of English as a second language in Finnish ECEC setting**

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*Bachelor's Thesis*

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**Abstract.**

The topic of our thesis is appreciation of English as a second language in Finnish ECEC setting. This study investigates how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting in Finland, use English as a second language. Our research is on using play to teach English and identifies which play based strategies work best for young learners. This study applies Lev Vygotsky's Social Interaction theory while applying quantitative research methods. Our research proves that play helps children develop language skills which guides policy creation for multilingual teaching. This study seeks to validate the part that English as a second language (ESL) plays in ECEC settings. It aims to better understand how ESL may affect ECEC children's language acquisition, social integration and cognitive development. Although there is a great deal of empirical study on second language education, it most often involves older children. This study aims to examine the special difficulties and benefits in teaching ESL to pre-schoolers with effective pedagogical techniques available to support early childhood ESL teaching in multiple environments. A literature analysis was conducted using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and 172 studies. Based on the analysis, 14 peer reviewed articles, which held all selection criteria, were selected. The finding indicates that all these types of learning through play and interactive storytelling, and peer collaborations not only help in the acquisition of second language but also foster cultural awareness and social and emotional skills.

Furthermore, there is also structured language support, multi modal instruction, and the creation of a nurturing linguistic environment that will facilitate language learning in young children. The study also highlights that there should be different professional training for educators in linguistically sensitive pedagogy, as well as implementation of policies that support multilingual learning. This will promote positive attitudes for acquiring a second language in early childhood through an increased social understanding of the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism.

Future research can take a mixed method approach and attempt to study the long-term consequences of early ESL exposure, specifically among non-Westerners and underprivileged.

**Key words:** English as a Second Language (ESL), Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Play-Based Learning, Language Acquisition.

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# 1 Introduction and background

Proficiency in English as a second language (ESL) offers great value in today's borderless world even though Finland remains an ESL non-native region. Young children learn language best during early childhood and Finland's ECEC approach helps students develop all aspects of their development including speaking English. Few research projects study how play methods enhance second-language learning for young students inside Finland's distinctive educational design. The research explores how play helps young students learn English at Finnish ECEC facilities using published works and expert data to start new learning paths.

The combination of natural learning combined with pleasure and interesting nature ensures play functions effectively as an English teaching method for children. Playing provides children opportunities to practice speaking and learn words as they navigate language-based environments with no stress. Children learn essential dialogues in the market environment through live roleplaying that teaches them to hear questions like "Can I have this please?" or "How much is this for?" (Waddington, 2023). Children receive vocabulary instruction together with sentence building education through the combination of puppetry activities and storytelling lessons. Children learn more effectively through physical games such as "Simon Says" and "I Spy" since these activities merges movement with verbal responses to maintain children's focus. Learning English through songs such as "If you are happy and you know it" achieve enhanced pronunciation together with better rhythm skills because they connect verbal messages to physical activities. Educational tools such as flashcards in addition to board games and digital applications serve as the most effective channels to teach language skills effectively to students. Research by Winther-Lindqvist (2016) showed Nordic ECEC settings use play techniques which boost children's language skills as well as social development abilities as Torras-Vila (2021) points out learning through planned teacher-led activities. The techniques of play-based learning proved most suitable for educating children under the age of three. Children acquire linguistic confidence together with creative skills along with collaboration abilities by using this natural learning approach which allows them to learn independently. Multisensory learning combined with scaffolding practice and the presence of play forms an effective language-learning environment which Thieme et al. (2023) report. English language acquisition strengthens through play-based learning which helps students build emotional competence that develops their cognitive abilities to gain a comprehensive education.

The Finnish ECEC system is popular because it lets children discover and grow while learning basic skills. Finland puts multilingualism in official policies because it values both cultural and linguistic diversity. ECEC settings need better strategies to integrate English language learning because English now serves as a global communication tool. Research on multilingualism in Nordic countries shows early language exposure helps kids learn but it misses play's power as an ESL learning tool. Our study connects play and English language learning to fill the research gap about this relationship.

Based on Vygotsky's Social Interactionism theory, play provides essential tools for language development as well as comprehension. Through his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) research Vygotsky demonstrated how children best learn through social interactions. Also, supportive interactions with family members and friends, children learn more advanced content within ZPD. Moreover, play activities children can explore language meaningfully and enjoyably with others. When teachers use play strategies, they build situations where students improve their English from start to end.

## **1.1 Purpose of the study**

Primary objectives of this research are:

1. To examine, the use of play as an educational tool for English language learning in Finnish ECEC settings.
2. To identify the most effective play-based strategies for promoting English language acquisition among young learners.
3. To provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing ESL education in ECEC contexts.

The aim of this research is to consider how play can be used as a pedagogical tool in English language learning in settings of Finnish ECEC. It is widely known that play based learning is a great method for the language acquisition of young children as it enhances natural communication, engagement, and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 2007). This study seeks to present methods that have demonstrated to be best when supporting English language development (Piker & Rex, 2008; Wasik & Bond, 2001) by identifying the most effective play-based strategies such as role playing, interactive stories, and music-based activities. In addition, the findings will provide evidence-based recommendations for improving ESL education in ECEC environments so that educators would be equipped with practical strategies to develop language rich environments

(Lightbown & Spada, 2013).). Second language learning can include play while teaching language skills to young learners in an enjoyable and fun manner, but with purpose and in accordance with their age and developmental stage. (Hall, 2018).

## **1.2 Research Gap**

This research widely acknowledges the prominence of play in early childhood education but, lacks ample proof regarding its precise contribution to English language learning in Finnish ECEC setting. Early education in Finland bases its foundation on play-based learning (Kumpulainen T, 2018:3) but has not explored to what extent this method helps students acquire ESL capabilities. The effectiveness of different play-based methods as tools to boost English language skills for young learners in multicultural environment lacks proper documentation despite previous research about their role in language development. (Simon et al., 2010) The research lacks understanding of educator perspectives about incorporating play into ESL teaching methods which hinders the knowledge of their implementation approaches for language instruction. This research investigates English language acquisition through play while identifying optimal play-based approaches and evaluating instructor perspectives regarding play-based teaching methods in ESL, early childhood education setting in Finland.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

1. How is play utilized as a tool for English language learning in Finnish ECEC settings?
2. What play-based strategies are most effective for promoting English language acquisition in young learners?
3. How do teachers and caregivers perceive the role of play in ESL education?

