

**Distance Differentiation in Finland:
a Survey on the Experiences of English Teachers**

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Differentiation and distance education have been studied quite a lot separately (see e.g. Tomlinson 2001, 2014; White 2003; Keegan 1990) but there is not much research done on the topics together: as distance differentiation. Additionally, differentiating English as a foreign language in distance education has not been studied. Also, because of the outbreak of COVID-19 in spring 2020, distance education grew rapidly in Finland and internationally. Therefore, these two topics together require more research.

The aim of this study was to examine English teachers' experiences with differentiation in distance education during spring 2020. The research questions were the following: 1) How did English teachers experience distance differentiation in spring 2020? 2) What differentiation methods did they use in distance education? The data were collected with an online questionnaire, which included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions for the purpose of qualitative and quantitative data. Basic education and general upper secondary school teachers (n=55) answered the questionnaire. The focus of this thesis was on the qualitative data that were analyzed with content analysis. Some minor statistical analysis was done on the quantitative data.

The results of the study indicated that while many teachers felt like English differentiation in distance education was time-consuming, challenging, and laborious, at the same time, and at the end of the day, they viewed it quite positively by describing it as necessary and important. Teachers gave examples of their distance differentiation methods and those were divided into three main distance differentiation categories. These included 1. *differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed* by offering individualized exercises usually based on the student's level of competence in English, 2. *offering individual support measures*, for example remedial teaching and having personal video calls with students, and 3. *students controlling their own learning and differentiation*, including examples of giving the opportunity to choose from exercises on different skill levels or to substitute written exercises by completing those orally.

The results showed that distance differentiation is possible and offered useful examples of distance differentiation methods for English teachers. As distance education is very likely to grow also in the future, there needs to be more research done on the topic of differentiation in that environment. Differentiation is a crucial part in making teaching fair for every student, thus it should be focused on in a distance education environment as well. As there are not many studies done on the topic of distance language differentiation, it needs to be studied more.

Keywords: differentiation, distance education, English as a foreign language, foreign language teaching, foreign language learning

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1 Introduction

Different types of students learn things differently and at different paces. Therefore, it is important that teachers and teaching in general take this into account. Differentiated instruction or differentiation for short is a type of approach to teaching which acknowledges every students' individuality and their different needs (Roiha and Polso 2018, 9). With various differentiation methods, teachers can help all learners to achieve the same goals and help the students learn in a way that suits them and that maximizes their learning abilities (Roiha and Polso 2018, 9; 16).

In spring 2020, the Finnish school system had to adjust to a new and very unusual situation caused by the virus COVID-19 that impacted the whole world. As one of the safety precautions, the Finnish Government decided to transition schools to distance education from the middle of March onwards (Yle 2020). Because of that, education was provided remotely from that on until the middle of May (EDUFI 2020a). Distance education is not a new phenomenon globally, but it is in Finland on such a large scale. Here, basic and general upper secondary school education is provided as face-to-face teaching, and possibly partly because of that, only some research is done on distance education, most of which after the spring 2020 distance education period. Furthermore, the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI 2020a) published an announcement at the beginning of April 2020 concerning the arrangements for support for learning in the exceptional circumstances. In the announcement, it is mentioned that while the situation is very unusual, and it is new for everyone, the children's need for support is still very significant, if not even more significant than in a normal situation (EDUFI 2020a). Therefore, differentiation as part of support measures was also much needed in spring 2020.

There is only a little research done on differentiation in distance education. While there is a lot of information and many studies on both topics individually (see e.g. Tomlinson 2001; Roiha and Polso 2018; White 2003; Keegan 1990), these two have not been studied much together (see e.g. McCarthy 2020). More specifically, foreign language differentiation in distance education has not been studied, which is the topic of this study. Furthermore, many of the previous studies have not examined any concrete ways teachers use to differentiate, whereas in this study, also those were examined. Therefore, this is a highly important topic to explore in terms of language learning and teaching. While the main principles of differentiation are the same in teaching different

subjects, as is the baseline for distance education as well, it is important to acknowledge that teaching and learning languages at distance still differ from other subjects and they need to be examined more.

Moreover, at the time of writing this thesis, the pandemic is still affecting the world and has not disappeared anywhere. In Finland, after the approximately two-month long period of distance education in spring 2020, some schools or certain grades have had short distance education periods as a precaution for exposures for or cases of COVID-19 in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 (see e.g. Yle 2021). Furthermore, in February 2021 the Finnish Government instructed that grades 7–9 of basic education and upper secondary education in areas where the epidemic was in the community transmission or acceleration phase should transition to distance education for a three-week-long period (EDUFI 2021). Additionally, in the future, something similar can emerge, or the current pandemic might continue for a long period of time. Thus, it is important to learn from the first experiences.

The aim of this study is to gain some insight on the topic of differentiation in distance education in Finland, that is, distance differentiation. As the basis for this research was the spring 2020 distance education period. Furthermore, the focus is on English language teaching in basic education and in the general upper secondary schools. The research questions were:

- 1) How did English teachers experience distance differentiation in spring 2020?
- 2) What differentiation methods did they use in distance education?

My hypothesis is that because the new situation came so fast and because there were many new things to learn with distance education on its own, differentiation was something that was overlooked and was left in the background; something that many English teachers did not prioritize. Therefore, the results might show that some teachers did not differentiate at all or used only minimal ways to differentiate during distance education. Teachers might also feel like it was quite challenging to differentiate English during distance education.

The data were gathered with an online questionnaire for English teachers (n=55) in basic education and in general upper secondary schools. In addition to multiple-choice questions, the questionnaire included various open-ended questions for the purpose of qualitative research. The qualitative data, which the focus was on, were analyzed using content analysis with the help of the computer program NVivo 12 and the quantitative data were analyzed statistically with Microsoft Excel and SPSS Statistics.

In this thesis, section 2 focuses on differentiation. The subsections examine differentiation from various points of view to get a well-rounded idea of the topic. Secondly, distance education is discussed in section 3 and its subsections. In the last subsection 3.4, differentiation and distance education are examined together in more detail. In section 4, the methodology of the present study is introduced, followed by the results and analysis in section 5. Lastly, section 6 summarizes the purpose and results of this study, introduces its limitations, and includes some suggestions for future research on the topic.

2 Differentiation

This section introduces the concept of differentiation. First, the concept of differentiation itself is clarified. Next, some differentiation methods are introduced in section 2.2 to further the understanding of differentiation. Then, in section 2.3, differentiation is examined as part of the Finnish basic and general upper secondary education. Lastly, in section 2.4, some possible problems or difficulties with differentiation are discussed. While I examine differentiation in this section quite generally because the concept of differentiation is the same in every subject, English as a foreign language (EFL) is kept in mind and examples of that are included because that is the focus of this study.

2.1 What is differentiation

As mentioned in the introduction, differentiated instruction or differentiation is an approach to teaching that takes the different needs of learners into account (Roiha and Polso 2018, 9). The aim of differentiation is to maximize the potential of students while acknowledging their individual differences (Pachler 2014, 309). This is done by planning a style of teaching that considers the individual characteristics of learners in terms of ability, interest, and prior learning (ibid.). Tomlinson (2014, 20) summarizes these individual characteristics into students' readiness, interests, and learning profile. In more detail, according to Pachler (2014, 307–308), the differences can be in areas such as gender, interest, ethnic and cultural background, first language, motivation, previous experience, aptitude, learning strategies, etc. and can influence students' progress, achievement, or participation in a foreign language.

Both Roiha and Polso (2018) and Petty (2014) use the words *approach to teaching* when describing differentiation. Furthermore, Petty (2014, 514) writes that “[w]e used to teach subjects and classes – now we teach students.” This highlights the important role of differentiation in today's teaching. Students and their different needs are where teaching should start from and focus on. Similarly, Roiha and Polso (2018, 32) mention the importance of knowing the students as a requirement for successful differentiation. Furthermore, Pachler (2014, 309) shares Roiha and Polso's and Petty's views and summarizes them by saying that differentiation “requires the recognition of pupils' individual differences and needs, familiarisation with their backgrounds and the identification of appropriate teaching strategies and activities.” Overall, even though differentiation is always student centered, the teacher's role in differentiation and ensuring it is successful is very significant. Moreover, and as these explanations

mentioned above indicate, differentiation is a very wide-ranging and diverse approach to teaching.

Additionally, Roiha and Polso (2018, 16–17) introduce a couple of divisions for explaining and describing differentiation that are common in the field. First, commonly and especially in everyday language (and in the Finnish school world), differentiation is divided into downwards and upwards differentiation. Differentiating downwards refers to the different measures to support the learning of so-called weaker students whereas differentiating upwards means acknowledging the more advanced students in teaching (ibid.). For example, Pachler (2014, 312) also explains a similar idea of differentiation in foreign languages. There should always be three elements when thinking of differentiation: core, reinforcement, and extension (ibid.). Core elements refer to the language items, structures, and tasks that all students should be able to master (ibid.). The element of reinforcement means the tasks that are aimed towards students who need more practice, and extension, on the other hand, means the language items and tasks for those students who are capable of more advanced and complex work than the others (ibid.).

Another possible division is reactive and proactive differentiation (Roiha and Polso 2018, 16–17). In reactive differentiation, teaching is differentiated and individualized only when some challenges appear whereas in proactive differentiation, students' individualities are acknowledged to start with, and students' needs are foreseen (ibid.). For example, Tomlinson (2014) describes differentiation exactly as a teacher's proactive response to the needs of a student and as examined in this section already, many others also suggest that being the key in differentiation. I will discuss the proactive ways more in section 2.2. Though, an example of reactive differentiation could be offering remedial teaching to those students who need more practice and help in language learning. Remedial teaching is a widely used differentiation method in Finland on top of the more proactive differentiation methods, especially in basic education. It is also a student's right among other support measures (EDUFI 2018, 7).

Foreign languages, such as English in Finland, can be very challenging for many students for various reasons. Difficulties with reading and writing in particular can make it difficult to learn languages, but sometimes even a student who has no problems in their mother tongue may have difficulties learning a foreign language (Roiha and Polso 2018, 222). Furthermore, understanding the difference between spoken and written language, for example in English, can be challenging especially for students with dyslexia (Moilanen 2019, 134). Additionally, because knowing foreign languages and the ability

to use them are nowadays highly valued, it is very important that enough support for learning difficulties is offered, for example through differentiation (Roiha and Polso 2018, 222).

When a teacher plans a lesson, they might first think of how the typical student would learn something well, but after that, they need to think how their stronger and weaker students would learn the same thing, and adapt their plans (Petty 2014, 514–515). After that, they might also need to think of their students who might have language difficulties or poor motivation and adapt their plans again (ibid.). All of this is differentiation: it means the methods and adaptations teachers make in their lessons and in their teaching. Petty (2014) also writes how overall some teaching methods differentiate better and this is something that teachers must learn. Next, in section 2.2 below, the different ways to differentiate teaching and particularly foreign language teaching are examined in more detail.

2.2. Different ways to differentiate teaching in foreign languages

In this section, I present two general ways to explain and divide differentiation methods according to two researchers, and then give some examples of specifically foreign language differentiation. Traditionally, language skills have been thought to consist of four main skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Though, this classical view or division has also been challenged because language is not always that simple and straightforward and therefore language skills are sometimes difficult to define (see e.g. Pietilä and Lintunen 2014). Still, when teaching or learning foreign languages, such as English in Finland, these four language skills are commonly acknowledged and focused on. Furthermore, all of these language skills should and could be differentiated.

First, according to Tomlinson's (2001, 4) quite general overview and framework, teachers can modify their teaching and differentiate through at least three teaching and learning related elements: they can differentiate through *content*, through *process*, and through *product* according to students' individual characteristics. Tomlinson is one of the pioneering researchers in the field of differentiation, and therefore many other differentiation frameworks are similar to Tomlinson's. Firstly, *content* means the input of teaching and learning, that is, what is being taught and what teachers want the students to learn (Tomlinson 2001, 72). There are two ways for teachers to differentiate through content: to adapt what they teach or manage how they give students the materials and mechanisms through which students access the important information (ibid.). Secondly,

process then describes how students process ideas and information given to them and teachers can differentiate this by guiding students and ensuring they use the best possible skills (Tomlinson 2014, 18). Thirdly, *product* means the output or the way in which the students show what they have learned (Tomlinson 2001, 4). Tomlinson (2001, 72) emphasizes how these three are closely related to each other and interconnected, so separating them from each other is usually quite unnatural. To summarize, "[i]n a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs" (Tomlinson 2001, 7).

Petty (2014, 516), on the other hand, divides differentiation methods into three main differentiation strategies that are similar to Tomlinson's but with slightly different emphases and contents: first, *differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed*, second, *accommodating different preferences and support needs*, and third, *differentiating feedback and setting individual tasks and targets*. Compared to Tomlinson's categorization, these are more specific, and he goes into more detail in each category. With *differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed* he explains how at least some of the tasks in a class must be simple enough for the weakest learners to be able to attempt to do, but also some of them must give some challenge for the strongest learners (ibid.). Differentiation by task can be done easily by using ladders of tasks that go from easy to hard and that are varied. An example of a ladder of tasks in English as a foreign language could be of almost any type of grammar topic, for instance the past perfect tense. First, there could be a task where the student should choose the right answer from two options. After that, one could write in English something with a help of a clue in their mother tongue saying the same thing and so on. The last and most challenging task could be to either write sentences or a whole essay on something that had happened in the past, where one needs to use the correct tense.

Petty (2014) also suggests setting open tasks, because the weaker students learn well from them and can answer something, but the stronger students interpret them in a more demanding way and produce more extensive answers. This is differentiation by outcome because the outcome is going to be different on various learners. Though, Petty (2014) reminds how in this type of task, teachers should also expect more from the stronger students. Additionally, Roiha and Polso (2018, 226–232) write how in foreign language teaching every part of language learning, the four main skills, can be differentiated with various types of exercises or tasks. Similarly to Petty, they suggest

that in speaking and writing some students should be offered more extensive open tasks where they should produce the answers on their own, whereas for others, it would be good to offer a list of words or example sentences for support (ibid.). Roiha and Polso (2018, 226–232) also propose how teachers could allow for some students to answer with single words only instead of whole sentences in some written or oral exercises, which is an example of differentiation by task. Following Petty’s categorization, Pachler (2014, 270) gives examples of differentiation by outcome and by task in foreign languages. In an activity, where the students are asked to create as many grammatically correct sentences as possible from certain words and for example in a given tense, the teacher can differentiate the exercise by outcome, that is by changing the number of sentences pupils create, or by task, that is by changing the number of variables (i.e. words) students are asked to combine (ibid.). An example of differentiation by time allowed is to give the weaker learners extra time or to use methods like resource-based learning (Petty 2014, 523–524).

Accommodating different preferences and support needs indicate how students have their preferred learning styles and how teaching should cater for all these different styles (Petty 2014). In addition, most students actually develop faster when they experience varied tasks and teaching methods, thus it is important to alternate between different learning styles but also different assessment methods as well (Petty 2014, 525). Students also have various difficulties in learning which must be discovered to be able to help with and correct them, but it might be challenging for a teacher in a large class to do so (ibid.). Therefore, doing work in groups and with peers can help in this. Similarly, Pachler (2014, 308) suggests that foreign language teachers should become aware of what learning strategies to use in teaching, when, why, and how, and help the learners monitor their own strategy use.

Lastly, Petty (2014, 526) highlights the importance of formative assessment. He writes that teachers can *differentiate feedback* and use different methods for it as well. He also suggests setting individualized goals based on assessment and tests but also encouraging students to do self-assessment and to ask them to set their own goals (Petty 2014, 517). Similarly, in their model for differentiation, Roiha and Polso (2018) highlight differentiating assessment as one part of differentiation. Though, they mention how only when support measures in other areas of teaching and learning are in order, can the teacher begin all-around assessment in a way that suits the students’ learning and competence (Roiha and Polso 2018, 22). Furthermore, differentiation is part of assessment even in the

Finnish National Core Curriculum for basic education (EDUFI 2014, 48; see section 2.3 for more).

Furthermore, in a foreign language classroom, working in a small group or with a peer is important especially when practicing speaking, as talking in a big group can cause anxiety for the so-called weaker students (Roiha and Polso 2018, 226). Additionally, small group work can help students to not be insecure about the perceived incorrect production of the language (Pachler 2014, 325). Moreover, sometimes the more advanced students could be paired up so they can have a more complex discussion about various topics and also improve their learning (Roiha and Polso 2018, 226). Tomlinson (2001, 3) explains how in flexible grouping teachers use many different group configurations in different tasks and over time, and therefore, the students get to experience all types of groups and arrangements. Furthermore, she uses the word *fluid* when describing the assignment of students to groups in heterogeneous classrooms and explains that to be the desirable way for an effective differentiated classroom (ibid.).

