

“English is a language that almost everybody will know or should know:” children’s perceptions of English in their lives.

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Abstract

The present study explores young Danish children’s experiences with and perceptions of English in their personal lives in what has traditionally been described as an EFL context. Twenty-one Danish children (between the age of 8-12) participated in the study. A multimodal emic approach was employed using language portraits and interviews. As the only language besides Danish (L1), English figured in all portraits thus illustrating the great importance placed on English by all children, recognizing its status as a global language. However, the participating children experienced and viewed English very differently. Findings of the present study ranged from perspectives where learning and using English was found to be frustrating and difficult, to bilingual perspectives where English was engaged with more or just as much as the first language (Danish). This confirmed arguments that, to some, English is still a foreign rather than second language. This has implications for teaching. It seems key that teachers become familiar with the extramural English interest of their students as well as their perceptions of the language. This way, they will be better able to differentiate their teaching (Sylvén, 2022).

Keywords: extramural English, second language learning, language perceptions

Introduction

In many parts of the world, not least Scandinavia, the role of English might have moved from that of foreign (EFL) to that of second language (ESL) (Henry et al., 2018; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016). In many places, it is taught from elementary school on (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2019) and is, according to Graddol (2004), considered “a basic skill” (p. 1330). This is true also for Denmark where the present study is set. Arguments for the altered status of English from foreign to second language are rooted in its massive global societal presence (Graddol, 2004), not least in digital contexts. Nowadays, due to the availability of technologies (e.g., smart phones, etc.) and constant development of new media (e.g., TikTok), globally many children engage in spare time entertainment mediated in English (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Such engagement has been found to foster language learning, also dubbed extramural English language learning (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016).

The increasing importance of non-educational contexts for English language learning has educational implications (De Wilde et al., 2020; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016), leading some to argue that it now makes little sense to teach English as a foreign language (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016; Sylvén, 2022).

A pertinent question is what young children themselves make of English in their personal lives. Most research on the presence of English in contexts where traditionally English has been taught as a foreign language has focused on the potential for language learning through extramural exposure – with only very little research taking a qualitative child perspective (De Wilde & Eyckmans, 2022). The little qualitative research that exists suggests that many children bestow English with positive symbolic value, (De Wilde & Eyckmans, 2022; Wolff, 2014), but also hints that to some extramural English does not present a positive presence (Hannibal Jensen, 2019; Sylvén, 2022). More emic research is needed to bring forth knowledge of children’s personal perspectives on English, acknowledging the “diversity and complexity of [today’s] L2 learning contexts” (Dewaele and Li, 2020, p. 14).

To this end, the present study asks:

What are young Danish children’s experiences with and perceptions of English in their personal lives?

First, the background of the study is provided through a brief overview of the foreign/second language distinction. Hereafter, the theoretical stance is presented, followed by the study including methodology and findings followed by their discussion. The article is rounded off with limitations, a conclusion, and a section on implications.

1.0. Background

1.1. Foreign versus second language

The foreign (EFL)/second language (ESL) distinction is generally based on the level of societal presence in the country in which the language is learnt (Sylvén, 2022). For example, English is considered a second language in the former British colonies where it has “an extended functional range in a variety of social, educational, administrative, and literary domains” (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016, p. 23). A foreign language, on the other hand, is defined as a language that does not have “an extended functional range” nor does it figure outside the educational system to any great degree. That is, to encounter the language outside formal education, one would have to travel to the country/countries in which the language is spoken (Sylvén, 2022). However, in countries where English has traditionally been considered a foreign rather than second language (e.g., Denmark), English is used in higher education, is the language of much commerce, and figures extensively in society, through advertisements and, not least, entertainment (Lønsmann et al., 2022). Indeed, this situation applies to all of Scandinavia (Henry et al., 2018) and many other places. That is, in these contexts, many citizens encounter English daily outside the educational system. Moreover, with the proliferation of web-based

entertainment, English takes up much space in many people's – including children's - lives, both in society generally and in their private homes - thereby English may have reached or be reaching the status of a second rather than foreign language in such contexts (Graddol, 2006; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016; Sylvén, 2022). According to the Danish Media Council for Children and Young People (2021), 9-11-year-olds engage frequently (71% more than an hour daily) with English, especially through digital games (e.g., Roblox). For Sweden, Sylvén (2022) found that children as young as 3-7 years of age, on average, engage with extramural English 430 minutes weekly though with sizeable standard deviations ($SD = 361$), thus suggesting English has status as a second language at the individual rather than societal level (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016; Sylvén, 2022). Research shows that extramural English engagement may lead to language learning (De Wilde et al., 2020; Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Sylvén, 2022) which means that for some children English language learning is facilitated outside school through incidental learning processes (Henry et. al., 2018; Sundqvist and Sylvén, 2016).