## **1.4 Theoretical Framework**

This research applies Vygotsky's Social interaction theory to show how child mental development and language acquisition happens through social relationships. (Vygotsky, L. 1978) Through Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory we gain fundamental understanding about learning environments because it shows how educational activities within children's potential growth zone promote language acquisition (Tomasello M, 2003). Researchers have identified play as a base mechanism to support social behaviour enabling children to learn new language acquisition. (Smolucha L, & Smolucha F., 2021)

This investigation about second-language English instruction in Finnish ECEC institutions uses Sociocultural Theory (SCT) developed by Vygotsky with its application to Second Language (L2) learning. Development of appreciation towards ESL in young children depends on social interaction and play alongside the scaffolding provided by both Hughes (Teachers College, Columbia University) and Smolucha. L & Smolucha. F (Early Child Development and Care 2021).

Hughes states that SCT establishes a robust analytical method to study L2 learning especially when applied to early childhood environments. SCT proposes that, children learn language by interacting with others and receiving expert guidance between what they can independently do and the next level of competence.

ESL education blends into Finnish ECEC context however, the meaningful learning activities that support natural child engagement with English language acquisition are not visible (Kumpulainen T, 2018:3). Groups of important SCT principles applicable to classroom English language teaching including the ZPD theory a child should be assessed at two levels of their ability such as, unaided skills and skills with intentional assistance (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

The investigation extends Smolucha L & Smolucha F (2021) Vygotsky-based study of play through their demonstration of play as a fundamental method for language growth and comprehension. Staff members in ESL, ECEC settings can utilize play-based activities to introduce English in a relaxed environment which promotes student interest and engagement as well as language development. (Piker & Rex, 2008; Wasik & Bond, 2001) Children will naturally acquire language through play-based learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 2007) as the experience develops their emotional engagement toward the language while sustaining their lasting interest in learning it.

The theoretical framework uses Sociocultural Theory (Hughes 2021) and Vygotsky's Theory of Play (Smolucha L, & Smolucha F., 2021) to show how social activities combined with scaffolding and play activities help young learners. Therefore, these theories can be adapted to the Finnish ECEC setting with ESL. This study establishes that positive and engaging English learning can be achieved through guided play and peer collaboration with mediated learning as essential components for early childhood education.

## **1.5 Research Methodology**

This research adopted systematic qualitative methodology to assess relevant research papers about children who speak foreign language in Finnish ECEC through thematic analysis. The research

investigates the experiences and obstacles together with policy impact on foreign children enrolled in Finnish ECEC centres while focusing on both Helsinki and Finnish national operations.

The research draws its information from peer-reviewed articles together with government reports and statistical databases as its secondary sources. The primary sources of data include: ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre): Used to access peer-reviewed research on early childhood education and child participation in Finland, Volter: Utilized for academic literature from Finnish universities, focusing on early childhood education policies and integration of foreign-language speaking children, Google Scholar: Searched for the latest empirical studies on child participation in Finnish ECEC and Finnish National Statistics (Tilastokeskus): Used to gather quantitative data on the participation of foreign-language-speaking children in ECEC settings in Helsinki and across Finland.

## 2 Literature Review

The literature review section explains the findings from major sources, including, Language Acquisition: Studies on early bilingualism (Simon et al., 2010) and the role of professional development in language-focused pedagogy (Torrás-Vila, 2021; Thieme et al., 2023). Further this area illustrates Play-Based Learning: Investigators conducted research on play functions in Nordic ECEC settings (Winther-Lindqvist, 2016) alongside evaluating how play shapes child linguistic independence (Waddington, 2023). The explored Finnish ECEC language policies (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021) and cultural educational methods (Ojala, 2010) are emphasized in this section.

### 2.1 Language Acquisition

Simon et al. (2010) investigate through their study how kids develop linguistic proficiency by receiving two language inputs at an early age. The research shows promising cognitive advantages which make bilingual children fascinating. Effective task-switching along with impressive memory skills together with superior problem-solving ability represents abilities of bilingual children. Kids who speak two languages show an exceptional route of linguistic growth. The language proficiency for bilingual children shows itself in sizeable vocabulary as they merge their individual language collections even though monolingual students typically hold more words in each language. The study explores how children perform code-switching between languages when engaging in conversation as an additional finding. They adopt social cues and contextual information to perform these fluctuations because the process lacks randomness.

The investigations conducted by Torrás-Vila (2021) and Thieme et al (2023) examine teacher training lessons as key contributors to teaching methods for early childhood language learning. Torrás-Vila explains methods training programs provide which incorporate visual materials alongside storytelling approaches and language modelling incorporated into practical assignments. With their research Thieme et al. demonstrates that formal instructor training systems develop both instructor's self-confidence and their ability to introduce these approaches effectively into their teaching practice. These programs create opportunities for educators to strengthen their partnerships because they build platforms where instructors share teaching stories and learn useful skills from each other. As teachers gain preparedness and confidence in communication they evolve into more effective champions of student language development particularly within diverse learning environments.

The development of language in ECEC settings depends on different theories alongside structured programs and novel instructional methods. Through the combination of playtime with music and social encounters and moderator assistance children experience strong growth in their language capabilities. (Torras-Vila B, 2021)

The Heidelberg Interaction Training (HIT) is a language promotion system for ECEC programs that enhances language learning through educator-child interaction improvements (Buschmann A, 2018). Daily routines of daycare facilities and kindergartens integrate language facilitation as per this program to produce natural language learning opportunities through meaningful engagement. (Buschmann A, 2018).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in *Mind in Society, The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (1978) demonstrates the essential contribution of social interaction when learning language. According to Vygotsky investigators discovered that adult guidance along with peer collaboration facilitates linguistic growth during the ZPD. The research demonstrates how important it is for teachers to offer controlled yet adaptable spaces where children can have meaningful discussions. (Vygotsky L. S, 1978)

## **2.2 Play Based Learning**

Winther-Lindqvist's (2016) study really highlights that Nordic nations recognize play activities as essential which children utilize for both enjoyment and educational purposes. Playtime activities between kids function as more than amusement because children develop communication abilities as they determine roles and perform empathy practices. Through playing, children build both emotional resilience against obstacles and strategic problem-solving techniques. The main part of learning occurs during activities involving storytelling and role-playing. Kids who pretend to run a shop learn both proper business terminology and the correct sequence of speaking during this activity. According to research, Nordic educators actively oversee children's learning activities to maximize their meaningfulness and involvement. Play functions as an essential learning instrument which promotes language proficiency as well as social development in a broad educational process.