Also, when studying English, or other foreign languages, students hear the foreign language a lot in the classroom, for example when the teacher gives instructions in English or when listening to different recordings (Roiha and Polso 2018, 223). For some students, understanding a spoken language can be challenging, and therefore, it is important to differentiate it. Repetition and paraphrasing are good ways to differentiate one's instructions (Roiha and Polso 2018, 224). When first introducing a topic with more challenging and diverse sentences it gives the more advanced learners new ways to express something, and then following it with more simple language help the students who have lower English skills (ibid.). Additionally, clear and precise oral instructions could be accompanied by visual support, like gestures or pictures (Pachler 2014, 325). Similarly, videos or pictures could help students with understanding the contents of a listening comprehension exercise better (Moilanen 2019, 148). Moreover, when doing listening comprehension exercises, it is important to give the weaker students the possibility to listen to the recording multiple times, split the recording into short sections, or offer a list of words for support (Roiha and Polso 2018, 224).

Lastly, when reading texts in English, students can be offered different versions of the same text based on their skill level: for instance, shortened versions or versions with easier synonyms of difficult vocabulary for weaker students (Roiha and Polso 2018, 228–229). Differentiating writing in English can be done with different projects and presentations where the more advanced students can write broader and longer texts and

the weaker students list only individual words regarding the topic (Roiha and Polso 2018, 230). Also, sometimes spelling words truly correctly should not be the most important thing in learning to write in English, for example with younger children who are possibly still learning to write in their mother tongue (ibid.). Furthermore, when doing written exercises, the more advanced learners can do more exercises or write with whole sentences, whereas the weaker learners can focus on doing easier exercises and only some parts of the more difficult ones (Roiha and Polso 2018, 231).

2.3 Differentiation in Finnish basic and general upper secondary education

In Finland, basic education, which is part of compulsory education (i.e. *oppivelvollisuus* in Finnish), consists of the grades 1–9 and usually begins the year a child turns seven. After basic education, students can choose to continue their studies either in general upper secondary school or in vocational school, both usually consisting of three years of education (MINEDU n.d.). Overall, compulsory education ends at the age of 18 (ibid.). Commonly in everyday speech, basic education is divided into elementary schools (grades 1–6) and middle schools (grades 7–9) but officially grades 1–9 are all part of basic education as a single structure (EDUFI 2018, 15). A National Core Curriculum (NCC) that is set by the Finnish National Agency for Education includes for example the objectives and core contents of different subjects and the principles of assessment (EDUFI 2014, 473.) Individual schools and municipalities usually have their own curricula that follow the NCC frameworks. Furthermore, there is a National Core Curriculum for both basic education (i.e. grades 1-9) and general upper secondary education.

In the NCC for basic education (later NCCB), differentiation is introduced when talking about choosing the working methods (EDUFI 2014, 30). According to the NCCB (EDUFI 2014, 30) differentiation is based on knowing the students. As mentioned earlier, Petty (2014) and Roiha and Polso (2018) also highlight the importance of this. Differentiation concerns the extent and the depth of studying, the progress of working and the students' different ways of learning (EDUFI 2014, 30). The students' needs are the starting point in differentiation which is the reason why students are encouraged to make progress individually and to choose various working methods (ibid.). Similarly, in the NCC for general upper secondary schools it is mentioned that instruction must be differentiated by “taking every students' individual starting points, needs, goals, hobbies, interests, competences and factors affecting their situations in life into account” (EDUFI

2019b, 27). Furthermore, for example in the NCCB, differentiation is part of assessment as well. For example, it is mentioned that various methods for assessment should be used, it is important to acknowledge students' different ways to learn and work when doing assessment, and even slight learning difficulties or possible deficient skills in the language of instruction, Finnish or Swedish, needs to be taken into account in assessment and skill demonstration situations (e.g. tests) (ibid.).

Also, differentiation and offering support to the student are included under each particular subject in the NCCB (EDUFI 2014). It is described how support should be part of the given subject in more detail and what is particular to that subject (ibid.) For example, in the English subject in the grades 3–6 and 7–9, students are encouraged to use English confidently (EDUFI 2014, 350). Moreover, it is mentioned how “students are given the opportunity to make progress individually and receive support for learning, if needed” (EDUFI 2014, 348). Additionally, even students who advance faster than others or with previous proficiency of the language can improve and make progress as well (ibid.). This highlights the diversity of differentiation: the teaching of students who are on a beginner level, on a more advanced level, or anywhere in between in their learning can and should include differentiation.

Moreover, in Finland, the classrooms are very heterogeneous. For example, in the English subject, there are no different groups based on the English competency and skill level but all students at all levels of competence are in the same classroom learning at the same time. Furthermore, in Finland, special needs education is also based on integration and inclusion (EDUFI 2019a, 46–47). The focus is that, as much as possible, the students with special educational needs would be integrated with their peers in mainstream education, while receiving the support they need (ibid.). According to Mikola (2011, 55), one of the key factors for teaching a heterogeneous classroom is differentiation.

2.4 Possible challenges with differentiation: experiences of teachers

Tomlinson (2014, 9) summarizes the challenges teachers experience with differentiation: “How to reach out effectively to students who span the spectrum of learning readiness, personal interests, and culturally shaped ways of seeing and speaking about and experiencing the world.” Furthermore, she writes how teachers might feel like dividing time and resources in an effective way to maximize students' learning is difficult (Tomlinson 2014, 10). Roiha and Polso (2018, 31) also note, how many teachers might feel like differentiation takes a lot of time and, therefore, might only focus on

differentiating downwards. Additionally, Pachler (2014, 311) acknowledges that differentiation is very challenging as it requires thoughtful planning, which usually takes time.

The lack of time and resources is something that has also arisen from various studies done on differentiation in Finland. For example, in their master's thesis, Karlin and Toivonen (2019) examined differentiation and classroom management from classroom teachers' (n=99) point of view with a questionnaire. Their findings showed that the lack of time, material, and other resources interfered with differentiation (Karlin and Toivonen 2019, 36–39). Likewise, Ikola (2013) found similar results in her master's thesis. She examined teacher views (n=8) on differentiation in secondary school English classrooms with the help of interviews and found that while teachers described differentiation positively, they did mention how the negative sides of it were the lack of time and resources (Ikola 2013, 98). Roiha (2014), on the other hand, examined the views of teachers (n=51) on differentiation in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), differentiation methods they have used in CLIL, and difficulties they had experienced with it. The most common difficulties teachers mentioned were also connected to time, materials, and classroom management (Roiha 2014).

While the lack of time and resources have been mentioned in studies when teachers are asked about the difficulties with differentiation, Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010, 137) write how there is a solution for this problem: the idea is to not plan a lesson first and then plan differentiation on top of it, but to plan a differentiated lesson from the beginning. This is something that Roiha and Polso (2018, 36) also mention. While all teaching should be based on the individual needs of students, as mentioned earlier, differentiation is not something that should add to the workload of teachers (*ibid.*). They mention how differentiation should be part of planning and fulfilling a lesson and using particular teaching methods serve differentiation in themselves without creating more work for the teacher (Roiha and Polso 2018, 37). For instance, one example of these methods is simply giving a different amount of homework or different timetables for doing the same homework (Roiha and Polso 2018, 117).

According to Petty (2014, 514), differentiation requires a so-called active mindset from the teacher. He describes that a teacher with an active mindset is someone who takes control, thinks that they can make a difference and help a student, and is adaptive in many ways in their teaching (Petty 2014, 474–475). Also, this type of teacher thinks that their students' success and progress depend on them, and if something does not work out, they

can ask for advice or change their strategy (ibid.). Therefore, if a teacher has more of a passive mindset, differentiation is going to be harder and because of that, a teacher might not differentiate. Likewise, Tomlinson and Imbeau (2014, 2–3) mention a similar mindset in making differentiation successful: a teacher who is optimistic about all students' success and sees that there is ample potential hidden in their students enter the planning of differentiation differently as opposed to a teacher who thinks that the curriculum is just a textbook and only some students can succeed. Supporting these two views, Pachler (2014, 309) highlights the importance of high teacher expectations in the achievement and behavior of students and how it can help students to fulfill their potential. These all show how the role of a teacher is very significant in differentiation and making it successful. Moreover, Pachler (2014, 311) adds how differentiation requires careful and thoughtful planning.

Furthermore, Pachler (2014, 309) notes how catering for all the individual needs of students is challenging because it requires that the teacher recognizes the students' differences and needs and identifies the appropriate teaching strategies and activities. Furthermore, he notes how as a teacher you need to ensure that there are suitable learning challenges for every student and that you are responding to all the various learning needs of students (ibid.). In addition, Roiha and Polso (2018, 32) mention the importance of knowing the students as a requirement for successful differentiation. Therefore, especially with a new group or a student who has just moved, this might create some difficulties at first (ibid.). As mentioned earlier in section 2.1, differentiation is among many other things about acknowledging the different needs of students and how they learn things. If a teacher does not know their students and how they learn the best differentiation might be harder. Then again, and as Roiha and Polso (2018, 32) also write, getting to know the student and listening to what they can tell about their learning styles and ways they favor, can help a lot.

Finally, the rapidly emerged situation with remote teaching here in Finland, as well as in other countries, also created new challenges with differentiation. Although distance education is something that has been studied quite a lot internationally, the transition in spring 2020 to distance education was so quick and as distance education is not common in Finland, it caused a new situation in teaching. Moreover, differentiation in distance education or further in distance language education has not been studied much. More on this and distance education in general in section 3 below.

3 Distance education

White (2003, 1) wrote already at the beginning of the 21st century how “rapid developments in information and communications technology have increased awareness of and demand for distance education.” Thus, now nearly 20 years later with the ongoing pandemic, the awareness and demand have certainly expanded even more greatly. In Finland, practically all basic education and general upper secondary school education are provided in a traditional school and classroom environment with face-to-face learning. Possibly because of this, there are only some studies done on distance education in Finland. On the other hand, for example in the United States of America distance education has been more common, especially in university courses and therefore it has been studied quite a lot internationally (Keegan 2006, 153). At the same time, as mentioned above, neither differentiation in a distance learning environment nor specifically differentiating language learning in distance education have been studied much.

In the subsections below, I first introduce the topic of distance education in general as well as at the same time examine it from language learning’s point of view. Some of the possible challenges with distance learning are also discussed in section 3.2 and some previous studies on distance education are presented. Lastly, in subsection 3.3 differentiation in distance education is discussed.

3.1 The definition of distance education and distance language learning

There are multiple terms used for the concept of distance education, for instance, remote teaching, distance learning, distance teaching, online teaching, and E-learning. Furthermore, different sources and researchers use different terms, and while the definitions for each term might not always be identical, they are very closely related. In general, different terms and their definitions across the board emphasize the distance between teacher and learner (White 2003, 11). Moreover, when defining the term in their studies, many researchers mention Keegan’s (1990) definition. Furthermore, according to White (2006, 248), most of the definitions in the field of distance language learning draw on the definition by Keegan (1990).

Keegan (1990, 44–45) explains how the definition of distance education is characterized by five key components:

1. *The separation of teacher and learner* in time and/or place, which distinguishes it from face-to-face learning
2. *The influence of an educational organization* in preparing materials for learning and providing support services for students
3. *The use of a range of media* for example print, audio, video, and computer to connect teacher and learner and to carry content
4. *The provision of two-way communication* meaning that the student can also initiate dialogue
5. *The possibility of face-to-face contact* in a group for didactic and socialization purposes

These components have been referred to or used as a basis for another explanation by many other researchers when talking about distance education. The idea of this definition was to combine too narrow and too broad explanations into one concise but wide enough definition (Keegan 1990, 44). Although some researchers criticized this explanation as too narrow, it is generally accepted by other researchers, and therefore for the purpose of this study, it offers a great baseline to understand what distance education refers to.

Keegan (1990, 31–32) also indicates that some terms cannot be used as the overall term for the field of education as they usually have a focus on a particular part and tend to ignore other parts. For example, he (ibid.) mentions how the term 'distance learning' would be too "student-based as the overall term" and similarly 'distance teaching' would be too teacher-centered to be used as an umbrella term but that 'distance education' combines both of these. Thus, distance education can be thought to be the umbrella term in the field and the other terms fall under it with slightly different emphases. Though, White (2003, 11) on the other hand highlights that distance learning is also a well-accepted and widely used term as a near-synonym for distance education while it is a more learner-centered term. Then again, the Finnish term 'etäopetus' when translated to English is closer to the terms remote teaching or distance teaching. At the same time, even the Finnish National Agency for Education has used the terms distance education, remote teaching, distance teaching, and distance learning in their reporting and communications interchangeably (see e.g. EDUFI 2020b). In this thesis, as they are fairly common and extensive, I will be using the terms distance education and distance learning to indicate teaching and learning happening online and/or with a help of computers or other media.

Moreover, synchronous and asynchronous learning refer to different types of online learning contexts. Synchronous online learning is usually live, real-time, and scheduled, whereas in asynchronous learning the instructor provides materials, lectures, and other content for the learners to access at any time that is suitable for them (Shahabadi and Uplane 2015, 131-133). In other words, usually synchronous teaching and learning means that the teacher and the students are divided by place but not time, and in asynchronous learning, the learning and teaching is neither happening in the same place nor at the same time. Though, both of these learning contexts are learner-centered and use various online learning resources (ibid.). McCarthy (2020, 10) and Hratinski, Keller, and Carlsson (2010) write how before asynchronous online teaching and learning was more popular and has been studied more than synchronous online learning, but in the last few decades synchronous learning has gained more exposure within the field of distance and online education.

Furthermore, White (2003, 10) explains that feedback and other interaction is crucial in distance language learning and therefore, synchronous distance language learning is offering great tools for this. Hratinski, Keller, and Carlsson (2010, 654) also suggest how synchronous communication could be more advantageous than asynchronous in some circumstances, like this, as feedback is less effective if it is delayed. Also, synchronous distance learning enables that distance learners can feel less isolated and gain motivation and energy from others (White 2003, 10). Regarding this, web-conferencing environments (WCE) are online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or Adobe Connect that offer various tools and features to be used for presenting information or sharing concepts in a real-time online meeting or synchronous online learning situation (Bower 2011, 63, McCarthy 2020, 10). Some of the significant tools and features these platforms offer are synchronous audio, video, chat, whiteboard, screen-sharing, and break-out rooms that enable interactive collaboration (ibid.). According to Bower (2011, 63), the use of these types of platforms to “provide a more interactive learning experience for distance students” was becoming more widespread already in 2011. Moreover, using these types of tools became the new normal under compulsion during spring 2020, when the pandemic caused schools to switch to distance education all over the world.

As mentioned in the introduction, Finnish schools transitioned to distance education for approximately two months because of the virus COVID-19 (EDUFI 2020a). In fall 2020 and spring 2021 some schools or certain grades have had short distance education

periods as a precaution for exposures for or cases of COVID-19 (see e.g. Yle 2021). Furthermore, in February 2021, the Finnish Government instructed that grades 7–9 of basic education and upper secondary education (including general upper secondary schools) in areas where the epidemic was in the community transmission or acceleration phase should transition to distance education again from March 8th to March 28th (EDUFI 2021). In the next subsection, I examine previous studies on distance education from teachers' point of view. It introduces many Finnish studies done on the basis of spring 2020 distance education as those studies are current and very close to the topic of this study.

3.2 Previous studies: views and experiences of teachers

In their study, Stenman and Petterson (2020) examined how Swedish teachers (n= 10) perceive remote teaching as a help to make learning in rural areas more equal. According to their findings, remote teaching requires and is dependent on the technological and pedagogical competence of the teachers (ibid.). Also, Bower (2011, 63) mentions how using tools such as web-conferencing environments for learning and teaching is quite complex as there are several tools to master, and deciding what tools to use and how requires consideration. Regarding this, From (2017, 48) introduces a term called Pedagogical Digital Competence (PDC) which means “the ability to [...] apply the attitudes, knowledge and skills required to plan and conduct [...] ICT-supported teaching [...] with a view to supporting students' learning in the best possible way.” One of the main characteristics of PDC is the ability to improve pedagogical work in online teaching with the help of digital technology (From 2017, 47). From (ibid.) also adds how PDC is not a competence someone is born with but rather something that everyone can develop. Therefore, while teachers might need certain competencies to succeed in remote teaching, those competencies are something one can learn and develop. Though, as the transition to distance education in spring 2020 came so rapidly and was new for many teachers in Finland, the PDC of the Finnish teachers might have been quite limited at first as using web-conferencing environments as a teaching environment was not something they were used to.