2.0. Theoretical orientation

Incidental learning is closely tied to the term extramural English (EE) (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Extramural English covers engagement in English-language activities outside the formal educational system with or without the intent to learn English. Many factors contribute to incidental learning. Language users may notice the language because it forms part of a meaningful activity (Lee & Pulido, 2017). They may also notice the language because they need to understand it (McCafferty et al., 2001) or need to use it actively (e.g., through speaking) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; McCafferty et al., 2001). They may focus on and notice the language because it grants them access to portraying valuable identities (Hannibal Jensen, 2024). Thereby the language becomes a positive resource tied to valuable extramural, often social, experiences leading to incidental learning. While serving as a valuable resource for incidental language learning processes, in many cases, extramural English seems not to be employed as a learning resource but rather seems merely to be engaged with as per being the mediating language of activities of interest (e.g., YouTube videos, etc.). Accordingly, scholars (Pavlenko, 2009; Sockett, 2014; Sundqvist, 2019; Ushioda, 2009) suggest that perhaps the term *user* (Sockett, 2009) rather than *learner* more accurately reflects the social identity of an individual engaging in EE. Consequently, when researching language learning we must pay attention to the contextually relevant social identities of the participants, as different social contexts invite the forging and expression of different identities tied to different emotions and different levels of investment (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Norton, 2013; Pavlenko, 2009). That is, in one context (e.g., school), individuals engaging with English may consider themselves learners, whereas in other contexts (e.g., creating a TikTok reel), they consider themselves users (tiktokers) rather than learners. These identities will likely carry different emotions and different levels of investment (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Norton, 2013). The easy access to a global world has been suggested to lead to people developing bicultural identities anchored partly in their local cultures and partly in their

awareness of and relation to the global world (Arnett, 2002). In the case of English, this applies also to young people who, due to their oft- substantial engagement with English-language popular media, may: “develop a global identity that gives them a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture and includes an awareness of the events, practices, styles and information that are part of the global culture” (p. 777). Moreover, English receives support at all levels of society, reinforcing the imputed importance of the language. Drawing on Douglas Fir’s ecological framework for SLA, Ushioda (2017) notes “macro-level socio-political ideological structures and meso-level institutional structures are exerting significant downward pressures on the micro level of social activity where language learning and interaction take place” (p. 471). At the macro level, language ideologies (e.g., endowing English with immense cultural and economic value) shape decisions that have great significance at the individual level, such as the design of national educational curricula (e.g., the worldwide lowering of the starting age for learning English (Nikolov & Djigunović, 2019), enforced in Denmark in 2014 (Lønsmann et al., 2022)). Such decisions are concretely and symbolically visible to children. Learning English becomes associated with “necessity, utility, advantage, social capital, power, advancement, mobility, migration, and cosmopolitanism” (Ushioda, 2017, p. 471). Factors at the meso-level, i.e., in the family, school, peer group, etc., also exert influence on the individual’s relationship with and access to global English. For example, peer group values may be part in deciding a child’s attitudes towards English. The question is how young children perceive English and whether they, too, develop “bicultural identities” (Arnett, 2002). Limited knowledge of this exists. Extant research shows that many children show positive perceptions of English. For example, De Wilde and Eykmans (2022) for Dutch children (age 10-12) found that “even at [...] a young age, children are aware of the value of English in today’s world” (p. 87), finding “English is ‘fun’, that it sounds ‘more original’, ‘better’, ‘cooler’ and ‘tougher’ than their mother tongue (Dutch)” (p. 87). Such attitudes certainly show positive identification with the global culture of English and potential for the development of bicultural identities, as argued to be the case for young people (Arnett, 2002). Some studies (Hannibal Jensen, 2019; Sylvén, 2022), however, show mixed results, with some children not being interested in English.