Waddington (2023) uses his play strategy model to describe how children acquire linguistic independence skills. Vocabulary growth among kids typically happens naturally through their imaginative play performances based on superhero and shopkeeper roles. Through experimentation children acquire diverse methods which help them express themselves and tell stories while sharpening problem-solving competencies through linguistic techniques. When participating in

collective building tasks alongside team games, youth acquire capabilities to share thoughts with others while identifying team placements. Through on-going stimulating activities children gain self-assurance until they achieve independent language use in everyday dialogue. Early educational programs require play activities according to Waddington because children naturally develop language skills during this stage.

The Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development (December 19, 2023) published Early Foreign Language Education Play as a Site for Child Agency, to research the importance of play for English language acquisition in ECEC settings. The research emphasizes the significance of active learning spaces which allow children to make choices and maintain their independence because these conditions improve their language abilities and cognitive skills. (Waddington J, 2023)

Michael Tomasello presents a Usage-Based Language Acquisition model through his interactive theory known as Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition. Tomasello demonstrates how young learners learn language by engaging socially and through actions of imitation and mental processes instead of built-in linguistic components. The optimization of language learning in ECEC settings becomes possible through interactive storytelling along with role-playing and structured conversations according to Tomasello's theory. (Tomasello M, 2003)

### **2.3 Finnish ECEC Language Policies**

Ojala (2010) analyse Finnish early childhood education through policies which promote comprehensive support for children to learn language in an inclusive learning environment. Schools in Finland welcome educational language interactions that combine both Finnish along with children's native languages. The simultaneous method helps students develop access to Finnish society while preserving their traditional cultural background. Teachers achieve this practice through multilingual books together with visual displays in distinct languages as well as by utilizing songs. The policies ensure minority language education as well as children's home languages acquire equal recognition under these programs. The educational approach generates welcoming conditions for diverse backgrounds because it goes beyond linguistic integration to establish an environment where students succeed.

Alstad and Sopenan (2021) examine the Finnish policies for early childhood education which intentionally support inclusive language development for children. Teachers in Finland bring both Finnish language and their students' native languages as acceptable tools for classroom learning.

Through a two-way education strategy Finnish kids manage successful integration in their new society together with maintaining cultural connections. Teachers achieve this practice through multilingual books together with visual displays in distinct languages as well as by utilizing songs. The policies recognize minority languages through their specific provisions to ensure all students feel their language holds value to society. Through this inclusive system children benefit from more than linguistic integration because effective programs establish secure and inviting spaces which help students from varied backgrounds succeed.

The Finnish education system presents essential details about early childhood education and care through Timo Kumpulainen's report (2018). The report addresses Finland's commitment to child-oriented play-based teaching methods through its emphasis on child-centred approaches even though it does not mention play specifically for English language learning. (Kumpulainen T, 2018:3).

### 3 Literature review methodologies

This section outlines the methods used for data review, the process of data collection, and the selection, categorization, and analysis of the literature in the study.

#### 3.1 Methodology

According to Kitchenham (2004), procedures for performing systematic reviews were used to conduct a qualitative systematic literature review. These were procedures that, by having a structured approach for researchers that allow them to evaluate previous studies in order to be able to test them in the future. Finally, the research left no margin for bias, as the data collection was highly defined in order to guarantee objectivity when examining the role of ESL in Finnish ECEC settings.

Systematic literature review involves searching, reading, and analysing relevant literature on the selected subject and deriving a meaning out of collected evidence. Kitchenham (2004:1) describes systematic reviews as secondary research, despite their reliance on primary studies during the review process. Thus, researchers can utilize this method to gather various information. Petticrew and Roberts (2006) point out that without context, volumes of data tend to be lost, and argue that one objective of an SLR is to find out what evidence may be found in relation to success or failure of research type or to address real practical issues.

In Thorpe & Holt (2008), systematic reviews are suggested to address research questions by the collection and synthesis of the findings from well conducted individual studies. Systematic reviews are a research methodology providing scenario for the broad field of subject by examining several empirical studies (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Bem, 1995). Kitchenham (2004) describes the composition of a literature review as a eight steps process starting with the need definition, moving through the review planning, research selection, standardized evaluation, data extraction, result synthesis and final reporting. For the purposes of objectivity, academic research ought to perform systematic reviews when trying to conclude all the available information on a subject.

The study about children speaking foreign language and children from other countries in ECEC, across Finland depends on statistics drawn from Finnish National Agency for Education and Helsinki city reports. (Finland, 04-12-2024) The research data examines ECEC enrolment statistics spanning 2021 to 2023 for national and Helsinki-based child participation levels. Specific statistics

evaluated the enrolment numbers of children who speak languages other than Finnish at both the national and Helsinki city level.

Table 1: Number of children in ECEC

Year	Whole Country	Helsinki
2021	229,191	30,131
2022	232,826	30,753
2023	233,776	30,941

Table 2: Number of foreign children in ECEC

Year	Whole Country	Helsinki
2021	13,839	3,011
2022	15,864	3,221
2023	17,610	3,371

Table 3: Number of foreign speaking children in ECEC

Year	Whole Country	Helsinki
2021	25,879	6,611
2022	28,811	6,948
2023	30,979	7,206

Data from grade 3 pupils spanning from 2000 to 2016 revealed information about their selection of first foreign languages within the Finnish educational system. Kumpulainen T, 2018:3) Statistical data provides expanded knowledge about the patterns of language development together with participant enrolment trends throughout Finnish early childhood and primary education.