A study initiated by the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI 2020c) examined both international and Finnish studies and reports that were related to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study (ibid.) was initiated in March 2020 and continued until the end of 2020. The report states how “both international

comparisons and national studies indicate that the transition to and delivery of distance education in Finnish schools --- were highly successful considering the circumstances” (EDUFI 2020c, 2). This is something that The Trade Union of Education in Finland, OAJ, also reported (OAJ 2020). OAJ carried out a survey for their members in April 2020 of teaching during corona (ibid.). Over 5,500 teachers from all levels of education, including vocational education and institutes of higher education as well, answered the survey (ibid.). Approximately 70% of teachers reported that the exceptional educational arrangements functioned well as a whole (ibid.).

Also, an ongoing research project by the University of Helsinki and the University of Tampere examines studying, teaching, and well-being in the school environment during the corona pandemic from the point of view of students, teachers, principals, and guardians in basic education (Ahtiainen et al. 2020, Ahtiainen et al. 2021). The research project included two data gatherings, first in May 2020 and second in November 2020 (ibid.). The initial results from the first data gathering, reported in August 2020, showed that the majority of the teachers experienced the workload in spring 2020 during the pandemic larger than normally: 38% of teachers (n= 5,239) experienced it larger, and 50% experienced it much larger (Ahtiainen et al. 2020, 29). OAJ’s report based on their survey showed similar results to Ahtiainen and others’ (2020) initial results but with a focus on the time being used: in all levels of education most teachers reported that the exceptional arrangements caused by the pandemic and transition to distance education, increased the time being spent for working (OAJ 2020). Furthermore, this was highlighted in basic education and in general upper secondary schools where around 75% of teachers chose the alternative “increased a lot” and 18% “increased slightly” (ibid.). Open-ended questions revealed that for instance increased preparations, giving personal feedback to students, and using new equipment took a lot of time (ibid.). In basic education, 61% of teachers reported that they taught synchronously during spring 2020 and other times teaching was based on working on given exercises that teachers usually gave personal feedback on, which was time-consuming (ibid.).

The second intermediate report part of the ongoing research project by the University of Helsinki and the University of Tampere from February 2021 examines results from the second data gathering in November 2020 and focuses on the time after the period of distance education in spring 2020 and its aftermath (Ahtiainen et al. 2021). Its emphasis is on students’ absences from school and schools’ distance education practices during the pandemic (ibid.). When asked about future potential distance

education periods, the open-ended answers raise two pronounced matters: students hope for fewer exercises or that there would not be a need for distance education at all (Ahtiainen et al. 2021, 99–100). Lastly, the report showed that approximately 70% of teachers in basic education reported that they are well prepared if their school is moved online again for a longer period of time (Ahtiainen et al. 2021, 104).

Some of the positive results from studies are related to teachers' digital competences. Ahtiainen and others (2020, 25) reported that 54% of teachers (n=5,222) told they felt their digital competences improved slightly and 41% reported they improved significantly during the exceptional circumstances. OAJ (2020) also reports about a 'digital leap' because while the majority of teachers were familiar with the devices or programs used for distance education, approximately 40% of teachers reported that at least some of that key equipment was new. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI 2020c, 4), similar results have been reported among students and in European studies as well. Teachers and students are nowadays more and more used to using information and communication technology (ICT) in various ways so the starting point for distance education was not as bad as it would have been years ago, and still there was a digital leap, which is interesting. While Nummenmaa (2012) discovered in her study on teachers' (n=2,493) interests in and views on distance education that teachers mostly view distance education positively, several teachers were also concerned with the lack of technology and skills and the increasing workload distance education would cause.

Nummenmaa (2012, 15) also found in her study that teachers thought that the age of students was also quite a considerable factor in distance learning. Especially the students' ages in grades 1-6 of basic education were seen as a restricting factor for distance learning (ibid.). According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI 2020c, 4), initial results from studies on the spring 2020 distance education period showed that students also had to learn independence and self-directed learning. This is something that other studies also indicate of distance education. While all learning requires motivation and independence from the learner, in distance education these aspects are even more relevant (Sampson 2003, 104).

As seen above, much of the research in the field is related to distance education in general, not distance language learning. Though, some results can be easily generalized to all subjects. Also, previously, much of the research done on specifically distance language learning has been done by universities or about university-level teaching, for

example by the Open University in the United Kingdom or universities in the United States of America (White 2017, 134; Keegan 2006, 153). Mäki and Saranpää (2011) on the other hand examined in their master's thesis teachers' and students' experiences on distance education of a voluntary foreign language in basic education. Students answered to a questionnaire (n=46) and the teachers (n=3) were interviewed (ibid.). Mäki and Saranpää (2011) found that of the four main language skills, students felt that the lessons included mostly writing, following with listening and reading, whereas teachers felt they taught speaking and listening the most. Though, the teachers also felt that speaking and listening were at the same time the most challenging skills to teach in distance education (ibid.).

3.3 Differentiation and distance language learning

Because of the situation with COVID-19 and the following decisions by the Finnish Government came so rapidly in spring 2020, schools had practically no time to adjust to a new situation with distance education. While distance education is nothing new, it has not been implemented in Finnish schools on this scale before, and therefore, the whole new teaching situation was hard on both teachers and students because they had to learn new means and methods quickly. Differentiation was possibly not the priority to many teachers, even though it should have been. As mentioned earlier in 2.3, children's need for support did not disappear when distance learning began (EDUFI 2020a).

As mentioned in section 2.4, to succeed in differentiation in an effective way, the teacher needs to have a certain mindset and competence. According to some studies (see e.g. Stenman and Petterson 2020), distance education is the same. From (2017, 48) also writes how a teacher who has pedagogical digital competence "can support students in their journey towards achieving expected learning outcomes." Therefore, to be able to differentiate in a remote teaching environment, one needs to be very competent and to be willing to invest in the teaching.

Furthermore, as all students learn in different ways, for some, distance learning can be very effective, and they might enjoy it greatly. On the other hand, for some students, it might cause them new problems in learning, especially in English language learning, and therefore, the need for differentiation might increase. Furthermore, distance learning might even create difficulties in language learning for the students who in a normal classroom environment have little to no difficulties learning a language. Therefore, the need for support and differentiation might be even larger in distance education. For

example, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (later FINEEC) investigated the impact of the distance education period in 2020 on students. According to the findings, while some students enjoyed and benefited from distance education, a significant part of students at all levels of education felt that they would have needed more support (FINEEC 2021, 12). FINEEC (2021, 13) recommends that the needs of different learners should be identified and acknowledged more, and more individual support should be offered. As differentiation is exactly this, a way to take different learners into account in teaching, the results indicate the importance of differentiation in distance education.

White (2006, 253) mentions how the literature on distance language education mostly focuses on the “design and development of distance language courses” while leaving a crucial element of learner support in the background. Therefore, differentiation, part of learner support, is less evident in the research literature of distance language education and is not often focused or even mentioned. White (ibid.) also mentions how learner support actually is a feature of quality distance language education and therefore it is surprising, I think, that it is not highlighted more on the topic of distance education.

In a summary of research on online and blended learning programs (blended meaning programs that use both online and face-to-face instruction) that offer differentiation, Brodersen and Melluzzo (2017, 2) highlight how many studies on online and blended learning programs have been done with students at online universities or adult programs, not with K-12 students (i.e. from kindergarten to 12th grade) or they have not examined differentiation. Brodersen and Melluzzo (2017) examined 14 programs for K-12 students that offered differentiated options for learning, and within their study, they introduce three types of online differentiation: teacher-directed, computer-adapted, and student self-paced differentiation. Teacher-directed differentiation, where teachers themselves, not computer programs, differentiate online learning is the most relevant to this study with the student self-paced differentiation.

Beasley and Beck (2017) studied K-12 online school teachers (n=118) and their definitions of differentiation with a survey. They (ibid.) found that teachers’ main reason for differentiation was students’ different learning styles, which was surprising compared to other studies. Additionally, teachers mentioned adjusting content, product, and process when differentiating (see e.g. Tomlinson 2001, or section 2.2) but there were no elaborations on what the participants actually meant by these (ibid.). McCarthy (2020) also examined K-12 online school teachers (n=10) and how they used web-conferencing environments for differentiation with the help of a survey and interviews. The analysis of

the results produced six categories of strategies: by 1) adjusting the pace of learning for students, 2) providing students the choice to select between learning synchronously or asynchronous, 3) providing opportunities to work together with a peer in breakout rooms, 4) providing individualized instruction and support, 5) offering small group instruction to support students' learning needs, and 6) providing targeted content and materials based on students' learning needs (McCarthy 2020, 157–172).

On the other hand, Nummenmaa (2012) examined teachers' interests in and views on distance learning and its challenges and opportunities. The aim of the study was to find out how teachers (n= 2,493) view distance learning (ibid.). According to the results, some teachers viewed the possibility of support and differentiated instruction as one of the best qualities of distance learning (Nummenmaa 2012, 11). However, in Nummenmaa's (2012) study, the same questions were asked from teachers who had taught remotely and from those who had not. Therefore, some of these views might have been from those teachers who had not taught remotely yet. Then again, Nummenmaa (2012) also mentions how teachers' possibility for giving individual support is more limited in a remote teaching environment.

In the initial results of the ongoing research project on studying, teaching, and well-being in the school environment during the corona pandemic by Ahtiainen and others, 5,316 teachers answered whether they were able to differentiate their teaching during spring 2020 and the two-month long distance education period (Ahtiainen et al. 2020, 19). Of those teachers, 43% answered yes, 46% that they were able to differentiate partly and 8% answered they were not able to differentiate (ibid.). There were no specifying questions on this matter or further examination as the report presented only initial results and focused rather on other topics concerning distance education. That being said, it is positive that as many as 43% were still able to differentiate their teaching. Though, the question or the numbers do not tell if those 43% of teachers actually differentiated and how much. In the second intermediate report from February 2021 regarding fall 2020 and the aftermath of the long distance education period, Ahtiainen and others reported that the majority of basic education students experienced that they received help regarding studying from their teachers when needed (Ahtiainen et al. 2021, 85), which is very positive.

When looking at different ways to differentiate and how those can be implemented in distance education, using break-out rooms offer a way to introduce different grouping in teaching. As mentioned in section 2.2, Tomlinson (2001) and Roiha and Polso (2018)

both suggest using various groupings for differentiation. For example, in foreign language contexts, for some students who are scared to speak a foreign language with a whole class, break-out rooms offer a great way to still practice their speaking skills. The results from McCarthy's (2020) study also suggest small group work as a great differentiation method.

Lastly, couple of master's theses were done on the topic in Finland in 2020. Mäkinen's (2020) master's thesis examined primary school classroom teachers' thoughts on the challenges and successes of differentiation in distance education and the support teachers received during this time. A total of 33 primary school classroom teachers responded to a survey and additionally four teachers were interviewed based on the questions on the questionnaire (ibid.). Mäkinen (2020) discovered that while the majority of teachers found differentiation in distance education challenging, some found it even easier than normally. The rapid transition to distance education was one of the main reasons for the challenges teachers faced and one of the most common ways to differentiate was altering the number and level of given schoolwork (ibid.).

Rainio (2020) on the other hand studied special education teachers' views on differentiation in distance education in her master's thesis by interviewing six special education teachers. According to her results, for a successful distance differentiation, it is important that students have great IT skills, and those skills should be taught before transitioning to distance education (Rainio 2020, 48). Furthermore, teachers had good bases for differentiation, and similarly to Mäkinen's results, differentiation was done for instance by adjusting the amount and level of difficulty of exercises that were given to students (Rainio 2020, 49). Also, knowing the students and having enough time for planning (e.g. lessons and evaluations) were important factors for a successful differentiation (Rainio 2020, 52–52).

As can be seen from the above discussion and examination of previous research on the topic, there is plenty of room for research on English differentiation in distance education. Next, I present the methodology of this study and then continue with the results.

4 Methodology

As seen in sections 2 and 3, differentiation and distance education have been widely studied separately, but there is only a little research done on the topics together. Furthermore, distance differentiation of foreign languages, such as English in Finland, has not been the focus in those studies. Therefore, it is crucial to gain information on the topic as distance language learning and teaching are likely to grow in the future, and differentiation is an important part of fair teaching. The aim of this study is to gain qualitative information on differentiation in distance education in Finland from the point of view of English teachers. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How did English teachers experience distance differentiation in spring 2020?
- 2) What differentiation methods did they use in distance education?

The results to the first research question give valuable information on what distance differentiation is actually like from the teachers' point of view. The purpose of the second research question is to offer concrete examples on how distance differentiation can be done, which can help teachers in the future when the use of distance education possibly grows.

A questionnaire was conducted to get a general idea of the experiences of English teachers on the topic. Below, in subsection 4.1, the method used for gathering the data is discussed more in-depth. After that, in section 4.2, the current data are introduced. Lastly, in section 4.3, the methods used for analyzing the data are explained.

4.1 Questionnaire as a data collection method

The data were collected with an online questionnaire using the Webropol survey tool. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, 83) introduce surveys as one of the most common data gathering methods for both qualitative and quantitative research. Furthermore, Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, 84-85) add how there is not always a need for a strict separation between a survey and an interview as they can both be used in similar ways. According to some definitions, one of the main differences between them can be how usually people fill out questionnaires themselves versus in interviews the interviewer writes the answers (*ibid.*). Though, there are always exceptions (*ibid.*). Furthermore, one of the advantages of questionnaires is how easy they are to administer, they offer the participants more time to think their answers and they work well to survey opinions, which is one of the aims of this study (Friedman 2012, 190).

On the other hand, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010, 36) write how questionnaires are not in particular suited best for qualitative research. Though, they (ibid) add how open-ended questions in a questionnaire can provide richness that purely quantitative data would not provide. Furthermore, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010, 37) suggest adding at least some open-ended questions when constructing a questionnaire, although they can take up respondents' time and discourage people from completing the questionnaire. They (ibid.) also explain how open-ended questions work best when they include some guidance, as for example *specific open questions* that “ask about concrete pieces of information such as facts about the respondent” or *clarification questions* that follow some question and ask for some clarifications such as ‘why something’. An example of the clarification question is when a multiple-choice question has an option of ‘other’, and some space to specify that is left for the respondent (Dörnyei and Taguchi 2010, 38). On the other hand, Friedman (2012, 186) specifically mentions open-ended questionnaires as one of the most common methods of qualitative data collection in SLA research. They can be used as a variation for interviews (Friedman 2012, 190). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the use of a questionnaire as a data collection method and including multiple open-ended questions in it was suitable. It enabled me to gain more information on the topic from more teachers than an interview would have been able to within the limits of the present study, that is, research done for a master's thesis. Furthermore, while the aim was to get both qualitative and quantitative information on teachers' experiences with distance differentiation, the emphasis was on the qualitative side.

4.2 Data

The online questionnaire was piloted with a small sampling size of teachers who had taught English during spring 2020. According to the feedback and comments given by the pilot group, some changes were made before conducting the actual study. The questionnaire was conducted online using a Webropol-survey tool. The link to the online survey was shared in three language teaching Facebook groups first in October and November 2020, and for the second time in December 2020. Taking part in the survey was voluntary. There was one precondition for the participants to take part in the survey: 1. They had to have taught English remotely in spring 2020 in basic education and/or in the general upper secondary school. The survey was anonymous and only the necessary background information for this study was gathered about the participants.

The survey was conducted in Finnish, as the mother tongue of the respondents was most likely to be Finnish, and the answers and questions were then translated after analyzing the answers. The reason for this is because it is commonly believed that the quality of the data increases when the questionnaire is presented in the mother tongue of the respondents (Dörnyei and Taguchi 2010, 49). The questionnaire included 20 questions for everyone and depending on what the respondent answered to certain questions, there were some additions or omissions of questions. Lastly, there was a voluntary blank space to write in if there was something the respondent felt like adding to any question or simply wanted to write about differentiation and distance learning. The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions as well as open-ended questions, and it took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. See the full English survey in Appendix 2.