3.0. The study

3.1. Research design

This study was part of a classroom action research project (Bradbury, 2015), the purpose of which was to implement bridging activities in the English-language classroom (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) by drawing on students’ EE engagement to see if this had a motivational effect. The present study builds on two components of this by drawing on 1) interviews - set up to establish rapport and gain knowledge of the participants’ extramural English engagement - and 2) language portraits (and post-drawing interviews) on children’s general use of and feelings connected to all languages in their lives. Moreover, where relevant, field notes from the action research project (activities in class and talks with the teacher) were included.

3.2. Participants

Participants were children between the ages of 8-12 attending a small Danish school. They all had Danish as their home language. School classes were merged so that 1st and 2nd grade constituted one class (A), 3rd and 4th another class (B) and 5th and 6th grades one class (C). Twenty-three children and their English teacher participated in the project: ten from class A (6 girls and 4 boys), five from class B (4 boys and 1 girl) and eight from class C (6 boys and 2 girls). Two participants were excluded from the analysis (see Analysis) leaving 21 portraits for inclusion.

3.3. Materials

A language portrait, used in this study (see supplementary materials), is a “whole-body empty silhouette in and around which research participants color or draw languages, language variants or other aspects or modalities of communication” (Kusters & De Meulder, 2019, p. 1). Language portraits represent a multimodal research method drawing on both images and narration (Busch, 2018). As part of the activity, participants may describe their portraits through interviews (Kusters & De Meulder, 2019), which was the case for the present study to facilitate children’s own perspectives. Using a language portrait allows for a glimpse of the “subjective, emotional relationships with languages which are central to personal experiences of language use and language learning” (Kusters & De Meulder, p. 3 referring to Kramsch, 2009). The multimodal nature of the instrument caters well to children’s developmental abilities and to what they find interesting. The latter helps motivate greater and more serious involvement from children (Stafford et al., 2003).

3.4. Data collection

Data collection started with the researcher visiting the school to establish rapport by participating in an English class with class B. Thereafter the participating children, except for children from class A, who were unavailable at that time, were interviewed in five groups ranging between 2-4 students in each group. The (audio-recorded) interviews had a semi-structured ‘informal talk’ format where one planned question kicked off the talk: “Do you engage with English-language activities outside school?” Hereafter, conversations were guided by the children’s interests. This included talking about the level of engagement with EE. The interview format worked well for the purpose, building on children’s personal interests and facilitating dialogue between them. Two interview sessions were conducted in English as the children chose to be interviewed in English. For the included case studies, this was the case for Jay, Mario and Lance.

The portrait activity was supervised and overseen by the teacher during regular classroom instruction based on a prompt guide from the researcher, who was not present. Students were informed that the language portrait was a personal representation of the languages in their lives (languages they knew, would like to learn,

dis/liked, used, etc.). This included also considering with whom and where they used the languages and in which types of situations. They could draw languages however they liked. They were told that portraits were personal and not supposed to be aligned, they could include any details they liked. To avoid nudging the students towards giving English extra attention, it did not receive particular focus in the activity prompts. Thereby it was hoped that children's drawings would reflect their personal perspectives rather than the preoccupations of the researcher.

Subsequently, the researcher interviewed the children based on their portraits and carried out bridging activities (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) with class B (not recorded – notes were taken) and C (recorded). For logistical and time-related reasons, children in class A described their portraits individually in front of the whole class while I was present taking notes.

3.4.1. Ethical considerations

The project was registered with the University Legal Services office and their ethical guidelines were observed. Parents gave informed consent. Participants were told that participation was voluntary. All children, including children for whom English was a struggle, decided to participate. In group interviews, children joined groups of their own choosing ensuring that they felt comfortable. All portraits have been anonymized, and case participants given aliases.

3.5. Analysis

First, an overview was made of all included languages (see table 1). Thereafter, English only was in focus and subject to a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This entailed viewing the drawings and interviews as a unified whole. Specifically, portraits were paired with interviews to provide a detailed picture of the perceptions of English from individual perspectives. Following this, each data unit was coded with particular emphasis on participants' use and perceptions of English. Unfortunately, information on EE engagement was not available for all children in class A. The next step entailed viewing the codes associated with each individual participant to identify larger themes (see table 2). Identified themes were *English is difficult*, *English is cool* and *English is as important as Danish*.