Table 4: Choice of first foreign language, Percentage of pupils per language. Year 2000-2016

Language/Year	2000	2005	2010	2016
English	89.1	90.1	90.5	89.8
Swedish	1.5	1.1	1.0	1.1
Finnish	5.2	5.5	5.2	5.5
French	1.1	0.8	0.9	1.3
German	2.2	1.4	1.3	1.3
Russian	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3
Spanish	*	*	*	0.3
Sámi	0.0	0.0	0.0	**
Other language	0.0	0.0	0,1	0.2
Languages total	99.3	99.2	99.2	99.7

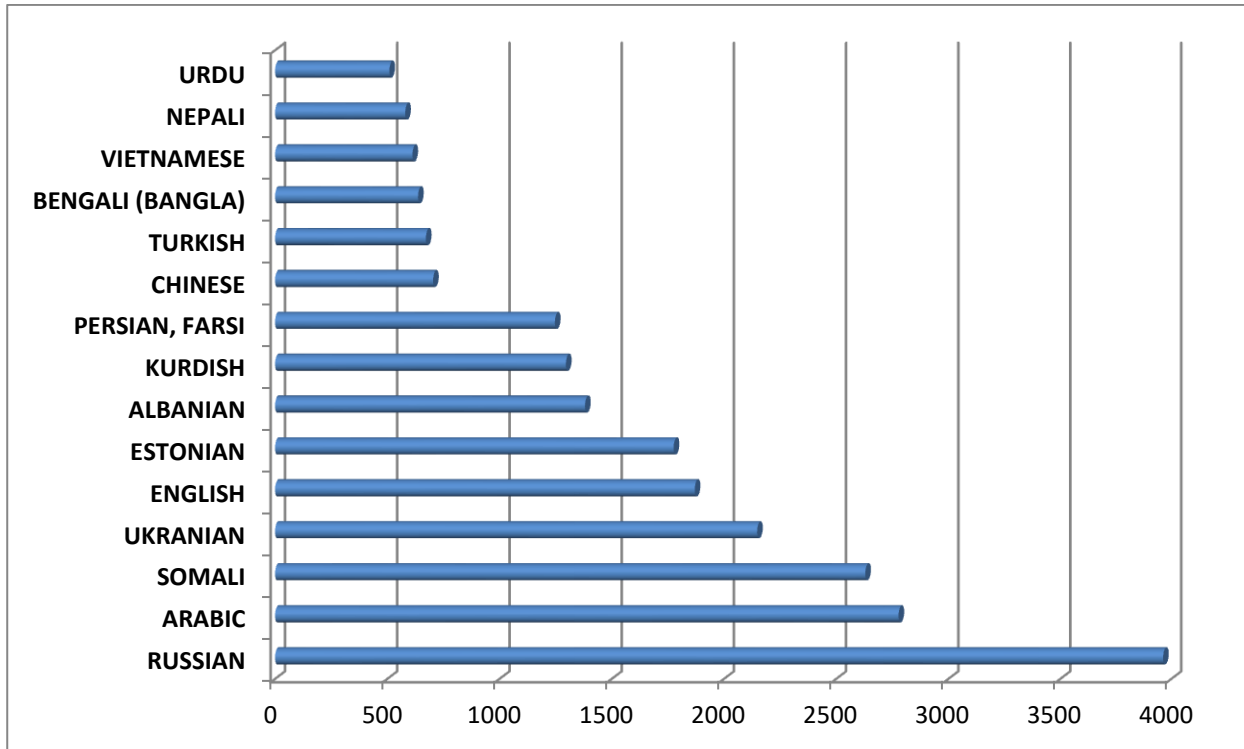
\* Until 2010, Spanish was included in the category "Other language"

\*\* No choices at all

\*\* The percentage values were calculated based on the number of pupils in grade 3

Statistics Finland – Vipunen – statistical service of the education administration

Table 5: Foreign-language children participating in early childhood education and care by native language in Mainland Finland in 2023, largest language groups



### 3.2 Data gathering process

All steps of research literature collection have been properly documented for this investigation. Structured approaches to conducting literature reviews tend to decrease the likelihood of selection bias occurrence according to Rhyan, Cronin and Coughlan, (2008). The study demands clear statements which explain both inclusion and exclusion criteria together with their obtained results (Rhyan, Cronin and Coughlan 2008).. The provided steps enable readers to reproduce studies with the same outcomes (Torraco 2005, 361).

The systematic literature review started with applying and approving pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria prior to beginning main literature search activities.

The analytical method follows three distinct phases to evaluate target publication details while using inclusion and exclusion criteria as per Kitchenham (2004). Two selection rounds were

performed to identify the optimal relevant and necessary literatures for selection. The titles and abstracts underwent a fast review during the initial section of the selection procedure. At the beginning of the review process investigators eliminated all titles followed by two progressive stages of evaluation.

This review collected its literature through ERIC and UTU Volter. Researchers together with students and educators depend on these online databases as their choice of source because they feature trusted peer-reviewed academic materials. Early childhood education and special education along with related subjects find resources at ERIC while students can research various topics comprehensively through the University of Turku library database called UTU Volter. An additional manual search through Google Scholar joined the selection of original databases. According to Chris Hart (2021) conducting a manual search makes it possible to locate materials which can be used by the author but were omitted from the review thus reducing the risk of bias related to poor indexing or selective publishing affecting literature discovery.

A first-stage data analysis functioned to review and improve the databases. The research relied on four main search keywords including, ESL in Finland, ECEC in Finland, Play-Based Learning in Finland, Language Acquisition in Finland. The research search produced 112,986 ERIC results together with 2303 UTU Volter results. The search terms underwent refinement to collect data directly linked to the research inquiry. The manual Google Scholar search returned 18,000 results with the query terms “English as a second language in Finnish ECEC”. Therefore, additional search terms became necessary for this investigation. The article utilized in this study needed to fulfil all requirements determined by the study despite the presence of inaccuracies in some articles found through Google Scholar.

### 3.2.1 Identification of relevant literature

Systematic reviews require predetermined lists of inclusion as well as exclusion criteria. Research for reasonable criteria followed the formulation of the research problem and the specification of selection standards. Meline (2006) explains research protocols need to establish a precise process to choose study participants and define the required research conditions.

This literature review contains articles from the period of 2010 to 2024 to ensure the selection of recent and relevant content.

A specific set of standards was used to choose the articles including their status as academic research publications and peer-reviewed journals and title term presence in abstracts with complete

reading access. All information should rely on primary research, but secondary sources can also be used along with articles providing straightforward research outcomes addressing study questions.

### 3.2.2 Data selection and gathering

All literature is accessible through ERIC and UTU Volter. The databases received support from a purposive Google Scholar search. The research databases produced 172 obtainable publications. The evaluation process began with reviewing abstracts and titles of included publications until 70 articles were eliminated at this point. Each remaining article underwent complete scrutiny to test if it fulfilled the required inclusion standards in the second stage of assessment. The assessment resulted in excluding 45 scholarly articles during this stage. The literature review included 14 publications out of the remaining 172 after screening.