First, on the background information form, the participants (n=55) reported their age (answer options at ten-year intervals), years of experience in teaching English (answer options at five-year intervals), the geographical location where they taught during spring 2020, and on what level of education they taught English (i.e. in basic education and which grades and/or in general upper secondary schools). The participants were not asked about their gender or exact age or years of experience because for the purpose of this study, it was not necessary. The summary of the participants' background information can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Background information of the participants of the study

Age (in years)	25–35		36–45		46–55		56–65	
<i>n</i> (=number of participants, total =55)	15		20		16		4	
Experience (in years)	<1	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	21–25	26–30	31–35
<i>n</i>	1	16	8	9	8	7	5	1
Location	Lapland	Northern Finland	Western and the interior of Finland	Eastern Finland	Southwestern Finland	Southern Finland		
<i>n</i>	4	3	13	3	9	23		
Basic education and/or general upper secondary school	Grades 1–6	Grades 7–9	Grades 1–9	General secondary school	Upper secondary	Grades 7–9 and upper secondary	Other combination	
<i>n</i>	14	9	6	20		3	3	

The age distribution was between 25–35 years and 56–65 years. The biggest age group was 36–45-year-olds (20/55), but the distribution of teachers was quite even between the other age groups as well with fifteen 25–35-year-olds and sixteen 46–55-year-olds. Most teachers had 1–5 years of experience (16/55) and most of the teachers taught in general upper secondary schools (20/55). Teaching in grades 1–6, that is primary school, was the second largest group (14/55).

In the questionnaire, there was a map of Finland with a ready-made division into the areas seen in Table 1 to help the teachers choose their own location easier (see Appendix 1 and 2 for the whole survey). While the majority of the respondents taught in Southern Finland (23/55) and in Western and the interior of Finland (13/55) there were teachers from everywhere else in Finland as well. Therefore, the whole Finland was covered, which is positive. One reason for this geographic distribution of respondents is possibly explained by the fact that the largest cities in Finland are in the South and West. Furthermore, the most densely populated areas in Finland are around Helsinki, the capital of Finland, which is in Southern Finland.

Though, as the sample size ($n=55$) is quite small, any large generalizations cannot be done even though there were respondents from all over Finland. Dörnyei and Csizér (2012, 80) explain how the question of how large the sample size should be when doing survey research is very common when beginning a research project. They (*ibid.*) add how the often-quoted principle ‘the larger, the better’ is not always helpful as there are no exact and set rules for this. On the other hand, they (*ibid.*) mention some guidelines that should be taken into consideration and mention how in some context the sample should include 30 or more participants and some statistical analysis needs around 50 participants to function correctly, but at the same time even smaller sample sizes can be compensated using certain procedures. Therefore, while the focus of this study is on the open-ended questions and gaining qualitative information, the sample size of 55 could be thought as a suitable size even for some quantitative research, but not for large generalizations.

Following the background information section, the questionnaire included three main sections. Firstly, some general experiences and views on differentiation were asked in the questionnaire. Secondly, the participants were asked about some practical and general questions on distance education, for instance, what video-conferencing tool they used and whether they taught asynchronously or synchronously. Thirdly, there were more detailed questions on both differentiation and distance education at the same time, that is

distance differentiation. I formulated the questions based on previous research on differentiation and distance education and constructed the questionnaire.

Regarding the methods used for differentiation in distance education, the questionnaire included two different questions. First, there was a multiple-choice question, where teachers were asked how they took different learners into account in distance education. It included quite general answer options that I had gathered from research on the topic and teachers were able to choose more than one answer, if needed. Lastly, there was also an option to write your own answer. After this, there was an open-ended question where teachers were asked to give example or examples of ways to differentiate English during distance education. Sometimes, it is reasonable to ask the same question in closed and open form, as the respondents might not be able to or realize to put all their ideas into words and this might then cause the omission of significant points (Oppenheim 1992, 114). Also, this helps to compare answers more easily (*ibid.*). Furthermore, as the questions were formulated differently, the open-ended question being more detailed and specific, the goal was to get concrete examples on top of the broader themes.

4.3 Data analysis

According to Baralt (2012, 223) qualitative research and consequently qualitative analysis can often give richer or deeper information about human experience of language learning that a more mathematical analysis could not be able to. Moreover, Baralt (*ibid.*) gives an example of how in a study of teachers' beliefs and experiences on a topic, a more qualitative coding and analysis involve multiple series of reading and examining of the data, leading to a more detailed analysis than a quantitative would. At the same time, some aspects of qualitative research can also be quantitative, such as coding the data (*ibid.*). For example, in this study, I used NVivo to qualitatively code the data and found categories for methods to differentiate English in distance education. Then, a quantitative coding of these qualitative findings included counting the frequency of each differentiation type.

As the main focus in this study was the qualitative side on the topic, the answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed with the help of content analysis and a software suited for it, NVivo 12. Content analysis is a method to systematically and objectively analyze different types of texts (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, 117). With content analysis, the aim is to arrange data in a compact and clear form without it losing its information

(Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2018, 122). This is done by coding data systematically “to discover patterns and develop well-grounded interpretations” (Friedman 2012, 191). One type of content analysis is data-based content analysis, which means that the analysis and possible categorization (coding) is led by the findings from the data, not some previously made categorization or some specific theory (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, 122–123; 127). This is something that was done on this study. On top of this, the actual code names for categories can be data-driven (i.e., names come from the data, are mentioned in the data) or come from the researcher (i.e., the researcher decides on a code name that represents what the data shows) (Baralt 2012, 230–231). NVivo is a software that can be used to assist in managing and analyzing qualitative data. It is also a software that is widely used in qualitative studies in the field of second language acquisition (Baralt 2012, 224). Using a program like NVivo in qualitative research is useful because it makes it easier for the researcher to code and categorize the data into recurring themes in a single data file (Baralt 2012, 224; 228). Therefore, a great tool to do content analysis on.

I began the process of analysis by transferring the answers to the open-ended questions to NVivo. After that, I began reading through the answers to a single question several times and simultaneously began open coding by creating nodes, that is codes in NVivo. Open coding means the concept of creating a code to represent “a concept shown in the data” and is usually the first step in general qualitative analysis but also in content analysis (Baralt 2012, 230; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018, 122). Next, I continued assigning words, sentences, and segments of text under different nodes that described the content of that particular piece of text the best. Then, I continued the coding process by comparing nodes and descriptions with each other that could then be related to one another or constitute and form a broader theme, creating so-called subcategories or subnodes, when possible. This is part of content analysis as well (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018). When reporting results and giving examples from the respondents’ answers, the teachers were coded simply by a number, for instance, Teacher 2.

Some minor statistical analysis was also done using statistical programs Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Also, the Webropol survey tool offered some simple statistics automatically, some of which were used as help as well. For calculating the measures of central tendency and the measures of variability the data was transferred to Microsoft Excel and from there further to SPSS Statistics. Furthermore, for examining if there was any statistical difference between positive and negative adjective choices, the t-test for independent samples was done using SPSS.

Lastly, as both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in this thesis when gathering and analyzing the data, this could be identified as mixed methods research. In their article, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) examined 19 different definitions for *mixed methods research* from current leaders in that field. Furthermore, they analyzed these answers and based on their analysis, they offered a general definition for mixed methods research:

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007, 123)

5 Results

First, in section 5.1, I present the results regarding general information on distance differentiation. Then, in section 5.2 and its subsections, I examine the teachers' perceptions of distance differentiation. Lastly, in section 5.3 and its subsections, I present the methods that teachers used for differentiation in distance education. The questions were based on the experiences of English teachers during spring 2020 when Finnish schools switched to teaching remotely. All the examples from the data are first shown in their original form in Finnish, and as they are in Finnish, I translated all the examples to English. I tried to keep the same tone and phrasing in the translations as well as it was possible.

5.1 General information on distance differentiation

Of all the teachers who took part in this study, 85.5% (47/55) were not familiar with distance education before spring 2020. Most likely, this result means that those teachers had not taught remotely beforehand, but possibly had heard about it. This result also shows how the situation was new for most of the teachers. Of the remaining 14.5% (8/55), who had some experience with distance education before spring 2020, four mentioned they had taught remotely for example in night school (upper secondary school level), English courses for adults (adult education), or other courses online. One teacher mentioned they had been in training that dealt with distance education on top of other things. The last three mentioned generally how teaching online was familiar to them or that they had some previous experience with it.

The teachers were asked about whether they taught synchronously (i.e., live, real-time, and scheduled teaching usually through some web-conferencing environment) or asynchronously (i.e. not real-time, e.g. materials are provided to access at any time) during the distance education period in spring 2020. Of all the respondents, 92.7% (n=51) taught synchronously and only 7.3% (n=4) asynchronously. According to White (2003, 10) and Hratinski, Keller and, Carlsson (2010, 654) synchronous distance language learning offers the possibility to give students feedback without a delay, which is more effective than when delayed. Also, it is important that distance learners can connect with each other for example to gain more motivation (White 2003). Though, of the 51 respondents who taught synchronously 21 also sometimes taught asynchronously. The

most popular web-conferencing environments used for synchronous teaching were Google Meet (25/55) and Microsoft teams (25/55).

Furthermore, the questionnaire also included a specifying question for the teachers who did teach synchronously about how many classes per week, on average, they actually taught live. The minimum value was 0% (i.e. no classes at all) and the maximum value 100% (i.e. all classes) and the question included a slider element where the respondents were able to choose their answer on the given scale. The distribution of held synchronous or live classes varied between 15% and 100% of all weekly classes with a mean of 72.16%. This means that, on average, approximately 7 out of 10 classes per week were synchronous where teachers and students were online at the same time.

Teachers were also asked how often they differentiated English during distance education per week. Again, the given scale was between 0% (meaning never) and 100% (meaning every class during a week). Here, the answers were distributed across the whole scale: between 0% and 100% of all weekly classes. The mean of how often teachers differentiated was 48.7% which is just under half of the weekly classes. Following this, those who chose 0% were asked to elaborate. Six teachers (6/55) answered this and all included similar reasons for it, saying that distance education was so new that there was already so much to do with so little time. More on this in section 5.2 and its subsection 5.2.2.

5.2 Teachers' perceptions of distance differentiation

Regarding teachers' views and experiences on distance differentiation, the teachers were first asked to choose adjectives from a list that they thought described differentiating English lessons during distance education. There were twelve given adjectives and an option for adding an adjective of their own. The given list included both slightly positive connotations containing adjectives as well as negative connotations containing adjectives, such as easy – hard, important – unnecessary, and so on. The teachers were able to choose several adjectives. Following this, they were asked to validate or elaborate on their adjectives. The adjectives and how large percentage of teachers (n=55) chose that particular adjective can be seen in Figure 1.

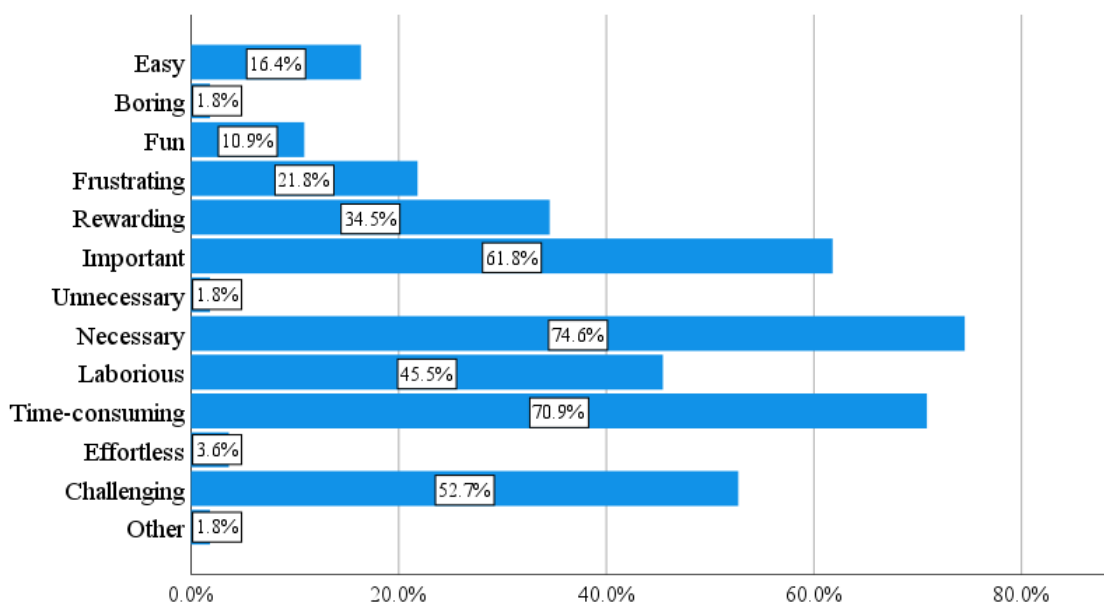


Figure 1 Adjectives chosen by teachers to describe differentiation in distance education

As Figure 1 shows, the most common adjectives the teachers chose to describe distance differentiation were *necessary* which 74.6% of teachers chose (41/55), *time-consuming* chosen by 70.9% (39/55) of teachers, *important* chosen by 61.8% (34/55), and *challenging* chosen by 52.7% (29/55) of teachers. Closely following these, even *laborious* (45.5%) and *rewarding* (34.5%) were chosen by multiple teachers. Adjective *frustrating* was chosen by 21.8% (12/55) for describing distance English differentiation, *easy* by 16.4% (9/55), and *fun* by 10.9% (6/55) of the teachers. One teacher chose other and wrote varied, one teacher chose boring, and one chose unnecessary. It is important to remember when looking at the figure that teachers were able to choose multiple alternatives.

These results show that teachers viewed differentiation in distance education quite positively with adjectives such as *necessary*, *important*, and *rewarding* which are all notably positive. At the same time, there were still more negative connotation adjectives used a lot as well, for instance *time-consuming*, *challenging*, and *laborious*. If all the adjective choices are categorized to positive or negative adjectives, the distribution is 111 positive connotation adjectives and 107 negative connotation adjectives. Therefore, there is not a huge difference between these two. Furthermore, using the t-test for independent samples, no significant difference between the number of positive connotation adjectives (mean=18.5, st. dev.=15.9) and number or negative connotation adjectives (mean=17.8, st.dev.=15.7) was found ($t=0.73$, $df=10$, $p>0.05$).

Next, to get a better idea of teachers' views on English distance differentiation, I examine the respondents' elaborations for their adjective choices and examine their other comments describing distance differentiation at the end of the questionnaire. There was room at the end of the questionnaire for general comments and thoughts on distance differentiation if one felt like adding something in general or to some questions. Of all the respondents (n=55), 13 left comments on this question. Though, in some cases, teachers mentioned quite generic reasons that could be used for both differentiation during distance education and differentiation in the English subject in general. First, I examine the more negative aspects of distance differentiation that teachers mentioned, following with the positive aspects.

5.2.1 Negative aspects of distance differentiation

Teachers elaborated on adjectives *time-consuming* and *laborious* quite similarly. Moreover, five teachers elaborated the adjective *laborious* with how much time it took to do something (i.e. time-consuming) or how it felt like there was little to no time overall:

- (1) Vapaa-aikaa ei enää ollutkaan.
There was no free time anymore. (Teacher 7)

Other teachers mentioned this as well. Example 1 indicates the feeling of inadequacy that the teachers felt during that time and what other teachers mentioned more elaborately. This was also highlighted in the answers to the voluntary last question in the questionnaire. Of the 13 answers, 7 mentioned how distance differentiation was more laborious than normally. Many of the respondents mentioned also how it was harder on them, as for instance, they had to work longer on workdays and work on weekends as well.

Also, usually the most time-consuming parts of differentiation were related to preparing materials and doing other preparations beforehand, as examples 3 and 4 indicate.

- (2) Aikaa vievää, koska materiaali pitää etsiä ja koostaa oppilaille oppimisolustalle.

Time-consuming because you had to find and put together material for the students in the learning platform. (Teacher 13)

- (3) Aikaa vievää, koska omia materiaaleja piti digitoida (esim.

paperimonisteet).

Time-consuming because you had to digitize your own materials (e.g. paper hand-outs).
(Teacher 41)

Doing differentiated materials yourself and how it feels tough and laborious is something that teachers have mentioned previously in other studies done on general differentiation as well (see e.g. Roiha 2012; Karlin and Toivonen 2019). This is usually referred to as a lack of resources: time and ready-made materials. If teachers feel that there is a lack of resources in a normal situation already and then are put in a situation where they have never been in before with new challenges for teaching, it is no surprise that they feel like there are even fewer resources to differentiate then.