To ensure credibility, that the analysis reflected the perceptions and experiences of the participants rather than the researcher, care was taken to not overanalyze portraits (Kuster & De Meulder, 2019). To ensure reliability, coding and analyses were discussed with a fellow researcher. Two portraits were excluded (7 and 10) as they evidently did not adequately reflect personal viewpoints.

To provide as detailed and rich descriptions of children's perceptions of English as possible, cases from each category were selected for presentation based on representativity and the richness of the data.

4. Findings

The present study aimed to answer the research question:

What are young Danish children's experiences with and perceptions of English in their personal lives?

4.1. General patterns

A total of twenty languages were mentioned in the portraits, many of which were mentioned only once (table 1).

Table 1. Overview of mentioned languages

Languages	Total mentions
Danish, English	21
German	14
Swedish	6
Spanish	3
Icelandic	3
Norwegian, Greenlandic, French, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, Irish	2
Austrian (German), Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, Egyptian	1

As is evident, English had a central place (i.e., represented in all portraits), however, the place that it occupied varied greatly. The participants could be divided into three categories based on their perceptions of English (see table 2). Category 1 represented children who stated to engage only little with EE and who found it difficult and had only little positive to say about English. Category 2 included those who found English cool and engaged moderately or a lot with English and who expressed many positive emotions towards the language (either connected to the language itself and/or to English-speaking people). Category 3 represented a bilingual perspective with children who used the language on par with Danish.

Table 2. Perceptions of English

Category	Description	Portrait number
1	English is difficult (light or no engagement)	2,3,6, 11,16
2	English is cool (moderate and heavy engagement)	1, 4 , 5, 8, 9, 13, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20 , 22, 23
3	English is as important as Danish (heavy engagement)	18, 21

Note. Portrait numbers in boldface represent selected case studies.

4.2. Case studies

In the following sections, case studies are presented from each category.

Case studies: English is difficult

Mai (portrait 11) was 9 years old, attending class B. Her portrait included Danish, German and English. Danish (red and white) was central in her portrait, taking up the most space on her body and face, because “it is spoken in the country where I was born, and live and it is a good country.” Generally, important languages seemed to be painted on faces and/or upper bodies. English had been included (on the sleeves), because “it is an important language which everybody speaks”, and therefore you must learn it in school. As for extramural English engagement, Mai noted that she would occasionally watch English-language YouTube videos, but as she did not understand what was being said in the videos, the content was difficult to follow and, therefore, not particularly entertaining. When asked which videos she would watch in English, she replied “I once watched this hide-and-seek video.” In English class, she said, she needed a lot of help and understood only “a little” and was able to write only a few words. Because she found English difficult, it was not her favorite topic in school. Mai said: “I think German is more fun because I’m not so good at English.” Indeed, German was her favorite language (seen also in her focus on German in her drawing, i.e., represented in numerous places, the eyes and on the hands and feet of her portrait), and she was excited about the prospects of getting German as a school subject. According to Mai, the family spoke German amongst each other for fun and practice from time to time and her older sister had taught her some. She preferred talking about German rather than English.

Malia (portrait 16) was 11 years old, attending class C. Her portrait included five languages (Danish, English, German, French and Swedish) and four mentions of countries (Slovenia, Egypt, Iceland, and Austria). Danish (a t-shirt covering the torso) was the language to take up the most space. Also, German was made significant being represented as a hat and in writing (Malia had written in German: ‘Ich heie Malia’ German for *My name is Malia*). English was represented at the same level as French, both painted as flag patches on her knees. German, she said, was included because she had German classes and an aunt in Germany. Moreover, as Mai, she preferred German over English because German, as opposed to English, was a language “where everybody else is not already much better than me.” English was part of the drawing because, as she stated, English was a school subject which was necessary to learn. In relation to after-school activities, Malia said she spent a lot of time on social media, mediated, however, mostly in Danish as she primarily followed friends and Danish influencers. According to Malia, knowing English was not an important part of her personal life. She would sometimes watch media content in English outside school on YouTube as well as via streaming services (series). However, this was a sporadic rather than regular activity. In the interview, Malia explained that because it was important to be good at English, she had tried to improve it at home by singing in English and

watching English-language movies and series. She said: “mostly I just watch Danish, but sometimes I’ll watch a scene in Danish and then switch it to English. I mean I watch it in Danish and then English because then I kind of understand it [i.e., English] more.” She also found the original version to sound more authentic in English: “That’s how it was made, in English and it’s like English people or Americans who speak” and, moreover, found the lip-syncing awkward.