The reviewed literature was during the time frame of, between 2009 and 2024 but some special articles related to the theoretical framework were much older than the fixed time frame.

Source	Details of Articles
UTU Volter	<p>Alstad T, G., &amp; Sopenan P. (2021). Language orientations in early childhood education policy in Finland and Norway. <i>Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy</i>, 7:1, 30-43.</p> <p>Bodrova E, &amp; L. (2007). <i>Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education</i> (2nd ed.). Pearson.</p> <p>Broström S, J. A. (2016).). <i>Values in Danish Early Childhood Education and Care, Nordic Social Pedagogical Approach to Early Years</i>. Switzerland Springer International Publishing, Vol. 15, 25-41.</p> <p>Broström S, J. A. (2016).). <i>Values in Danish Early Childhood Education and Care, Nordic Social Pedagogical Approach to Early Years</i>. Switzerland Springer International Publishing, Vol. 15, 25-41.</p> <p>Education, F. N. (2016). <i>National core Curriculum for Basic Education</i>. Finnish National Board of Education.</p> <p>Hall G. (2018). <i>Exploring English language teaching: Language in action</i> (2nd ed.). Routledge.</p> <p>Lerkkanen, M, K., P, P., Deborah, W, D., E, N... Megan M. (2019). <i>Early Language and Literacy Development in the Finnish Context</i>. The SAGE Handbook of Development Psychology and Early</p>

Source	Details of Articles
	<p>Childhood Education, 403-417.</p> <p>Lightbown P. M., S. N. (2013). How languages are learned (4th ed.). Oxford University Press. Ojala M. (2010). DEVELOPING MULTICULTURAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN A FINNISH CONTEXT. University of Helsinki Finland, International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy.</p> <p>Copyright 2010 by Korean Institute of Child Care and Education, Vol. 4, No. 1, 13-2</p> <p>Tomasello M. (2003). Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition. Harvard University Press.</p> <p>Vygotsky L. S. (1978). Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Harvard University Press. Waddington J. (2023). Early foreign language education: play as a site for child agency.</p> <p>Winther-Lindqvist D. A. (2016). The role of play in Danish childcare. In C. Ringsmose, &amp; G. Kragh-Müller (Eds.), Nordic social pedagogical approach to early years. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, Vol. 15, 95-114.</p>
ERIC	<p>Buschmann, Anke, Sachse, &amp; Steffi. (2018-03). Heidelberg interaction training for language promotion in early childhood settings (HIT). European Journal of education, Vol. 53 (1), 66-78.</p> <p>Kumpulainen T. (2018:3). KEY FIGURES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD AND BASIC EDUCATION IN FINLAND. Finnish National Agency for Education, Report and Surveys.</p> <p>Torras-Vila, B. (2021). Music as a tool for foreign language learning in Early Childhood Education and Primary Education. Proposing innovative CLIL Music teaching approaches. CLIL Journal of Innovation and Research in Plurilingual and Pluricultural Education, 4(1), 35-47.</p>
Google Scholar	<p>Filippi R, R. A. (2019). A developmental approach to bilingual research: The effects of multi-language experience from early infancy to old age.</p>

Source	Details of Articles
	<p>Hughes S. (2021). The Role of Sociocultural Theory in L2 Empirical Research. <i>Studies in Applied Linguistics and TESOL</i>.</p> <p>Piker R.A, &amp; Rex L. A. (2008) Influences of teacher-child social interactions on English language development in a Head Start classroom. <i>Early Childhood Education Journal</i>, 36 (2). 187-193.</p> <p>S, B., S, J. A., &amp; Hansen O. H. (2016). Values in Danish Early Childhood Education and Care.</p> <p>Simon, Ellen, Philip, Oliver, Mackey, Jenifer ... Alison. (2010). Second language acquisition and the younger learner. <i>Child's play? Journal of Child Language</i>; Cambridge, Vol.37, 4: 945-951.</p> <p>Smolucha L: Smolucha F. (2021). Vygotsky's Theory In-Play: Early Childhood Education. <i>Early Child Development and Care</i>.</p> <p>T, A., &amp; S, M. (2021). Research into multilingual issues in ECEC contexts: proposing a trans disciplinary research field.</p>

### 3.3 Thematic data analysis

This study employed thematic content analysis to identify recurring themes in the selected articles, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach which offers flexibility in detecting broad patterns across various studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coughlin, Ryan, Cronin (2021) describe qualitative content analysis but do not clearly distinguish the specific features of thematic content analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six key steps in thematic analysis: data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining themes, and reporting findings.

In this thesis, the identified themes are shaped by the research questions and propositions outlined in the selected studies. These include the use of play as a tool for English language learning in Finnish ECEC settings, the most effective play-based strategies for fostering English language acquisition in young learners, the recognition of play's role by teachers and caregivers in ESL education, and the discussion surrounding the appreciation of ESL in Finnish ECEC settings.

## 4 Findings

Julie Waddington's article, "Early Foreign Language Education Play as a Site for Child Agency" (December 19, 2023), examines the role of play in fostering child agency within early foreign language learning contexts. According to the information provided by Julie Waddington (2023) it is important to create a play-based learning environment where children can actively engage, make choices, and exercise autonomy in their language learning processes. By integrating play into foreign language education, the research article (Waddington J, 19 December 2023) highlights how such approaches can enhance children's motivation, participation, and overall language development. Also, there are needs for educators to recognize and facilitate opportunities for child agency through playful pedagogies in early language instruction.

### 4.1 Utilization of play as a tool for English language learning in Finnish ECEC setting

The advancement of language skills in ECEC classrooms receives support from both interactive social experiences and musical and playful learning activities. The learning methods create purposeful play settings where students can gain new language capabilities through enjoyable natural experiences.