Most reasons for choosing the adjective *challenging* were related to problems with technology or not being able to see the students. Teachers also mentioned how it was difficult because it had to be done differently than in a classroom, where you are face-to-face with the students and can more easily check how the students are managing. It was also more difficult to know if someone needed differentiation, as Teacher 32 mentions.

- (4) Vaikea tietää, kuka oli missäkin vaiheessa valmis tai kuka ei ymmärtänyt jotain asiaa.

Hard to know if and when someone was ready or if someone didn't understand something.
(Teacher 28)

- (5) Haastavaa ja aikaa vievää, koska kontakti opiskelijoiden kanssa oli vaikeampaa ja eriyttämisen tarpeen arviointi normaalia haastavampaa.

Challenging and time-consuming because the contact with students was more difficult and evaluating the need for differentiation more challenging than normally.
(Teacher 32)

Two teachers wrote how students asked fewer questions than usually, and that the students did not know how to or want to tell if something was easy or hard. This then has an effect on differentiation: if a teacher cannot see or know otherwise if something is too difficult or too easy, they cannot differentiate their teaching. In distance education, it is harder to see how students are doing because for instance as some teachers mentioned, normally you could walk around the classroom and see how everyone was doing, but in distance education, it is not as simple. Therefore, teachers cannot know whether they need to offer for example easier or harder exercises or to go through something again.

Some teachers also combined challenging with laborious or time-consuming and highlighted giving instructions as being the reason for choosing those adjectives:

- (6) Haastavaa/työlästä/turhauttavaa, kun aikaa kuluu valtavasti muutamien oppilaiden ohjeistukseen sen sijaan että selviäisi yhdellä ohjeistuksella.

Challenging/laborious/frustrating when it takes an enormous amount of time to give [separate] instructions to some students instead of just managing with one set of instructions. (Teacher 39)

- (7) Vie paljon aikaa ja on työlästä, kun on mietittävä selkeitä sanamuotoja ohjeisiin, jotta oppilaat ymmärtävät mitä ja minne tehdä.

Takes a lot of time and is laborious to think of clear wordings for instructions so that the students understand what to do and where. (Teacher 45)

Especially in language learning and teaching, differentiating teacher's speech is important so that everyone can understand and learn from that. This is something that Roiha and Polso (2018) highlight. When learning languages, it is important to hear the target language a lot and teacher speech is one way to hear it (ibid.). Therefore, as for some students understanding spoken language can be difficult, it is important that at least the teacher's speech is understandable and that is done by saying instructions in ways that everyone understands. Furthermore, choosing these two adjectives, challenging and time-consuming, to describe differentiation in the English subject during distance education was quite expected as many researchers highlight this when speaking of differentiation in general. Pachler (2014, 309) and Tomlinson (2014, 9–10) explain how taking into account every student and their individual needs can be challenging for teachers, as it requires a lot of willingness and effort from them. A couple of teachers wrote this in their answers as well, mentioning how differentiation was laborious in distance education, but it always is.

One general upper secondary school teacher also mentioned the beginning new distance education period at the time of answering the questionnaire in fall 2020. They wrote how they felt it was unreasonable to assume that with all the work in moving courses online with a short time frame, they could also offer differentiated exercises:

- (8) Ensi viikolla siirrymme taas kokonaan etäopetukseen ja saimme tietää siitä eilen. Aikaa suunnitella neljän kurssin toteutus verkkoon on kolme päivää plus toki on viikonloppu eli viisi päivää. Ei ole vapaa-ajan ongelmia. Se, että saan neljä kurssia kursittua verkkokuntoon tällaisilla aikatauluilla on ihme, joten on kohtuutonta kuvitella, että tekisin vielä erikseen eriyttävät tehtävätkin tarjolle.

Next week we will transition again to distance education and we were informed about it yesterday. Time to plan four courses online is three days plus of course the weekend so five days. No problems in thinking about what to do in your free time. It's a miracle that I can transform four courses to online with this kind of timetable so it's unreasonable to think, that I would also make differentiated exercises separately. (Teacher 26)

This answer reflects the situation where many general upper secondary schools were moved online again during fall 2020 and it shows how some teachers might have felt in spring 2020 as well. The transition to distance education in spring 2020 was extremely rapid, two days, so many might have felt exactly like Teacher 26 in fall. Furthermore, later in March 2021 many Finnish schools were again transitioned to distance education for a three-week-long period, and again some teachers might have felt similar to Teacher 26. Though, it is interesting when examining the other answers of Teacher 26 in the survey. They mentioned things that are similar to those mentioned already in Example 8 above, such as how it is unreasonable to think that in the short transition period, they would create differentiated exercises. But then, they mentioned how they did offer extra exercises and support materials:

- (9) On täysin kohtuutonta ajatella, että siinä kevään kaaoksessa, kun aikaa annettiin viikonloppu suunnitella kurssit verkkoon, että vielä olisin tehnyt esim. Moodleen eriyttäviä tehtäviä! Kyllä sai kelvata samat tehtävät kaikille kurssin opiskelijoille. Lisätehtäviä ja tukimateriaalia tarjosin toki, kuten aina.

It is completely unreasonable to think that in that spring chaos when there was a time frame of a weekend to plan courses online that I would have done e.g. differentiated exercises to Moodle. Yeah, the same exercises had to do for all students in the course. Sure, I offered additional exercises and support materials as always. (Teacher 26).

Furthermore, they answered to the question 'Give example(s) on ways you differentiated English teaching during distance education: What did you differentiate and how?' with "I didn't really differentiate as such" (Teacher 26) while in a previous question of 'In what ways did you cater for the different learners in distance education?' they, for example, chose making additional materials, giving every instruction written and orally, and alternating between different types of working methods. In this survey, these two consecutive questions ask the same question just a little differently: how one differentiated in distance education. Still, it is interesting to see, that this teacher does not think of alternating between different working methods (some learners like something better than something, etc.), additional exercises, and support materials as part of

differentiation. As seen in sections 2.1 and 2.2, these are exactly some of the ways to differentiate.

5.2.2 Positive aspects of distance differentiation

The reasons the respondents gave for choosing adjectives important and necessary were very similar. Main thoughts that arose from the elaborations of the teachers on why differentiation during distance education was important and necessary could be sorted into three main categories or themes: *students' motivation*, *differences in the level of competence*, and *need for support compared to normal situation*.

Nine teachers mentioned *students' motivation* as one of the main reasons for differentiation being important or necessary in their eyes. Some of these elaborations are closely related to the English skills of the students that was also a theme that arose from the answers even more often than motivation. For example, as seen in the example below, Teacher 49 combines both themes:

- (10) Opiskelijaa motivoi saada tehtäviä, jotka sopivat hänen osaamistasolleen.

The student is motivated by getting exercises that are suited for their level of competence. (Teacher 49)

Mentioning how students are motivated by getting exercises that are on their level of competence brings awareness to both motivation and the importance of offering exercises on all different levels. One teacher mentioned an example of how some students will not do anything in the English classes if they do not understand things. It is also interesting how Teacher 54 mentioned in particular the so-called good students and how their motivation should be kept high, but not all students. Though, the same teacher also mentioned how it is important to differentiate so that the 'weaker' students do not fall behind, which contains the other theme of *differences in skill levels* for elaborating why differentiation is important and necessary.

- (11) Tarpeellista, jotta heikot opiskelijat eivät putoa kokonaan kärryiltä, ja jotta hyvät eivät menetä motivaatiotaan.

Necessary, so that the weaker students don't end up dropping by the wayside [=fail to understand and continue] and so that the good ones [good in English] don't lose their motivation." (Teacher 54)

At the same time, mentioning how it is important for the teacher that the weaker students follow along could be related to their motivation as well. This again shows that these two themes are closely intertwined. Overall, thirteen teachers highlighted the *differences in*

the level of competence as a reason for differentiation being important. Some also mentioned how English in particular is very challenging for many. These two themes and the elaborations are quite general, meaning, that these might be how the teachers feel about differentiation in general.

The last theme that arose from elaborating on adjectives important and necessary was how the teachers viewed differentiation during distance education *compared to the normal situation*. There were two types of answers here: first, it was important and necessary because it always is, as in also in a normal situation, and second, it was even more important and necessary when being at distance. One teacher mentioned how it was extremely important to be able to support the students in an already difficult situation, meaning the new way of learning at distance and not being able to for example see friends or learn in a normal environment. Teacher 29 also explained the need for differentiation in a distance education environment very well:

- (12) Tarpeellista, koska ei eriyttämisen tarve lopu siihen, että koulua ei enää käydä koulurakennuksessa.

Important, because the need for differentiation doesn't end there when school is no longer attended in the school building.
(Teacher 29)

Nine teachers also described distance differentiation as *easy*, because they felt that it was even easier to differentiate tasks and help the ones who really needed it in distance than in a normal situation.

While many answers showed and previous studies have also shown that many teachers felt that distance differentiation was quite challenging or time-consuming, the general experience of it being subtly negative, there were still positive thoughts and experiences as well. Some answers combined thoughts on both distance differentiation and just distance education, as seen in example 12:

- (13) Medioissa on tehty lööppejä siitä, miten oppilaat eivät olisi saaneet tukea tai opettajat eivät olisi tehneet etäopetusta kunnolla. Tosi asiassa ainakin meillä etäopetus järjestyi tilanne huomioiden tosi hyvin, ja siitä sain itsekin positiivista palautetta huoltajilta. Oppilaita pyrittiin tukemaan alusta asti mahdollisimman hyvin ja järjestettiin heikommille paljon tukea eri muodoissa (tukiopetus, enemmän henkilökohtaisen yhteyden pitoa tai vaikka oppilas välillä koululla opiskelemassa, ohjaajan tuki, jne). Joka päivä oltiin jollain tavalla yhteydessä oppilaisiin ja vähintään puolet tunneista videoyhteydessä.

In the media, there have been headlines on how students wouldn't have gotten support or that teachers wouldn't have taught properly in distance

education. In reality at least at our school distance education worked out really well given the circumstances and I even got positive feedback on it from guardians. From the beginning it was the goal that students were given support as much as possible and a lot of support was provided for the weaker students in various forms (remedial teaching, more personal contact or even having a student study at school occasionally, tutor support etc.). Every day we were somehow in contact with the students and at least half of the classes with video connection.
(Teacher 20)

In the above example, Teacher 20 wanted to highlight that distance differentiation, or distance education in itself was not as bad as it may have seemed. Though, the same teacher did follow this by saying that they did have very long workdays, as other teachers mentioned as well. Teacher 20 also mentioned that given the circumstances, distance education and differentiation during it went well, which is similar to the results on distance education reported by the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI 2020c) and OAJ (2020). In both reports (EDUFI 2020c, OAJ 2020), both the transition to and delivery of distance education worked well under the exceptional circumstances. It is positive to see that some teachers also viewed distance differentiation similarly.

Some things teachers learned have been implemented to normal face-to-face education as well. One teacher mentioned that they now have ready-made materials to be used in face-to-face teaching as well, and the web-conferencing tool they used then is still being used now between teachers. Other teacher mentioned how they tried new assessment methods that they now use in normal face-to-face teaching. One also mentioned how they were surprised how well remedial teaching via Zoom worked. Six teachers also chose the adjective *fun* to describe distance differentiation because it was fun to learn something new in general or new ICT skills as one can never be ready with those. These results indicate how teachers improved both their Pedagogical Digital Competence (introduced by Form 2017) and other teaching, and despite that distance differentiation can be tiring and time-consuming, they still do think of it somewhat positively at the same time.

Lastly, when choosing adjectives to describe distance differentiation, 19 teachers (34.5%) chose *rewarding* and elaborated how positive effects on students were rewarding for the teachers as well. When someone learned something or had the courage to answer, it was rewarding for teachers. One teacher also mentioned, how in particular it was rewarding that individuals (not mentioning their skill level) got to stand out when pressure from others in the classroom disappeared. Another teacher mentioned how differentiating upwards (i.e. differentiation for the more advanced students) was quite effortless and

these more advanced students enjoyed it when they were able to proceed at their own pace without waiting for anyone or taking time to put up with others messing around.

5.2.3 Summary: teachers' perceptions of distance differentiation

In this section, I analyzed how teachers experienced and viewed distance differentiation. While many of the teachers had some negative experiences with distance differentiation, they do view it relatively positively. While many teachers described differentiation in distance education as time-consuming (70.9% of teachers), challenging (52.7%), or laborious (45.5%) they still also described it as necessary (74.6% of teachers) and important (61.8%).

The most challenging and time-consuming factors in distance differentiation were usually related to the lack of time and other resources. Also, the physical distance between the teacher and students affected differentiation, as it was harder to know if someone needed differentiation. On the other hand, many considered differentiation in distance education as necessary and important because it is important for the students' motivation to get exercises suitable for their skill level. Distance differentiation was also necessary so that everyone was able to follow along with the teaching. Some also reported that the materials or means and methods they introduced in distance education are now being used in face-to-face teaching as well. Additionally, many of those teachers who felt that distance education in itself was too demanding, and that they had no time to think about differentiation, perceived it still as being important or necessary.

5.3 Used differentiation methods in distance education

First, I examine the more general answers to the multiple-choice question, and after that, in subsections 5.3.1, 5.3.2, and 5.2.3, I examine the answers to the open-ended question for more concrete examples of differentiation methods. Figure 2 shows the multiple-choice question, its answer options, and which ones were chosen by the teachers. The options also included examples of that idea so that the teachers knew what exactly was meant with them, for example, option "I differentiated my instruction" was followed with "e.g. by saying something in two different ways, so that everyone would understand" in parentheses. See Appendix 2 for the whole survey, where the examples are also shown. It is important to remember, that the teachers were able to choose multiple options.

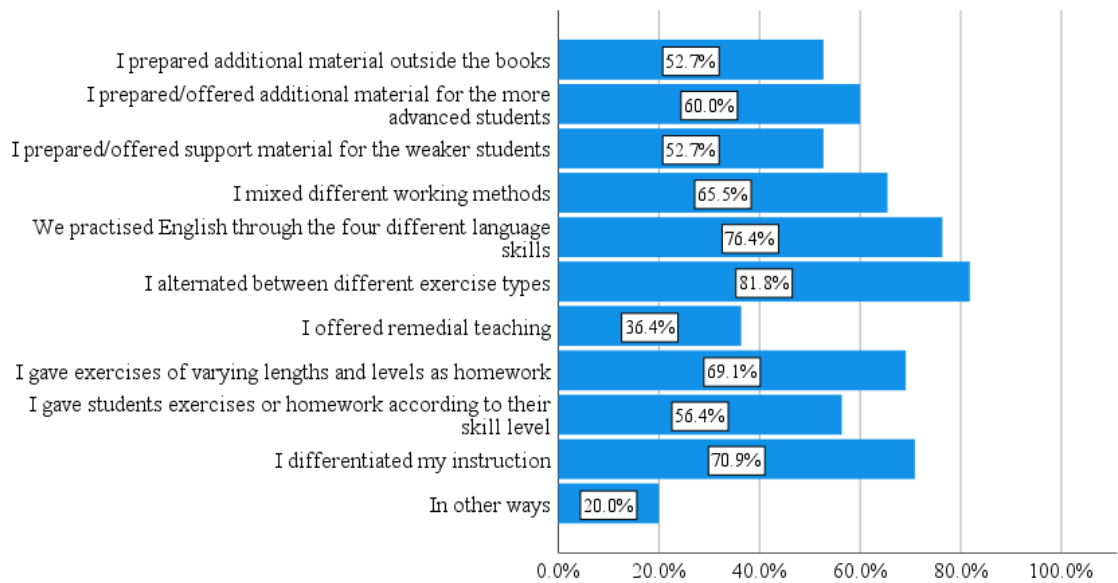


Figure 2 How teachers took different learners into account in distance education

As seen in Figure 2, there is not a drastic difference between the different options. This is most easily explained by the option to choose many alternatives. On average, one teacher chose six options, which partly explains the even percentages between the different options. Though, this also describes the nature of differentiation. There are many simple ways to differentiate, and these numbers show how that is exactly what teachers do in their teaching. They use various methods to cater to all types of learners. Furthermore, some of these options could also be just part of diverse teaching, as some teachers mentioned in the following question. Still, the three most popular answers were “I alternated between different exercise types” with 81.8% of teachers (45/55), “We practiced English through the four different language skills” with 76.4% (42/55), and “I differentiated my instruction” with 70.9% (39/55). The least chosen category, offering remedial teaching, was chosen by 36.4% of teachers (20/55).