Being aware of the importance granted to English, Malia was frustrated with her comparatively low proficiency and wanted to improve this and, therefore, had taken extra classes. According to Malia, these had been helpful which was corroborated by field notes from talks with her teacher. However, from work done in class during the bridging activities project, where I was present, it was evident that Malia still felt inadequate. In fact, she cried and refused to let her classmates watch a YouTube project she had made for the project. She moreover became visibly frustrated when doing a written assignment complaining that her classmates were much better at writing than her. The teacher took many measures to make Malia feel comfortable and to help her overcome her feelings of inadequacy. Due to her struggles with English, Malia would sometimes be bored in English classes because she understood only a little. She said she felt she was in constant need of help which she could not get as others needed help too.

Case studies: English is cool

Elisabeth (portrait 4), who was 8 years old at the time of the project, attending class A, had drawn a mix of Danish and English including a little German. She stated to speak better English than Danish. She said she loved English and was very good at it. She demonstrated some of her vocabulary which was a collection of different fruits. She had a distinct British accent. She said that one day, out of the blue, she suddenly knew how to speak English and she loved it. She also gave advice to a classmate who said his younger siblings did not understand English. She said: “If you tell them English words and what they mean. I do believe they’ll learn.”

Jay (portrait 20) was 11 years old at the time of the project, attending class C. He chose to do his initial interview in English. His language portrait had six languages with English and Danish being dominant. English (in the form of the US flag) covered the entire head and parts of the upper body. The rest of the upper body and arms were painted as the Danish flag. Most of his spare time digital activities were mediated in English. For example, he played digital English-language games (especially Ark, an online game) for which he said he used English a lot (reading and doing written chat). Moreover, he said he watched tutorials in English on various games and soccer YouTube videos, most often in English. Apart from hearing and reading English, he told the researcher that he sometimes spoke English (on- and offline). For example, he noted that offline, he and his Danish friends and his brother would sometimes use English word/term if they did not know or

remember the equivalent in Danish, whereafter they often continued their conversation in English. He stated to mostly play online games with Danes, but he also sometimes chatted with English-speaking gamers and had been to the US where he spoke English when playing with other children.

English was evidently very important to Jay. He said he found it easy (to speak and learn), it sounded cool, was an important language, necessary to know, and one he could not do without in his spare time. It was his favorite language. According to the interview, he would think mostly in English and sometimes, by his own accord, would dream in English. He said that he was bored in class and would like for English lessons to be more challenging and, to this end, had asked for a more advanced textbook. He still liked the subject though. When asked whether outside class he considered himself a learner or someone just using English, he replied: “there is always more to learn” which, they agreed in his interview group, was also the case for Danish. Danish, he said: “is my first language. I speak it the most” but added “but I use English a lot!” (smilingly emphasizing ‘a lot’).

Case studies: English is as important as Danish

The brothers **Mario** (portrait 21), 10 years old, and **Lance** (portrait 18), 12 years old, both attended class C. They both did their interviews in English.

In Mario’s language portrait the entire head and most of the upper body represented English (white), which he said is “a language that almost everybody will know or should know.” Mario’s was the only language portrait wherein Danish took up remarkably little space (left foot and ankle). Japanese took up a shoulder (he watched Japanese Anime). The rest of the arm was Italian, which, he said, he and a friend jokingly pretended to be speaking to each other. The other arm represented Swedish and Norwegian, which he noted, “are almost identical to Danish” something he had noticed during game chats in Scandinavian with Norwegian gamers. One whole leg represented Russian which he would hear online by listening to Russian songs and would like to learn. The other leg was part Arabic, a language he would also like to learn. His brother Lance’s entire upper body and head were painted as the American flag and Danish was painted as the legs and feet.