Language acquisition occurs through meaningful interactions during play because children naturally learn language through their play activities. Children use play to test new vocabulary and structural elements while feeling relaxed. Heidelberg Interaction Training (HIT) for language promotion in early childhood settings targets early childhood educators to teach them how to recognize natural play moments to model language usage and enhance language growth for children. (Buschmann A, 2018) Children develop their communication abilities better when teachers unite language learning with play since the learning environment combines enjoyment with relevance to the children's interests. (Buschmann A, 2018)

The learning of English language proves most beneficial through play activities in ECEC settings. Julie Waddington (2023) explains how play-based learning environments use active student participation and personal choice while giving students self-regulation to promote English language learning. Children develop their language skills and sense of control while discovering English through interactive experiments during this learning process. (Waddington J, 2023)

Through Finnish ECEC settings play functions as an integral component because it allows full development and learning for children. The content of Timo Kumpulainen's (2018) report lacks direct references about play serving as an English language learning tool, but Finnish teachers frequently include foreign languages into their playful activities through singing, gameplay and storytelling and role play. (Education, 2016) The academic environments of Finland support child-driven education so children can learn new languages according to their individual learning speeds. (Kumpulainen T, 2018:3)

Mikko Ojala (2010) investigates how Finnish early childhood education and care helps students develop language abilities through play-based learning despite not specifically analysing English language acquisition. The study conducted by Mikko Ojala did not examine English language acquisition but revealed how private facilities in Helsinki teach early childhood education entirely through English thus enabling natural language acquisition through daily activities such as play and arts and sports besides storytelling and singing. (Mikko O, 2010)

The ECEC setting uses music as an effective tool to enhance language learning. Berta Torras-Vila (2021) discusses the MOVIC program (Movement & Music in English) that combines musical activities into language education. Through songs and rhythmic activities together with physical movement the approach teaches and consolidates vocabulary alongside pronunciation and grammatical elements. Through musical activities that support language goals children can develop linguistic understanding in a motivational way. (Torras-Vila B, 2021).

#### 4.1.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Language Learning in ECEC

According to the usage-based theory of language acquisition by Michael Tomasello (2003), children learn language through social activities and, by understanding the intentions of others. Meaningful conversations between children and staff remain essential to language development within ECEC centres. Effective tools include: The teaching method of Interactive Play with activities which let children speak to each other and establish roles and freely express themselves. Organizing storytelling sessions helps children understand and forecast narrative plots which develop their language proficiency. (Tomasello M, 2003) Children develop language skills through social work when participating in collaborative group projects that need group communication and coordination. (Tomasello M, 2003)

In the sociocultural theory Vygotsky demonstrated how children acquire language by developing social relationships with others. Modern ECEC programs use these core concepts defined by

Vygotsky for their foundations. The scaffolding construct enables adults along with peers who possess knowledge to provide specific assistance to enhance language development in children. Children learn through purposeful activities designed to be slightly more complex than their independent level under guidance from supporting adults. (Vygotsky L. S, 1978)

Children learn to speak better and improve their verbal expression by playing and participating in role-playing scenarios (Vygotsky L. S, 1978). The best method for learning vocabulary and grammar emerges through sustained dialogue between children and their caregivers in addition to their peers. (Vygotsky L. S, 1978) By implementing Cultural Tools through texts and musical numbers together with visual presentation materials students gain better understanding of complex materials while remaining committed to their learning process. (Vygotsky L. S, 1978)

The integration of play with structured musical activities that use multicultural approaches exists as a successful mean to boost language development in children. The research findings between HIT and Torras-Vila B (2021) confirm the significance of meaningful student learning experiences supported by Waddington and Kumpulainen and Ojala. The early language learning process requires guided social engagements and cognitive processes according to the joint thinking of Vygotsky and Tomasello. Educational settings that teachers develop serve as developmental spaces where motivated implementations enable both language learning and cognitive advancement. (Vygotsky L. S, 1978)

## **4.2 Most effective play-based strategies for promoting English language acquisition in young learners**

Youth learn language most efficiently through interactive learning sessions, free play activities, musical interaction and proficient speaker immersion practices and oral storytelling sessions. Multiple research studies together with theoretical perspectives demonstrate several effective methods which stimulate language development in ECEC settings.

### **4.2.1 HIT Program: Strategies for Language Acquisition**

Through HIT program for language promotion in early childhood settings, organization has defined multiple proven approaches for supporting language acquisition. (Buschmann A, 2018) The HIT program requires teachers to use responsive engagement by listening carefully to children while validating their contributions while extending their communicative skills. (Buschmann A, 2018) Teachers improve children's statements through language modelling while providing contextual

examples that children can follow. Language development happens naturally through integrated language facilitation during upcoming events throughout daily sessions providing students with diverse language exposure. (Buschmann A, 2018)

Educators conduct recorded reviews of their interactions so they can experience reflection through practice that helps them develop better language facilitation methods. Play functions as an important instructional method to help young learners learn English language effectively. According to the researches the below mentioned strategies can be useful, (Waddington J, 2023), the combination of listening to English stories and playing out their contents allows students to enhance both their language comprehension and vocabulary usage, songs together with music-based activities that include English rhymes and songs assist children in learning both language patterns and pronunciation, children learn conversational English skills through Role-Play activities which leads to development of both social abilities and language skills across various scenarios and playing interactive games while using English for verbal communication both activates language learning and strengthens adult learning success. (Waddington J, 2023)

#### 4.2.2 Play-Based Strategies and other strategies in Finnish ECEC for English Language Learning

The educational system of Early Childhood Education in Finland combines play-based approaches for better language development. (Kumpulainen T, 2018:3) storytelling activities when combined with story development allow children to build vocabulary strength and reading abilities. Also, music activities combined with songs facilitate children's skill development for word memorization and pronunciation. The dramatic Play and Role-Play offer environments for children to develop appropriate language skills while conversing through different roles. Moreover, interactive games that incorporate language elements build verbal interaction while keeping the content interesting. (Kumpulainen T, 2018:3)

Research studies of Finnish ECEC centres have identified successful methods which include Early Total Language Immersion (Conducting daily educational activities entirely in English facilitate natural language acquisition (Mikko O, 2010) and Play-Based Learning (Uses play as a medium for language practice in meaningful and interactive contexts). Students learn phonemic awareness better through enjoyable musical activities combined with movement along with rhymes and songs. Students build their language ability as well as their conversational skills through role-playing in storytelling sessions. (Mikko O, 2010)

### 4.2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Language Acquisition Strategies

In the perspective of Michael Tomasello (2003) language acquisition depends on social communication. Effective strategies, it includes, through modelling once own language use in everyday settings adults give children standard examples to use as guidelines. Also, when children are permitted to repeat words and sentences, they learn to absorb linguistic structure patterns. In addition, children learn better from receiving broad linguistic content when placed in relevant meaningful situations and the support provided to children grows less structured when their language skills develop through appropriate teaching stages. (Tomasello M, 2003)