The most commonly chosen option, alternating between different exercise types, is not a surprising result. Alternating between for example open-ended questions, matching exercises, and fill-in exercises offer diversity to learning. That is important in differentiation, as individual students learn from and like different exercises better (Pachler, 2014). Also, usually for example when learning a certain grammar topic, the workbooks include these different types of exercises that go from the easiest to the hardest which offer practice and challenge for all skill levels. This method is an example of a ladder of exercises, that Petty (2014, 516) suggests as one of the easiest ways to

differentiate by task. Also, as the schoolbooks usually offer various exercises on the same topic, it is an easy way to differentiate.

The four different language skills mean reading, writing, listening, and speaking and these were mentioned for the teachers in the option in the questionnaire. As all of these are hugely part of language teaching, it is at the same time a rather expected answer as well as positive that all of the language skills are being acknowledged, because sometimes some skill might be overlooked more than the others. Usually, some skills are emphasized more than others, and teachers and students might think differently about which skill is highlighted the most, as Mäki and Saranpää (2011) found in their study, where teachers felt they highlighted speaking and listening the most, whereas students felt the exact opposite. Lastly, differentiating instruction is great for students' listening skills as teacher speech is one of the main ways students hear the language. Teachers can easily offer challenge for the more advanced students, but by repeating the same instructions more simply, the weaker students can also understand (Roiha and Polso 2018). The answers to the option 'in other ways' are examined together with the answers to the open-ended question.

I then wanted to know what examples teachers themselves wrote in the open-ended question. I wanted to see if there were a lot of similar answers to the choices on the multiple-choice question and what more concrete examples of the distance differentiation methods they mentioned. Also, as the questions related to differentiation methods were one after the other, it was expected that some would point to the previous question and not answer anything else. Though, only 7/55 left the open-ended question empty or referred directly to the previous multiple-choice question by saying for example 'see above'. All the differentiation methods teachers answered with could be divided into three main categories to help in the analysis: 1. Differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed 2. Differentiation by offering individual support measures and 3. Students control their own learning and differentiation. These are now examined in more detail in the subsections below.

5.3.1 Differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed

Of all the given examples of differentiation in distance education, the most examples were related to differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed. The name for this category comes from Petty (2014) as it describes these results well. In other words, these answers included offering individualized exercises usually based on the student's level of competence in English. Of the 48 teachers who answered to this question (excluding the

seven who referred to the previous multiple-choice question), 36 mentioned an example of differentiation belonging to this category, which is 75%. This category could then be divided into three subcategories as well: Differentiation by giving a *different number of exercises or different exercises to students at various levels, differentiating tests, and differentiation by time.*

The most common subcategory, differentiation by giving a different number of or different exercises based on the student's level of competence, consists of examples of having basic exercises for everyone, exercises for the more advanced students and for weaker students. Three teachers mentioned this generally as in giving individuals different exercises, and other teachers gave more detailed answers. This result is very similar to the findings of Mäkinen (2020) and Rainio (2020) in their studies on distance differentiation, where the most common differentiation method was altering the number and level of given schoolwork. McCarthy's (2020) results also indicated this as one of the ways to differentiate in distance education.

Furthermore, nine teachers mentioned how they had chosen and marked the so-called basic exercises that everyone had to do, and then usually the more advanced or quicker students were given or got to choose to do more exercises.

- (14) Määrittelin perustehtävät ja lisätehtävät niin, että kaikki ehtivät tehdä perustehtävät (ja muutin tarvittaessa niitä lennosta).

I defined basic exercises and additional exercises so that everyone had time to do the basic exercises (and I changed them on the fly if needed).
(Teacher 14)

Examples mentioning basic exercises usually included mentions of the weaker or more advanced students too, but those were often mentioned on their own as well. Teachers mentioned giving broader, more challenging, and just more exercises for the more advanced or quicker students. At the same time, they gave less or easier exercises for the weaker students. Teacher 7 and Teacher 38 explained more of the variations they had for students at different levels:

- (15) Toiselle annoin kirjoitustehtävän: keksi ja kirjoita lauseita harjoittelemamme kieliopin mukaan. Toiselle Jatka lauseita. Tai Käännöstehtävä, toisella lauseet, toisella yhdistä.

I gave a writing exercise for the other: Come up with sentences according to the grammar we practiced. And for the other: Continue sentences. Or, [in] a translation exercise, some had sentences, the other had connect [exercises].

(Teacher 7)

- (16) Nopeammille tarjolla lisäteksti jokaisesta teemasta, hitaille yksinkertaistettu versio perustekstistä.

There was an additional text related to every theme for the quicker students, a simplified version of the basic text for the slower ones. (Teacher 38)

Roiha and Polso (2018, 228–231) offer exactly these types of differentiation methods as examples of differentiating English or other foreign language learning. They (ibid.) mention how either a shortened or an easier version of the same text is a great way to help weaker learners in their reading. Differentiating writing on the other hand can be done exactly like this, by giving students at various skill levels different instructions for completing similar exercises (ibid.). Not every student has to do the same exact exercises. Additionally, three teachers mentioned differentiating tests by giving either easier versions of vocabulary tests or offering different online tests to different learners. Four teachers mentioned how they offered more time for some students to either do exercises or turn in assignments. At the same time, the examples of giving more exercises to the quicker students could also be thought as differentiation by time, as the slower students had more time to do the basic exercises.

5.3.2 Offering individual support measures

The other differentiation methods that several teachers mentioned were related to offering individual support to students. Of the 48 teachers, 16 gave examples of how they supported their students with either giving individual feedback, personal assistance, or remedial teaching during distance education. Most of these were aimed at the weaker students as they needed help the most. Nine teachers mentioned calling personal phone or video calls to those students who needed support and for example three mentioned how they also did some English exercises with the weaker students during those personal calls, as Teacher 15 tells in Example 17.

- (17) Joillekin oppilaille soitettiin erikseen henkilökohtaisesti ja katsottiin mm. englannin tehtäviä yhdessä.

Some students were called personally, and we looked at English exercises together among other things. (Teacher 15)

In addition to the personal calls, five teachers also reported on remedial teaching in small groups or with single individual students. Though, some of the personal phone and video calls could be thought of as remedial teaching as well even though some teachers did not

label them as it. Remedial teaching is one of the support measures mentioned often by the Finnish National Agency for Education, and it is a much-used method in Finnish schools in a normal face-to-face teaching as well. Therefore, again, it was quite an expected example. Though, it is positive, that it is possible, and it was done during distance education as well.

Three teachers introduced small group work as one of the ways they were able to offer their support to those who needed it during a class. This was done by putting students into breakout rooms or new meetings in the web-conferencing environments. The teacher then alternated between being in the different rooms and was able to spend more time helping those who needed it. At the same time, students were able to get support from the small group as well. Roiha and Polso (2018, 226) and Tomlinson (2001, 3) both recommend small group work because it is excellent for differentiating language learning. It also takes the pressure off those students, who might have anxiety with learning foreign languages in a big group. Furthermore, Petty (2014, 525) explains how students working in small groups is a great tool in helping teachers in their work. He (ibid.) explains how it is important that teachers discover the difficulties students have and help them, but it can be challenging in a big classroom, as teachers might not have for example time for everyone. Working in small groups, students can help each other or get encouragement from others to ask for help. These support-related differentiation methods mentioned by teachers are similar to those in McCarthy's (2020) study. She (ibid.) also found that teachers used a web-conferencing environment to differentiate by providing individualized instruction and support and by using small group or peer work.

5.3.3 Students control their own learning and differentiation

Lastly, the third clear method for differentiation that arose from the teachers' answers was how students were in control of their own learning as well as differentiation. Of the 48 teachers, 14 used methods related to this. The most common way this was done, mentioned by eight teachers, was by giving the students the right to choose from different exercise options given to them. The key in this differentiation method is that while the students were able to make their own decisions, the teachers were still in charge in the background. They gave the options for the exercises and always followed students' progress. Therefore, while this differentiation method could be an example of student self-paced differentiation, it could be labeled as teacher-directed differentiation as well (terms by Brodersen and Melluzzo 2017). These were also usually related to the differences in the level of competence, but more in a way where students practiced self-

assessment at the same time, as they for example chose between the more basic exercises or more advanced ones:

- (18) Osa arvioitavista tehtävistä oli jaettu basic-intermediate-advanced -tasoihin. Opiskelija, joka tavoitteli kiitettävää valitsi vaativimman ja opiskelija joka tavoitteli hyväksytyä kurssisuoritusta valitsi basic-tason

Part of the exercises that were assessed were divided into basic-intermediate-advanced -levels. A student who strove for excellent marks [A's] chose the most demanding [level] and a student who strove for a pass chose the basic level.
(Teacher 25)

Also, Teacher 34 gave a great example of how students were able to self-reflect on their skills and based on that choose from the given options:

- (19) Käytin paljon YouTube videoita, ja tarjosin aina useamman videon samasta aiheesta. Jokaisen linkin vieressä oli pieni kuvaus esim "Tämä video on hauska mutta siinä puhutaan todella nopeasti. Tässä videossa puhutaan selvästi, valitse se jos äskeinen tehtävä tuntui hankalalta." Oppilaat päättivät itse mikä materiaali sopi heille parhaiten.

I used YouTube videos a lot, and I always offered several videos on the same topic. Next to every link [to the YouTube video], there was a small description e.g. "This video is funny, but they speak really quickly in it. In this video, they speak clearly, choose it if the previous exercises felt challenging." Students chose which material was best suited for them.
(Teachers 34)

Also, five teachers said that they gave the opportunity to substitute written exercises with doing those orally, which is very interesting. Often it seems that while spoken language is important and should be even highlighted more, written exercises are used often and for example, schoolbooks include many of those. Therefore, for example for those students who have difficulties with letters or writing, can choose to also answer orally.

- (20) Saa valita itselleen sopivimman työskentelytavan, esimerkiksi osan kirjoitustehtävistä voi korvata puhumalla jne.

One can choose the most suitable working method for themselves, for example some of the written exercises can be replaced with speaking and so on.
(Teacher 30)

Lastly, two teachers explained how certain exercises differentiate students' learning and outcome without actually having to think about differentiation.

- (21) Opiskelijat tuottavat paljon sisältöä itse (esim. esityksiä, videoita, animaatioita...), joten eriyttäminen tapahtuu näissä jo luonnostaan.

Students produce a lot of content themselves (e.g. presentations, videos, animations...), so differentiation happens already naturally in these.
(Teacher 24)

This is quite an efficient way to differentiate as it does not require that much planning or work from the teacher. Therefore, this could be one way to ease teachers' large workload and lack of resources that are usually associated with differentiation. This is also an example that Roiha and Polso (2018, 230) give on differentiating writing in English.

5.3.4 Summary: differentiation methods used in distance education

In this section, I examined the findings related to the differentiation methods English teachers used in distance education. In the multiple-choice question, the three most popular answers were "I alternated between different exercise types," "We practiced English through the four different language skills," and "I differentiated my instruction", while all the options were very close to each other without a single option standing out. Though, offering remedial teaching was chosen only 36.4% of teachers, whereas other options were chosen by over 50%.

Teachers reported their distance differentiation methods in the open-ended question and those were divided into three categories. These included *differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed*, *offering individual support measures*, and *students controlling their own learning and differentiation*. Distinctly the most common distance differentiation methods (mentioned by 36 teachers) were related to the first category, meaning that teachers offered individualized exercises usually based on the student's level of competence in English. Some teachers (16/48) reported that they offered remedial teaching remotely or made individual video or phone calls to the students, to make sure they knew how to do exercises. Lastly, 14 teachers offered students the opportunity to choose from exercises on different skill levels or to substitute written exercises by completing those orally.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

In this section, I examine and summarize the results of this study from the perspective of the research questions. I also discuss the implications more thoroughly and examine them in contrast to the previous studies done in the field of distance education and differentiation. Lastly, the limitations of this study are considered and suggestions for future research on the topic of differentiation in distance education, that is, distance differentiation, are made. The aim of this study was to gain valuable information on distance differentiation from English teachers in Finnish basic education and general upper secondary schools. The research questions were:

- 1) How did English teachers experience distance differentiation in spring 2020?
- 2) What differentiation methods did they use in distance education?

Regarding the first research question, the teachers described distance English differentiation quite evenly with both negative and positive adjectives and there was no statistically significant difference between them. Many viewed it as time-consuming, laborious, and challenging, as for example making differentiated materials into digital forms took time and it was harder to know if someone needed help since the physical contact between the teacher and the students was missing. At the same time though, teachers did feel that differentiation was still extremely important and necessary, some said it was even more important in distance education than in a normal situation. As the transition to distance education came so rapidly, it probably affected at least some of these views. This was also something that a couple of teachers expressed in their answers and possibly others thought so too. The results indicate that at the end of the day, distance differentiation of English has its pros and cons, and regardless of it being time-consuming or challenging, English teachers view it as necessary and important.

To answer the second research question, teachers used various differentiation methods quite evenly such as alternating between different exercise types, practicing all language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), and differentiating their instruction. Furthermore, more concrete examples included three types of differentiation. First, *differentiation by task, outcome, and time allowed* meant usually offering individualized exercises based on the skill level of the students, for example by giving more time to do an exercise or by offering additional exercises. The second way to differentiate in distance education was *offering individual support measures*, including

personal phone or video calls with the students to do English exercises on or offering remedial teaching remotely. Thirdly *students control their own learning and differentiation* meant that students were able to choose from given exercises or to substitute doing some written exercises by doing them orally.

Additionally, I made a hypothesis that teachers were not prioritizing differentiation in distance education, meaning that some would not differentiate at all and that they would also consider it being challenging. While the results indicate that the hypothesis is partly true, as 52.7% of the teachers (29/55) described English as challenging, only six teachers reported that they did not differentiate at all as there was already so much to do with the new situation. Nevertheless, some of these teachers also reported that they did offer additional exercises, which is differentiation. Furthermore, on average, teachers reported that they differentiated approximately half of their weekly classes. Thus, while probably they were not prioritizing differentiation and felt it was challenging, making the hypothesis true in that part, teachers kept different learners in mind and generally still differentiated their teaching.

One explanation for why distance differentiation felt so time-consuming to various teachers could be how several teachers mentioned making personal calls with students and making sure they followed along. Offering remedial teaching outside the normal English classes takes time and that was also one of the methods teachers mentioned for distance differentiation. At the same time, these personal calls and remedial teaching probably were some of the most effective ways for the teachers to help their weaker students and it might have been hard to cut back on these. However, another reason for distance differentiation feeling time-consuming, challenging, or laborious can be what a couple of teachers verbalized in their answers: planning classes and courses to online environment already added to the workload of the teachers and thinking of ways to differentiate or make differentiated materials on top of it was just too much. This is a problem that teachers often have with differentiation and lack of time and resources according to Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010). Though, teachers should not plan a lesson first and then plan differentiation but plan a differentiated lesson from the offset (ibid.)

Also, differentiation is not something that should add to the workload of teachers (Roiha and Polso 2018, 36). Therefore, finding the perfect differentiation methods that do not add to the workload of teachers is something that teachers still need help with, so that for example that precious time can rather be used to for example offering individual assistance or remedial teaching. As a couple of teachers mentioned, certain exercise types

differentiate on their own, which could be a solution for easing teachers' large workload and lack of resources that are usually associated with differentiation. Also, having more time to prepare for distance education would help with the feeling that there is too much work and too little time overall, though this might not be possible, as these transitions have usually been done with quite a tight schedule.

Both the elaborations for describing distance differentiation as important as well as offering individualized exercises based on the student's level of competence in English summarize the most essential characteristics of differentiation: *student-centered teaching that takes the individual characteristics of students into account*. This is also something that researchers highlight when describing what differentiation as a concept means. Petty (2014, 514) explains how students and their different needs are the key factors in teaching and differentiation. Those are where teaching should start from and focus on. Additionally, Tomlinson (2001) explains that differentiation should be done according to the students' individual characteristics. As the results showed, even in distance education, which was a new and challenging situation in spring 2020, the key component of differentiation was still kept in mind and paid attention to. Teachers viewed distance differentiation as important and necessary so that students at different skill levels would stay motivated to learn English. They also offered differentiated exercises based on the students' individual characteristics, such as the level of competence in English.