Both brothers engaged extensively with English outside school, finding it easy to speak. They played digital games online (with voice chat). Mario said: “I learned [English] mostly from multiplayer games like because it’s kinda necessary to learn to speak English if you want to speak to others online like with discord if you want other online friends.” Lance also mentioned how after having chatted with people for a while, you get to know them, and conversations extend beyond game-related content. Furthermore, when you know people and talk to them a lot, you start noticing their accents and you learn from this. Lance also noted that initially to learn English outside school, he would repeat words he heard and try to use them when chatting.

Mario listened to rap music, watched English-language YouTube videos, and followed various people and organizations on social media (e.g., NASA). Neither engaged in Danish-language entertainment. Mario said

“...I never really grew up watching Danish YouTubers. When first I got some sort of iPad or some type of technology, I instantly just found English like way better and more funny [sic] than almost every Danish YouTuber I’ve ever watched.” They both estimated that they were around 4 years of age when they became interested in engaging in English-language content.

Both brothers spent most of their time speaking English - both at home (with each other) and at school where they exclusively spoke English with each other at recess. Mario said: “I don’t know why. I think it’s because we think it’s a more fluent language and ehm we think it’s just better to speak English than Danish.” They used to speak English at home with their parents too, but the parents now only spoke Danish with the children. Mario was unsure why but said: “Ehm probably because they don’t want me to speak English around the house because this is, the country I’m in is Danish and my main language is Danish so...”

To both, speaking English was natural and easy and the language indispensable. When asked if he considered English or Danish his first language, Mario said: “I personally think that because I speak mostly English everywhere I go- if its online or offline - I mostly speak English so of course my main language is Danish, but I mostly speak English since I just think it’s a better language and I can speak it better than Danish.” The ease with which Mario used English was echoed by his brother who declared both Danish and English to be his first languages. When asked what he did when encountering words he did not understand, Lance replied: “We [he and Mario] don’t get into that situation as often anymore now that we speak the language.”

In relation to school, Mario liked English lessons “because it is English” but did not think that he learnt English in that context. He said: “I don’t mean to brag but I’m just way better than the rest of the class.” Therefore, he easily got bored, as did his brother, Lance. When asked what an ideal English lesson would look like, Mario said it would involve using computers and Lance said that he would like to chat with English-speaking children because “I’d like to speak to somebody who speaks the same language as I do.”

5. Discussion

Ushioda (2017) notes that “in the globalized society we inhabit, few people would downplay the essential usefulness of English language skills” (p. 472). Indeed, English was of undeniable importance to all children in this study. The presence of English on all portraits, as well as the relatively large space it occupied in many portraits, testify to the importance of English for these children. For those who engage only little with extramural English, or not at all, the language was still deemed very important, seemingly because of the perceived societal importance placed on the language both at the macro and the meso-level (Douglas Fir Group, 2016) – exerting, as Ushioda (2017) notes “significant downward pressure on the micro level of social activity” (p. 471). This, in turn, influenced thoughts and feelings around the language and on how one should act. Mai and Malia were no doubt aware of the societal importance of English, i.e., the “necessity...[and] utility” (Ushioda, 2017) and were struggling to meet societal demands and self-expectations (related to peer group