According to Lev Vygotsky (1978) social interactions between children and others serve as the essential factor for language acquisition. Effective strategies include, statement of Guided Participation involves encouraging children to actively participate through conversation exchanges and storytelling activities as well as shared reading opportunities, during modelling language session's teachers and caregivers show students proper pronunciation together with correct grammar and usage of the language. Qualitative peer learning should consist of structured group assignments with advanced learners to advance language skills, simplified exaggerated speech patterns that teachers and caregivers address to children serve as an effective method to improve their comprehension and teachers should use open-ended questions and experience-prompts to help children express themselves verbally. (Vygotsky L. S, 1978)

The learning of language in early childhood education relies on interactive approaches and play-based methods including musical programs and immersive learning elements. Research on HIT and play-based English learning (Waddington, Kumpulainen, Ojala) and music in language learning (Torras-Vila) offers instruction for educators. Social interaction alongside guided learning and scaffolding support serves essential purposes in linguistic development as demonstrated by the theoretical frameworks of Vygotsky and Tomasello. When educators implement the described strategies, they establish meaningful surroundings which help students learn language naturally with effectiveness.

### 4.3 Recognizing the role of play by teachers and caregivers in ESL education

Teachers and caregivers accept that play serves as an essential development tool for early language learning because it is a natural and effective approach to linguistic growth. Through play activities children develop an environment where they can speak freely to other learners in the group without judgement or need to be perfect. Studies show teachers understand play serves as a fundamental

method to develop communication skills and improve confidence when students learn languages more effectively and meaningfully.

#### 4.3.1 Perceptions of Play in Language Acquisition: HIT Program

Teaching staff welcomed The Heidelberg Interaction Training (HIT) program because it gave them confidence to integrate play-based techniques into their language instruction methods. Players accept that through play they achieve, design surroundings with abundant language resources to merge the elements of play and language, the support of natural language emerges during activities that students guide independently, educate children to develop their communication skills through letting them engage in play-based dialogue activities and through the HIT program teachers learn methods to use play strategically thus they observe progress in children's language development. (Buschmann A, 2018)

#### 4.3.2 Perceptions of Play in English Language Education

The natural educational approach understands play functions as a meaningful setting for English learning where children can investigate new linguistic elements while having fun. Key insights from research indicate, through play students learn how to communicate effectively because the process allows them to share their ideas while finding common understanding with others. The approach sticks to developmental phases which make learning seem natural instead of being compelled. Students show higher intrinsic motivation toward language activities when these activities are fun because of play-based educational approaches. (Waddington J, 2023)

The studies by Waddington demonstrate how play enables children to gain control over their learning environment through an optimal context for naturally and happily mastering English skills. (Waddington J, 2023)

#### 4.3.3 Perceptions of Play in Finnish and English ECEC Education

In Finnish education practice play serves as a fundamental component in developing both holistic learning and language abilities. They emphasize (Kumpulainen T, 2018) that play through social interaction play enables children to enhance their communication abilities. The practice of language occurs effectively throughout multiple real-life situations. Finland's child-centred philosophy embraces the core principles of well-being and exploration in line with its education approach. (Kumpulainen T, 2018)

Kumpulainen (2018) confirms through his report that Finnish ECEC utilizes play-based methods to enhance language acquisition but does not cover English language learning specifically. Teachers throughout Finland dedicate their efforts to using playful experiences which support both language acquisition and individual personal development of their students. (Kumpulainen T, 2018)

Although Finnish ECEC professionals firmly advocate the use of play-based learning for early childhood development, Ojala's study fails to find out the perception of teachers about English language learning through play activities. The Finnish teaching profession sees play as an inherent method which enables children to discover their surroundings along with strengthening social abilities and acquiring multiple languages. The Finnish ECEC framework supports integration and play-based approaches to help young pupils improve their natural language skills. Mikko O. (2010)

#### 4.3.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Teachers' and Caregivers' Perceptions of Language Learning

In Tomasello's Usage-Based Theory, Tomasello focuses his work on child language acquisition, but his principles suggest that teachers and caregivers function as facilitators to establish areas rich with opportunities for language exposure during social interactions. Educational communication and language pattern observation both support students to develop their language abilities naturally. The education process that encourages active social communication assists students in language development.

ECEC educators need to offer structured social environments to guide children through their linguistic development based on Tomasello's research findings. (Tomasello M, 2003) According to Vygotsky, teachers together with caregivers understand the development of language as a social enterprise which depends on others. They see their role as, facilitators of language development (creating opportunities for meaningful conversations) and responsive interacting mediums (actively listening and reinforcing children's language attempts). Children learn language through cultural mediators who use culturally appropriate stories along with play activities and supportive scaffolding. This helps teachers provide appropriate assistance by examining the child's current abilities in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky L. S, 1978).

The notion that instructor-directed support together with student-to-student dialogue and play activities serve as essential language development methods in early childhood education centres stems from Vygotsky's theory. (Vygotsky L. S, 1978)

Teachers in ECEC environments unite with caregivers in understanding play as the vital approach for language acquisition across global teaching institutions including both English and Finnish early programs. Education recognizes play because it supports language acquisition through personal development and environment-based learning experiences for students. Multiple academic studies recognize music to be a vital educational methodology that develops students' social ties and their spoken interaction competence.

Social exchanges together with scaffolding interactions along with responsive dialogue are essential according to theories developed by Tomasello and Vygotsky for language acquisition. Interactive methods combined with play-based approaches yield the most significant success when it comes to language development in children.

#### **4.4 Unexpected findings**

Through her article from 2021 and her research on music as a tool for foreign language learning in early childhood education and primary education, Berta Torras-Vila outlines how music functions as a crucial tool for foreign language acquisition and advocates creative Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) music teaching approaches. The research proves that music combines with language acquisition synergistically since music education methods embedded in CLIL approaches effectively expand linguistic abilities of young language learners (Torras-Vila B, 2021).