The results indicate that while distance differentiation was time-consuming and challenging, most notably it still was viewed positively, as necessary and important. The results also showed that differentiation in the English subject is possible in distance education or in other situation where the teacher and the students are separated. Furthermore, the results offer ideas and examples of how differentiation could be done in the future in distance education and therefore this study is useful for English and other foreign language teachers.

This study includes some limitations as well. Firstly, the results are based on the perceptions and statements of the teachers which can be contradictory to their actions in real life. Secondly, while the survey was of differentiation in distance education, some teachers might have answered the questions thinking of differentiation and distance education as separate topics. Furthermore, questions were based on the spring 2020 distance education period, but the survey was conducted at the end of the year, so some might not have remembered everything as clearly as for example exactly after that period.

Lastly, because of the relatively small sample size (n=55) any larger generalizations cannot be done.

Finally, further research on the topic is needed. With a larger sample size, more quantitative research on the matter and more generalizations could be made. It would also be interesting to compare how much teachers' views on and methods for differentiating English in distance education differ from those in face-to-face teaching, if they do. Additionally, more research on the topic should be done during a normal situation, that is, not in an exceptional situation caused by a pandemic, so that any factors unrelated to the research topic that could possibly affect the results negatively, could be minimized. Lastly, and most importantly, English distance differentiation has not been studied, which in itself demands and requires more research on the matter. Distance education of foreign languages is very likely to grow in the future and therefore, researching differentiation in that environment is vital for a successful and equal learning experience for every single learner.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire in Finnish

Tämän kyselyn tarkoituksena on kerätä tietoa englannin opettajien kokemuksista eriyttämisestä kevään 2020 etäopetuksen aikana.

Kysely sisältää 4 osiota ja vastaamiseen menee noin 10–15 minuuttia. Se sisältää monivalintakysymyksiä sekä avoimia kysymyksiä. Kysely on anonyymi.

Vastaamalla kyselyyn annat suostumuksen sille, että vastauksia käytetään anonyymisti osana tutkimusta. Tutkimuksesta valmistuu maisterintutkielma.

Tutkimuksessa kerättyjä tietoja ja tutkimustuloksia käsitellään luottamuksellisesti tietosuojalainsäädännön edellyttämällä tavalla. Tästä tietosuojaselosteeseen.

1. Ikä *

- Alle 25-vuotias
- 25–35-vuotias
- 36–45-vuotias
- 46–55-vuotias
- 56–65-vuotias
- yli 65-vuotias

2. Kuinka monta vuotta olet toiminut englannin opettajana? *

- alle vuoden
- 1–5 vuotta
- 6–10 vuotta
- 11–15 vuotta
- 16–20 vuotta
- 21–25 vuotta
- 26–30 vuotta
- 31–35 vuotta
- 36–40 vuotta
- 41–45 vuotta

3. Missä päin Suomea toimit englannin opettajana keväällä 2020? *

Valitse alue

- 1 Lappi
- 2 Pohjois-Suomi
- 3 Länsi- ja Sisä-Suomi
- 4 Itä-Suomi
- 5 Lounais-Suomi
- 6 Etelä-Suomi
- Koko Suomi



- Lappi
- Pohjois-Suomi

- Länsi- ja Sisä-Suomi
- Itä-Suomi
- Lounais-Suomi
- Etelä-Suomi

4. Missä seuraavista opetit englantia etäopetusjakson aikana? *

- perusopetuksen vuosiluokilla 1-6
- perusopetuksen vuosiluokilla 7-9
- perusopetuksen vuosiluokilla 1-9
- lukiossa
- perusopetuksen vuosiluokilla 7-9 sekä lukiossa
- muu yhdistelmä, mikä

Tämä osio käsittelee eriyttämistä yleisesti.

5. Onko termi eriyttäminen sinulle jollain tavalla tuttu? *

- Kyllä
- Ei

→ Eriyttämisen määritelmä: Eriyttäminen on opettamisen lähestymistapa, joka ottaa huomioon oppijoiden yksilöllisyydet ja heidän erilaiset tarpeensa. Opettaja voi erilaisilla eriyttämisen tavoilla auttaa kaikkia oppijoita saavuttamaan samat tavoitteet ja auttaa heitä oppimaan tavoilla, jotka sopivat heille ja jotka maksimoivat heidän kykyjään oppia. Eriyttämistä on esimerkiksi se, että tarjoaa edistyneimmille oppijoille esimerkiksi haastavampaa lisämateriaalia tai antaa heikoimmille oppilaille vähemmän tehtäviä tai tukisanoja esimerkiksi kuuntelun oheen.

5b. Kuulostiko eriyttäminen jollain tavalla tutulta, kun olit lukenut eriyttämisen määritelmän?

- Kyllä
- Ei

6. Mitä ajatuksia sinulle tulee mieleen, kun kuulet sanan eriyttäminen? Voit listata yksittäisiä sanoja tai selittää ajatuksiasi kokonaisilla lauseilla. *

7. Kuinka usein yleensä eriytät opetustasi? *

- Aina
- Usein
- Joskus
- Harvoin
- En koskaan

7b. Miksi et? *

8. Millaisena yleisesti koet eriyttämisen englannin opetuksessa? *

Tämä osio käsittelee etäopetusta kevään 2020 aikana.

9. Kuinka monta tuntia viikossa keskimäärin opetit englantia keväällä 2020 etäopetusjakson aikana? *

10. Oliko etäopetus sinulle jollain tavalla tuttua ennen kevään 2020 etäopetusjaksoa? *

- Kyllä → 10b
- Ei

10b. Millä tavoin? *

11. Piditkö etäopetusjakson aikana reaaliaikaisia oppitunteja jonkin videopuhelupalvelun tai videokonferenssipalvelun kautta? *

- Kyllä
- En

11b. Mitä videopuhelupalvelua tai videokonferenssipalvelua käytit etäopetuksessa? *

- Zoom
- Google Meet
- Microsoft Teams
- Skype
- Muu, mikä

11c. Arvioi, kuinka suuren osan viikossa pitämistäsi englannin tunneista pidit reaaliaikaisina jonkin videopuhelupalvelun tai videokonferenssipalvelun kautta? (0% = ei yhtään tuntia viikossa, 100% = kaikki tunnit viikossa) *



11d. Kuinka suuren osan oppitunnista yleensä pidit reaaliaikaisesti oppilaiden kanssa? *

- Koko oppitunnin
- Noin puolet oppitunnista
- Alku- tai loppuosan oppitunnista
- Muu, mikä

12. Piditkö etäoppitunteja jollakin muulla tavalla kuin siten, että opettaja ja oppilaat olivat samanaikaisesti läsnä jossakin videopuhelu- tai videokonferenssipalvelussa? *

- Kyllä → 12b
- En

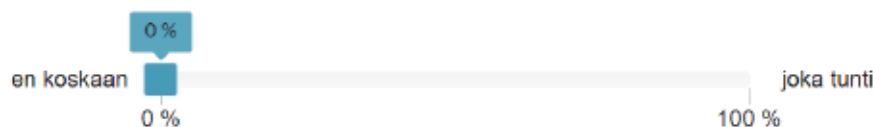
12b. Miten toteutit tällaiset tunnit? *

13. Minkä avulla annoit oppilaille ohjeita, tehtäviä ja/tai materiaalia etäopetuksen aikana? *

- Google Classroom
- Google Meet
- Microsoft OneDrive
- Microsoft Teams
- Moodle
- Showbie
- Skype
- Sähköposti
- WhatsApp
- Wilma
- Zoom
- Muu, mikä

Tämä osio käsittelee eriyttämistä kevään 2020 etäopetusjakson aikana.

14. Kuinka usein keskimäärin eriytit englannin oppiaineen opetustasi etäopetusjakson aikana viikossa? (0%= en koskaan, 100%=jokaisella tunnilla viikossa) *



14b. Jos vastasit edelliseen kysymykseen 0%, perustelee miksi et koskaan eriyttänyt?

15. Millä tavoin otit erilaiset oppijat huomioon etäopetuksessa? Voit valita useamman vaihtoehdon. *

- Valmistin lisämateriaalia kirjan ulkopuolelta. (esim. lisäharjoituksia kielioppiasiaista)
- Valmistin/tarjosin lisämateriaalia edistyneimmille oppilaille. (esim. haastavampia tehtäviä tai lisätehtäviä)
- Valmistin/tarjosin tukimateriaalia heikoimmille oppilaille (esim. kuunteluun tukisanalistausta, enemmän perustehtäviä johonkin kielioppiasiaan)
- Vaihtelin työskentelytapoja (itsenäinen, pari, ryhmä)
- Harjoittelimme englantia kielen eri osa-alueiden avulla (vaihtelua luku-, kirjoitus-, kuuntelu- ja puheharjoitusten välillä)
- Vaihtelin eri tehtävätyyppien välillä (esim. avointen kysymysten, täydennystehtävien, aukkotehtävien ja monivalintojen välillä)
- Tarjosin tukiopetusta
- Annoin vaihdellen erilaajuisia tai -tasoisia tehtäviä kotiläksyksi
- Annoin oppilaille heidän tasonsa mukaisesti tehtäviä tai läksyjä (esim. toisille enemmän/toisille vähemmän, toisille erityyppisiä tehtäviä kuin toisille...)

- Eriytin ohjeistustani (esim. sanomalla jotkut asiat kahdella eri tavalla, jotta kaikki ymmärtäisivät)
- Muulla tavoin, miten

16. Anna esimerkki tai esimerkkejä tavoitiasi eriyttää englannin opetusta etäopetuksen aikana: mitä eriytit ja millä tavalla? *

17. Millä adjektiivilla kuvailisit englannin opetuksen eriyttämistä etäopetuksen aikana? Voit valita useamman vaihtoehdon. *

- Helppoa
- Haastavaa
- Vaivatonta
- Aikaa vievää
- Työlästä
- Tarpeellista
- Turhaa
- Tärkeää
- Palkitsevaa
- Turhauttavaa
- Hauskaa
- Tylsää
- Muu, mikä

17b. Perustele hieman valintaasi/valintojasi. (Esimerkiksi "tärkeää, koska...")*

Jos sinulla on lisättävää johonkin vastaukseen tai muuta kommenttia liittyen eriyttämiseen etäopetuksessa, voit kirjoittaa tähän.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire in English

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information on English teachers' experiences of differentiation during distance education in spring 2020.

The questionnaire includes 4 sections and answering takes approximately 10–15 minutes. It includes multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. The questionnaire is anonymous.

By responding to this questionnaire, you give the permission to use the answers anonymously as part of research. This research leads to a Master's thesis.

The data and research results collected in this study will be treated confidentially by data protection legislation. [Click here to the privacy statement.](#)

1. Age *

- Under 25 years
- 25–35 years
- 36–45 years
- 46–55 years
- 56–65 years
- over 65 years

2. How many years have you been an English teacher? *

- less than a year
- 1–5 year(s)
- 6–10 years
- 11–15 years
- 16–20 years
- 21–25 years
- 26–30 years
- 31–35 years
- 36–40 years
- 41–45 years

3. Where in Finland did you work as an English teacher in spring 2020? *

Valitse alue

- 1 Lappi
- 2 Pohjois-Suomi
- 3 Länsi- ja Sisä-Suomi
- 4 Itä-Suomi
- 5 Lounais-Suomi
- 6 Etelä-Suomi
- + Koko Suomi



- 1. Lapland
- 2. Northern Finland
- 3. Western and the interior of Finland
- 4. Eastern Finland
- 5. Southwestern Finland
- 6. Southern Finland

4. Where in the following did you teach English during distance education? *

- Basic education – grades 1-6
- Basic education – grades 7-9
- Basic education – grades 1-9
- General upper secondary school
- Basic education – grades 7-9 and general upper secondary school
- Other combination, what

This section examines differentiation in general.

5. Is the term differentiation somehow familiar to you? *

- Yes
- No

➔ The definition of differentiation: Differentiation is an approach to teaching that takes the students' individualities and different need into account. With various differentiation methods, a teacher can help every student reach the same objectives and help students learn in ways that are suitable for them and maximize their abilities to learn. As an example of differentiation, a teacher can offer the more advanced student more challenging additional materials or give the weaker student fewer exercises or list of words for support when listening to a recording.

5b. Did differentiation sound familiar when you had read the definition?

- Yes

No

6. What thoughts come to your mind when you hear the word differentiation? You can list individual words or explain your thoughts with complete sentences. *

7. How often do you usually differentiate your teaching? *

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never

7b. Why not? *

8. In general, how do you experience differentiation in English teaching? *

This section examines distance education during spring 2020.

9. In general, how many hours per week did you teach English during distance education in spring 2020? *

10. Was distance education somehow familiar to you before the spring 2020 distance education period? *

- Yes → 10b
- No

10b. In what way(s)? *

11. Did you taught synchronous (real-time) classes during the distance education period through some video or web-conferencing environments? *

- Yes
- No

11b. Which video or web-conferencing environment did you use in distance education? *

- Zoom
- Google Meet
- Microsoft Teams
- Skype
- Other, what

11c. Estimate, how many classes per week, on average, did you teach synchronously through some video or web-conferencing environments? (0% = no classes at all, 100% = every class)*

0 %

100%

No classes

Every class



11d. How large part of the class did you hold in real time with the students? *

- The whole class
- About half of the class
- The beginning or the end of the class
- Other, what

12. Did you teach classes in distance education in some other way than having the teacher and the students be simultaneously present in some video or web-conferencing environment?

- Yes → 12b
- No

12b. How did you carry out these classes? *

13. What platform did you use to give the students instructions, exercises and/or materials in distance education? *

- Google Classroom
- Google Meet
- Microsoft OneDrive
- Microsoft Teams
- Moodle
- Showbie
- Skype
- Email
- WhatsApp
- Wilma
- Zoom
- Other, what

This section examines differentiation during the spring 2020 distance education period.

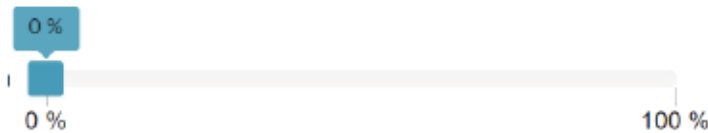
14. On average, how often did you differentiate your English teaching during distance education, per week? (0%= never, 100%=every class of the week) *

0 %

100%

Never

Every class



14b. If you answered 0% to the previous question, elaborate why you never differentiated?

15. In what ways did you take different learners into account in distance education? You can choose multiple options. *

- I prepared additional material outside the books (e.g. additional exercises on a grammar topic)
- I prepared/offered additional material for the more advanced students (e.g. more challenging or additional exercises)
- I prepared/offered support material for the weaker students (e.g. wordlists as a support for listening comprehension exercises, more basic exercises to some grammar topic)
- I mixed different working methods (independent, peer and/or group work)
- We practiced English through the four different language skills (variation between reading, writing, listening and speaking exercises)
- I alternated between different exercise types (e.g. between open-ended questions, gap-fill exercises, multiple-choice questions...)
- I offered remedial teaching
- I gave exercises of varying lengths and levels as homework
- I gave students exercises or homework according to their skill level (e.g. more or less to others, different types of exercises to different learners...)
- I differentiated my instruction (e.g. by saying something in two different ways, so that everyone would understand)
- In other way(s), what?

16. Give example(s) on ways you differentiated English teaching during distance education: What did you differentiate and how? *

17. What adjective(s) would you describe English differentiation during distance education? You can choose multiple options. *

- Easy
- Challenging
- Effortless
- Time-consuming
- Laborious
- Necessary
- Unnecessary
- Important
- Rewarding
- Frustrating

- Fun
- Boring
- Other, what

17b. Elaborate on your choice(s). (For example: "Important, because...")*

If you have anything to add to any answers or other comments on differentiation during distance education, you can write them here.

Appendix 3: Finnish summary

Johdanto

Erilaiset oppijat oppivat asioita eri tavoin ja eri tahtiin. Tämän takia on myös tärkeää, että opettajat ottavat tämän huomioon opetuksessaan. Eriyttäminen on lähestymistapa opettamiseen, mikä ottaa huomioon jokaisen oppilaan yksilöllisyyden ja erilaiset tarpeet. Opettaja voi erilaisilla eriyttämisen tavoilla auttaa kaikkia oppijoita saavuttamaan samat tavoitteet ja auttaa heitä oppimaan tavoilla, jotka sopivat heille ja jotka maksimoivat heidän kykyjään oppia. (Roiha & Polso 2018.)