acceptance) to become better at English. Neither Malia nor Mia felt that they needed English in their spare time which was the opposite for Mario, Jay, and Lance. However, their not needing English likely stemmed from their finding it difficult to understand rather than not wanting to use it. Their comparatively low proficiency in English was frustrating to them and came with personal consequences. Interestingly, one consequence was positive, namely an enhanced motivation to learn German. Incidentally, this contrasts with the reported negative consequence of the global presence of English, namely demotivation to learn other foreign languages (Ushioda, 2017). However, their comparatively low proficiency in English also caused low self-esteem at the meso-level (e.g., school) due to feeling like *bad learners*. This low self-esteem made it difficult, sometimes even impossible, for Malia, to participate in learning activities in class. As mentioned, it also hindered engagement with extramural activities as these were difficult to understand and thus not considered entertaining. In turn, this meant that Malia and Mai experienced less language learning affordances as their investment in the language (Norton, 2013) became sporadic in the extramural space and frustrating in school. To Malia and Mai, English was, beyond any doubt, a *foreign* language and their identities those of (struggling) *learners*. Thereby this finding supports the argument that English is a second language at the individual (personal) rather than societal level (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2016; Sylvén, 2022) and not all children develop bicultural identities nor feel like global citizens (Arnett, 2002). There were also students in class, like Jay, who engaged in many English-language activities outside school finding such activities very authentic and cool. Consequently, some became slightly demotivated for English classes due to this engagement, either for lack of authenticity or lack of educationally challenging teaching (a point that has been made before, see e.g., Henry et al., 2018; Sylvén, 2022). At the far end of the specter were the two brothers who seemed to have developed robust bicultural identities. These brothers engaged extensively with the English-language affordances of the environment – additionally creating for themselves language learning opportunities by using and speaking English every day. Arguing that to these brothers English was a foreign language would make little sense. They seemed instead to be bilinguals resulting from *early second language acquisition* (De Houwer, 2009) – that is, situations where “monolingual children’s language environments change in such a way that they start to hear a second language (language 2) with some regularity over and above their language 1 [without formal instruction]. Often this happens through daycare or preschool” (De Houwer, 2009, p. 4). This indeed resembles the way the brothers’ learning trajectories had developed. However, in their case, their early language socialization happened at home and not through day care or preschool. Other such cases have been reported (Sylvén, 2022) and, presumably, more will appear in the future given the realities of global, digital English. Mario and Lance clearly identified as “multilingual speaker[s]” (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 32) with access to an exciting world through language (Mario in particular so, given his interest in languages in general). Accordingly, they invested (time and positive emotions) (Norton, 2013) in using English. Sylvén (2022) notes: “we do not know if those who spend time on activities in English do so because of an initial interest in language in general, and English in particular, or if the availability of English through various

activities leads to an interest in taking part in them” (p. 147). In the case of Mario and Lance it seemed a reciprocal process; for example, they both found only English-language activities interesting, thus they invested in watching and understanding (and learning) English. Through this engagement, they learnt/were learning English, they identified as proficient speakers and engaged more, became more proficient, and so on and so forth. The opposite was evidenced for Malia and Mia but with the same processes at work, albeit negatively so. Indeed, the perceptions, emotions and identities guided the children in their actions (Barcelos, 2015) and this affected their learning opportunities, in turn affecting their perceptions, emotions and identities (Dewaele & Li, 2020; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Pavlenko, 2009; Swain, 2009).

5.1. Limitations

The study provides only a snapshot view of children’s perceptions of English. Added to this, having had access to observational data would have provided richer data. Another limitation is class A’s limited participation (i.e., no initial interview and lack of detailed data on their EE engagement) and the fact that their post-drawing debriefing took place in front of the whole class potentially affecting what and how much they shared.

6. Conclusion

This study illustrated that English shows an undeniable presence in the lives of Danish children. All children found the language important and necessary to know. However, there were great differences between children’s perception of and engagement and identification with English. The findings and presented case studies illustrated a continuum of identities connected to English, ranging from struggling learners to bilingual users. The study then showed that indeed, as suggested by others, the second language status of English applies at the individual rather than societal level and that only some assume bicultural identities (Arnett, 2002). This was the case for the two brothers, Mario and Lance, who had very positive emotions towards English and used the language as much or more than Danish for their everyday socializing and access to a global world. However, the study also showed that to some, English is a foreign language and a difficult one too, causing many frustrations and less positive emotions. The study thus highlights a very real need to prioritize differentiation in the English-language classroom.

7. Implications

Given the identified range of learner/user profiles (see also Sylvén, 2022), it is essential – albeit not an easy task - to ensure that the educational needs of all children are met in the classroom. Firstly, this means acknowledging that student identities related to English are complex and varied. Connected to this, it seems key that teachers seek to uncover their students’ perceptions of English (emotional and cognitive) to assist them in differentiating their approach to teaching English. As stated by Ross and Rivers (2018): “in order to better understand the complexities of the emotional experiences of language learners, it is necessary to more fully engage with the lived experiences of language learners beyond the classroom” (p. 104). This study

highlights a real need to not only engage with positive experiences with EE but also with lack of experiences and, not least, the emotional consequences hereof. In fact, the reciprocal nature between perceptions, emotions and identities and their concomitant effect on the affordances for language learning, as also demonstrated in this study, renders knowledge of all learner experiences pertinent. It is through such knowledge that fruitful differentiation is made possible. Much more emic research on children's perspectives of English is needed.

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