##### **4.4.1 Music as a Tool for Language Learning and development**

Music-based language learning strategies develop multiple learning experiences to improve language development. Singing combined with chanting allows students to develop better pronunciation and memory skills. Listening to storytelling enriched by music help learners gain better comprehension while remaining highly engaged. Also, active pattern activities that use clapping music and movement exercises assist children in understanding rhythms and tone. (Torras-Vila B, 2021) Listening to easy instruments creates opportunities for children to develop superior auditory skills as well as stronger word relationships. (Torras-Vila B, 2021)

##### **4.4.2 Perceptions of Music in Language Development**

Research leads educators to recognize music as an important tool which enables superior language development. Language activities receive increased participation from students through motivational support. The approach considers multiple educational learning preferences thus allowing access to every student. The target language learning experience brings about greater

assurance for students while increasing their inclination to speak through the destination language. In his work Torras-Vila (2021) demonstrates how music provides an educated supportive learning environment used to boost linguistic abilities and general educational experiences. (Torras-Vila B, 2021)

## 5 Discussion

The Finnish ECEC facilities create immersive play environments where children experience English effortlessly through interactive learning activities that decrease anxiety for children. Children learn languages naturally through interactive and playful activities such as storytelling and singing with role-playing as well. Finnish ECEC settings use meaningful language activities to teach English by promoting negotiation and collaboration between children while fostering their self-expression. (Waddington, 2023; Kumpulainen, 2018; Ojala, 2010)

The HIT educates teachers to detect spontaneous play situations to demonstrate and reinforce vocabulary along with language structures within those moments. The MOVIC program combines movement with music to boost English vocabulary learning along with pronunciation and grammatical understanding for children. Kids learn language patterns more effectively through singing and rhythmic activities together with interactive storytelling while enjoying interactive learning. (Buschmann, 2018; Torras-Vila, 2021; Education, 2016)

Through play-based learning children acquire ownership of their language education through fostered agency in their learning process. Within Finnish ECEC children learn English through their individual learning speeds within a child-led educational approach that promotes playful interaction. The theoretical framework of this method matches Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory because it emphasizes social interactions and teacher and peer support for language acquisition (Waddington, 2023; Kumpulainen, 2018). Children under Tomasello's Usage-Based Theory learn language skills by taking part in meaningful discussions and collaborative activities which supports interactive play as a language development tool. (Vygotsky, 1978; Tomasello, 2003)

Private childcare centres operating in Helsinki enable English-only early childhood instruction which helps young children learn languages naturally through educational activities that include storytelling sports and arts. Various studies by Ojala (2010) show that Finnish ECEC playground develops a learning environment which promotes natural engagement through social activities. The methods incorporating storytelling with role-playing and music and structured interactive play help children both improve their vocabulary skills and their communication abilities and build their capacity for language learning self-direction. Researchers Vygotsky and Tomasello agree that supported social settings and guidance help children learn language in early development.

The found data shows that foreign-language-speaking youngsters gradually grew as part of ECEC programs in Finland throughout last five years. Annual ECEC enrolment statistics from the Finnish

National Agency for Education (2024) show an 18% growth in foreign language-speaking children accessing Helsinki ECEC services from 2019-2023. Analysis of educators' viewpoints identified three central elements about play-based language immersion activities and bilingual staff members and parental support for language learning. Through educational methods that include story-based exercises and dramatic play, and musical activities teachers reported that students developed improved interactive communication skills between Finnish and English language content.

Research results support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory because it demonstrates how social interaction drives language development. The total ECEC student body composition in Helsinki shows a rise in foreign-language-speaking children from 12% in 2019 to 16% according to Finnish National Agency for Education (2024). The growing population of bilingual and multilingual children requires educational establishments to develop specialized teaching methods for effective support. Research demonstrates that Finnish ECEC effectively interfaces foreign-language-speaking children, yet additional training of educators and improved parent involvement could lead to enhanced language learning results.

## **5.1 Limitations**

There are a few limitations associated with ESL teaching in an ECEC setting. One of the biggest challenges is less or no practice and little exposure, since young children hear less English and therefore takes longer to learn language, if English is not spoken at home. Moreover, there is variability in language proficiency among the children some of which would have had some previous exposure to English and others who are complete beginners, making it difficult for educators to tackle the varied learning needs of their learners. Teacher training and language skills are also crucial, but not all teachers have been trained in second language acquisition or have strong English proficiency and can, therefore, not properly model language, scaffold language learning, or engage in meaningful conversation. The other challenge is to learn English and at the same time supporting child's first language development, so that the child does not get confused or lost in a language.

In addition, some ECEC settings might be under resourced with things like bilingual books, visual aids or the HIT programme structured language programmes thus, preventing the skill to learn a language effectively. A second factor is parental involvement since they play a major role in reinforcing language development. However, if parents do not know English or are not actively

involved in a child's education, exposure may not be consistent. Lastly, cognitive and emotional readiness of children varies, with some being overwhelmed, frustrated or unwilling to do as much when it comes to language activities. However, a well formulated play-based ESL learning approach with teacher support and parents' involvement can assist in building a positive and beneficial ESL learning environment in ECEC contexts.

## 5.2 Conclusion

As a part of Finnish ECEC, play is a fundamental part of play and essential to learning foreign languages, in particular ESL. Through various forms of play, children can engage in playing with meaningful words through storytelling, rhymes, drama and role play, not only enhancing their acquired specific words but also improving their communication skills. The language acquisition strategies mentioned in the HIT program are stressed in this program which also emphasizes on the role of the teacher, the careful listening to the child and the provision for language modelling through examples. Having such conversations with teachers is a very natural way for children to learn a language without any pressure. This is important because in such settings, children can explore the use of words to achieve language development and feels comfortable to speak without fear of perfectionism. Teachers' roles are more than teaching; they must provide for opportunities of language rich interactions and action in conversations, children are expected to participate in. Language learning is embedded in play and other everyday social experiences so that children are naturally made to use new words and structures. Here, ultimately, play becomes an important tool in early childhood language acquisition by encouraging and interactive learning environment that fosters children to develop confidence in using English. Future studies need to study the academic effects which emerge from multilingual exposure during early childhood in Finnish ECEC institutions.

Play education based on the development of early language has long-term effects for cognitive, social and academic development in childhood. It promotes linguistic fluency, supports the acquisition of language and solving problems. It also helps to create a lively environment for children to be able to coexist in different environments by boosting their confidence, creativity and collaborative spirit. Play based language training early in life helps with improved communication skills and sensitivity to cultural differences, as well as the ability to be more successful with academics later in life.

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