Keväällä 2020, Suomen kouluissa jouduttiin sopeutumaan COVID-19 viruksen aiheuttamaan uuteen ja epätavalliseen tilanteeseen. Yhtenä varatoimenpiteenä Suomen hallitus päätti siirtää koulut etäopetukseen maaliskuun puolivälistä toukokuun puoliväliin saakka (EDUFI 2020a). Vaikka etäopetus ei ole kansainvälisesti uusi ilmiö, Suomessa perusopetus ja lukio-opetus järjestetään lähiopetuksena ja vain vähän tutkimusta on tehty etäopetuksesta. Lisäksi Opetushallitus julkaisi huhtikuussa 2020 julkaisun, jossa kerrottiin, että lasten ja nuorten tuentarve on yhä etäopetuksessakin merkittävää, ellei jopa merkittävämpää kuin tavallisessa tilanteessa (EDUFI 2020a). Tämän takia eriyttäminenkin osana tukitoimia oli todella tärkeää ja tarpeellista.

Vaikka etäopetusta ja eriyttämistä on tutkittu paljon erikseen, niitä ei ole tutkittu paljoa yhdessä (esim. McCarthy 2020). Lisäksi nimenomaan englannin tai muun vieraan kielen opetuksen eriyttämistä etäopetuksessa ei ole tutkittu aikaisemmin. Tämän takia tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena on tutkia englannin kielen opettajien kokemuksia eriyttämisestä etäopetuksen aikana. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli vastata seuraaviin tutkimuskysymyksiin: 1. Miten englannin opettajat kokivat eriyttämisen etäopetuksen aikana? 2. Mitä eri eriyttämisen tapoja opettajat käyttivät etäopetuksessa? Aineisto kerättiin kyselylomakkeella, joka sisälsi sekä monivalintakysymyksiä että avoimia kysymyksiä. Laadullinen aineisto, mihin tämä tutkimus painottui, analysoitiin sisällönanalyysin ja NVivo 12-ohjelman avulla.

Eriyttäminen

Eriyttämisen päämääränä on tarjota opetusta, joka ottaa huomioon yksilölliset erot, minkä takia hyvä oppilaantuntemus on tärkeää eriyttämisen onnistumisen kannalta (Roiha ja Polso 2018). Näitä voivat olla muun muassa äidinkieli, sukupuoli, kiinnostuksen kohteet, motivaatio ja aiempi kokemus (Pachler 2014, 307–309). Lisäksi opettajan rooli on

eriyttämisessä merkittävä, vaikka sen tulisikin silti olla aina oppilaskeskeistä. Eriyttäminen voidaan jakaa esimerkiksi alaspäin ja ylöspäin eriyttämiseen, tai reaktiiviseen ja proaktiiviseen eriyttämiseen. Alaspäin eriyttämisellä tarkoitetaan erilaisia toimenpiteitä ja tapoja, joilla tuetaan niin kutsutun heikompien oppilaiden oppimista, kun taas ylöspäin eriyttämisessä huomioidaan lahjakkaat opiskelijat ja tarjotaan heille heidän osaamistasonsa mukaista opetusta ja tehtäviä. Reaktiivisessa eriyttämisessä opetusta aletaan eriyttää ja yksilöllistää vasta, kun joitakin haasteita ilmenee. Proaktiivisessa eriyttämisessä puolestaan otetaan jo lähtökohtaisesti oppilaan yksilöllisyys huomioon ja ennakoidaan oppilaiden tarpeita. (Roiha ja Polso 2018, 16–17.) Vieraan kielen oppiminen voi olla monelle haastavaa, minkä takia eriyttäminen onkin siinä tärkeää. Perusopetuksen ja lukion opetussuunnitelmien perusteissakin (EDUFI 2014, EDUFI 2019b) eriyttäminen mainitaan osana opetusta, ja kuinka jokainen opiskelija tulisi ottaa huomioon erilaisine ominaisuuksineen.

Tomlinsonin (2001) mukaan opettajat voivat lähestyä eriyttämistä vähintään kolmen osa-alueen kautta ja eriyttää näitä oppilaan yksilöllisten ominaisuuksien mukaan: he voivat eriyttää opetustaan sisällön kautta, menetelmän kautta tai tuotosten kautta oppilaan valmiuksien, kiinnostusten tai oppimisprofiilin mukaan. Petty (2014) puolestaan jakaa eriyttämisen kolmeen eri kategoriaan: tehtävän, lopputuloksen ja ajan eriyttäminen, erilaisten mieltymysten ja tukitarpeiden mukauttaminen sekä palautteen eriyttäminen ja yksilöllisten tehtävien ja tavoitteiden asettaminen. Esimerkiksi vieraan kielen tehtävän eriyttämiseen sopivat hyvin niin kutsutut tikapuutehtävät, joissa tehtävät vaihtelevat tehtävätyyppien ja vaikeustason mukaan. Toisaalta voi myös tarjota tehtäviä, joissa heikoimmat voivat esimerkiksi kirjoittaa yksittäisiä sanoja, kun taas lahjakkaammat voivat kirjoittaa kokonaisia lauseita.

Kielten opetuksen eriyttämisessä on tärkeää muistaa, että kaikkia kielten osa-alueita voi ja pitäisikin eriyttää. Esimerkiksi ääntämisen ja puhumisen harjoittelussa pienryhmä- tai parityöskentely on hyvä tapa eriyttää opetusta, sillä osalle puhuminen isossa ryhmässä voi olla ahdistavaa. Myös opettajan opetuspuhetta voi helposti eriyttää käyttämällä apuna kuvia tai eleitä tai selittämällä asian muutamalla eri tavalla, aloittaen haastavimmista rakenteista, jotta lahjakkaammatkin opiskelijat saavat haastetta (Roiha ja Polso 2018, 226–231.) Usein opettajat ovat kokeneet eriyttämisen positiivisena, mutta haastavana muun muassa ajan ja muiden resurssien puutteiden takia (esim. Ikola 2013, Tomlinson 2014, Pachler 2014).

Etäopetus

Etäopetuksen määrittelyssä keskeisin ero tavalliseen kontaktiopetukseen verrattuna on kuinka opettaja ja oppilas ovat erillään toisistaan ajan ja/tai paikan suhteen. Lisäksi siihen kuuluu erilaisten medioiden (esimerkiksi äänen ja videon) käyttö opettajan ja oppijan yhdistämiseksi ja sisältöjen siirtämiseksi. (Keegan 1990, 44–45.) Termit samanaikainen eli reaaliaikainen (engl. synchronous) ja eriaikainen eli ei-reaaliaikainen (engl. asynchronous) opetus lisäksi kuvailevat erilaisia etäopetuskonteksteja. Samanaikainen etäopetus tarkoittaa, että opettaja ja oppilaat ovat livenä eli samanaikaisesti jossain esimerkiksi videopuhelu- tai videokonferenssipalvelussa, ja opettaja ja oppilaat ovat erillään toisistaan vain paikan suhteen. Eriaikaisessa etäopetuksessa puolestaan opettaja tarjoaa materiaalit oppilaille siten, että heillä on näihin pääsy ajasta ja paikasta riippumatta, silloin kuin heille parhaiten sopii. (Shahabadi ja Uplane 2015, 131–133.) Viimeisten vuosikymmenten aikana samanaikainen etäopetus on saanut enemmän julkisuutta ja sitä on alettu tutkimaan enemmän (Hratinski, Keller ja Carlsson 2010). Myös kielten etäopetukseen samanaikainen etäopetus sopii osaltaan paremmin, sillä esimerkiksi välitön palaute ja vuorovaikutus ovat oleellisia kielen oppimiselle (White 2003, 10).

Opettajien kokemukset etäopetuksesta ovat olleet hyvin samanlaisia eri tutkimusten mukaan. Sekä Opetushallituksen (EDUFI 2020c) että Opetusalan ammattijärjestö OAJ:n (OAJ 2020) tutkimukset kevään 2020 etäopetuksesta osoittivat, että kevään 2020 etäopetusjakso oli opettajien mukaan tilanne huomioon ottaen onnistunut. Silti, Helsingin yliopiston ja Tampereen yliopiston meneillään olevan tutkimuksen ensitulosten mukaan suurin osa opettajista koki työmäärän lisääntyneen normaaliin verrattuna (Ahtiainen ym. 2020). OAJ raportoi samanlaisista tuloksista. Yleisesti opettajat ovat kokeneet, että heidän digitaaliset taitonsa ovat etäopetuksen myötä parantuneet. (Ahtiainen ym. 2020, OAJ 2020, EDUFI 2020c).

White (2006, 253) mainitsee, kuinka kielten etäopetus -aiheinen kirjallisuus keskittyy usein vain etäkielikurssien suunnitteluun ja kehittämiseen jättäen oppijoiden tukemisen taustalle. Näin ollen eriyttäminen osana oppimisen tukemista jää hyvin vähälle etäopetuksen kirjallisuudessa, vaikka nimenomaan oppilaiden tukeminen on laadukkaan etäopetuksen ominaispiirre. Mäkinen (2020) käsitteli pro gradu -tutkielmassaan luokanopettajien ajatuksia etäopetuksessa tapahtuvan eriyttämisen haasteista ja onnistumisista. Suurin osa opettajista kuvaili eriyttämistä etäopetuksessa haastavana, vaikka osa myös piti sitä helpompana kuin tavallisesti. Suurimpana haasteena koettiin nopea siirtyminen etäopetukseen. Yleisimpinä tapoina eriyttää opetusta oli vaihdella

tehtävien määrää ja vaikeustasoa. (Mäkinen 2020.) Samanlaisista eriyttämisen tavoista raportoi myös Rainio (2020) pro gradu -tutkielmassaan erityisopettajien kokemuksista etäopetuksen eriyttämisestä.

Tutkimuksen menetelmät

Aineisto kerättiin sähköisesti Webropol-kyselyllä, joka jaettiin kolmessa kielten opetus - aiheisessa Facebook ryhmässä syksyllä 2020. Kyselyyn vastaaminen oli vapaaehtoista, ja ainoana edellytyksenä kyselyyn vastaamiseen oli se, että oli opettanut englantia kevään 2020 etäopetusjakson aikana joko perusopetuksessa ja/tai lukiossa. Kysely sisälsi neljä osiota: taustatiedot, eriyttäminen yleisesti, etäopetus ja eriyttäminen etäopetuksessa. Kysely sisälsi monivalintakysymysten lisäksi useita avoimia kysymyksiä, joiden tarkoituksena oli saada laadullista tutkimustietoa. Kyselyyn vastasi 55 opettajaa ympäri Suomea. Opettajien käyttämiin eriyttämistapoihin liittyen kysely sisälsi kaksi kysymystä, joilla kysyttiin samaa asiaa eri tavoilla. Monivalintakysymyksessä opettajilta kysyttiin, kuinka he ottivat erilaiset oppijat huomioon etäopetuksessa, ja annetut vaihtoehdot olivat jokseenkin yleisluontoisia. Tämän jälkeen avoimessa kysymyksessä opettajia pyydettiin antamaan esimerkkejä tavoistaan, joilla he eriyttivät englannin opetusta etäopetuksessa. Joskus saman kysymyksen kysyminen erilaisilla kysymyksillä on järkevää (Oppenheim 1992, 114). Lisäksi, koska kysymykset olivat muotoiltu eri tavalla, avoin kysymys tarkemmin ja yksityiskohtaisemmin, tavoitteena oli saada laajempien teemojen lisäksi konkreettisia esimerkkejä. Avointen kysymysten vastaukset eli laadulliset tutkimustulokset analysoitiin sisällönanalyysin mukaisesti NVivo 12 -ohjelman avulla. Kyselyn määrälliset tulokset analysoitiin Microsoft Excel ja IBM SPSS Statistics 27 - ohjelmien avulla.

Tulokset ja pohdinta

Suurimmalle osalle opettajista (n=55) etäopetus ei ollut tuttua ennen kevään 2020 etäopetusjaksoa. Opettajista 92,7 % (n=51) opetti yleisesti samanaikaista live-opetusta ja joskus eriaikaisesti. Lisäksi opettajat ilmoittivat eriyttävänsä opetusta keskimäärin noin puolilla viikon oppitunneista (48,7 % viikon oppitunneista). Vaikka monet opettajista kuvailivat eriyttämistä aikaa vievänä (70,9 % opettajista), haastavana (52,7 % opettajista) tai työläänä (45,5 % opettajista), pääosin he pitivät sitä kuitenkin tarpeellisena (74,8 % opettajista) ja tärkeänä (61,8 % opettajista). Haastavimmat ja eniten aikaa vievät tekijät etäopetuksen eriyttämisessä liittyivät usein ajan ja muiden resurssien puutteisiin. Lisäksi

opettajan ja oppilaiden fyysinen etäisyys toisistaan vaikeutti eriyttämistä, sillä opettajien oli vaikeampaa tietää, jos joku tarvitsi eriyttämistä. Samanaikaisesti monet pitivät eriyttämistä etäopetuksessa tärkeänä ja tarpeellisena, sillä oppilaiden motivaation kannalta on tärkeää, että he saavat omalle tasolleen sopivia tehtäviä. Lisäksi on tärkeää, että kaikki pysyvät mukana opetuksessa. Osa opettajista myös koki saaneensa uusia työkaluja lähiopetukseenkin, muun muassa lisää materiaalia, uusia arviointitapoja ja kehittyneempiä tietoteknisiä taitoja.

Etäopetuksen eriyttämistapoihin liittyvässä monivalintakysymyksessä tulokset olivat hyvin tasapuolisia eri vastausvaihtoehtojen välillä, mihin varmasti vaikutti opettajien mahdollisuus valita useita vaihtoehtoja. Silti kolme yleisintä vaihtoehtoa olivat ”Vaihtelin eri tehtävätyyppien välillä” (81,8 % opettajista valitsi), ”Harjoittelimme englantia kielen eri osa-alueiden avulla” (76,4 %) ”Eriytin ohjeistustani” (70,9 %). Avovastauksista opettajien mainitsemat etäopetuksen eriyttämistavat voidaan jakaa kolmeen kategoriaan: 1. eriyttäminen tehtävän, tuloksen tai sallitun ajan mukaan, 2. yksilöllisten tukitoimien tarjoaminen sekä 3. oppilaiden itseohjautuvuus oppimisessa ja eriyttämisessä. Selvästi yleisin etäopetuksen eriyttämistapa liittyi ensimmäiseen kategoriaan eli opettajat tarjosivat yksilöllisiä tehtäviä yleensä oppilaan osaamistason mukaisesti. Osa opettajista kertoi tarjonneensa tukiopetusta tai soitelleensa henkilökohtaisesti joidenkin oppilaiden kanssa videopuheluita. Osa opettajista antoi oppilaille mahdollisuuden valita annetuista tehtävistä helpompia tai haastavampia tehtäviä tai esimerkiksi suorittaa joitain kirjallisia tehtäviä suullisesti.

Monet tutkimustulokset myötäilevät aikaisempien eriyttämiseen tai etäopetukseen liittyvien tutkimuksien tuloksia. Usein eriyttämiseen liittyvät vaikeudet liittyivät juuri ajan ja resurssien puutteeseen (mm. Roiha 2014, Ikola 2013) ja monet opettajat kokivat työmäärän lisääntyneen kevään 2020 etäopetuksen aikana (Ahtiainen ym. 2020, OAJ 2020). Lisäksi koska suurimmalle osalle etäopetus oli jo itsessään uutta ja lisäsi työmäärää, eriyttäminen lisänä tuotti varmasti omia haasteita. Tomlinson ja Imbeau (2010) mainitsevat tähän ratkaisun: opettajien ei tulisi suunnitella tuntia ja sitten suunnitella eriyttämistä, vaan heidän tulisi suunnitella eriyttävä oppitunti heti alkujaan, jolloin eriyttämiseen ei menisi enempää aikaa.

Vaikka opettajat kokivat eriyttämisen olevan aikaa vievää ja haastavaa etäopetuksessa, siihen suhtauduttiin siitä huolimatta positiivisesti. Tutkimustulokset eriyttämisen tavoista ovat hyödyllisiä opettajille tulevaisuutta ajatellen ja osoittavat, että eriyttäminen on etäopetustilanteessa mahdollista. Englannin tai muiden vieraiden kielten

opetuksen eriyttäminen etäopetuksessa kaipaa lisätutkimusta, sillä siitä ei ole aikaisempaa tieteellistä tutkimusta, ja etäopetus tulee hyvin todennäköisesti kasvamaan tulevaisuudessa jollakin tavalla.