

## **Teaching strategies and materials in foreign language teaching in Finland: Focus on basic and upper secondary education**

**Toni Mäkipää**

University of Helsinki

[toni.makipaa@helsinki.fi](mailto:toni.makipaa@helsinki.fi)

**Kaisa Hahl**

University of Helsinki

[kaisa.hahl@helsinki.fi](mailto:kaisa.hahl@helsinki.fi)

**Milla Luodonpää-Manni**

University of Helsinki

[milla.luodonpaa-manni@helsinki.fi](mailto:milla.luodonpaa-manni@helsinki.fi)

**Laura Lahti**

Tampere University

[laura.lahti@tuni.fi](mailto:laura.lahti@tuni.fi)

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to investigate what teaching strategies and materials are used in foreign language education in Finland. The data were collected with an online questionnaire that was answered by 550 language teachers from primary school to adult education. Descriptive statistics and two-way ANOVA were used to analyse the dataset. The results showed that printed textbooks, mechanical exercises, communicative tasks, and comprehension exercises were widely used in foreign language education, while fiction, non-fiction, and national and international collaboration were rarely implemented into teaching. Major differences in the use of teaching strategies and materials were detected across educational levels. The results imply that training about more multifaceted teaching methods for teachers and student teachers is required, and greater attention should be given to diversifying foreign language teaching materials. Providing higher-quality ready-made materials for teachers and considering the effect of the

matriculation examination on teaching strategies and materials are also essential implications of this study.

**Keywords:** *foreign language teaching, teaching strategies, teaching materials*

## **Introduction**

For decades, Finland has been committed to promoting high-quality language education (Kantelinen & Hilden, 2016). In practice, this alludes to the interconnectedness of reflection, social interaction, and personal experience that form meaningful learning (Kantelinen & Hilden, 2016). This constitutes the cornerstone of Finnish language education (Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE), 2020a; Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE), 2016). In terms of language choices, every student needs to study two languages in Finland in addition to their mother tongue: the second national language (primarily Swedish for Finnish speakers), and one foreign language. Students customarily study English as a foreign language, and the number of students studying other languages has decreased over the years (Pyykkö, 2017; Vaarala et al., 2021).

The number of large-scale studies of teaching strategies and materials in foreign and second language education in Finland is limited. However, some studies have been conducted. Research studying basic and upper secondary education shows that language teachers use textbooks to a great extent (Harjanne et al., 2015), and that language teachers can be divided into two groups: those who favour communicative tasks and those who favour non-communicative tasks (Harjanne et al., 2015; Harjanne et al., 2017). In terms of challenges, language teachers rely on the mother tongue extensively, and meaningful communicative tasks are not frequently employed (Harjanne et al., 2017). In addition, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) has assessed students' language proficiency in several languages. The most recent assessments focused on ninth graders' English proficiency (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022) and Swedish proficiency (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2023). Alongside students' language skills, FINEEC surveyed their perceptions of language teaching. Based on the results, textbooks are widely used (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022, 2023), and the teaching strategies should be diversified, particularly regarding students' courage to speak (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022) and students' writing skills (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2023).

The dataset for Harjanne and colleagues' studies was collected in 2010. After their data collection, the national core curricula for basic education (grades 1–9) and upper secondary

education have been revised, and digital textbooks and materials have become more widespread in Finnish education. Therefore, it is of paramount importance, first, to explore how foreign languages are taught after these updates in Finland, and second, to compare how teaching materials and strategies have evolved in the decade. Even though FINEEC has assessed learning outcomes in foreign languages, they have primarily focused on ninth graders. Consequently, more research on foreign language teaching is required at all educational levels in Finland. Moreover, a recent study surveying learners and teachers in England and in Finland showed that disengaging tasks and activities in language learning, such as irrelevant and uninteresting teaching materials, do not support engagement in language learning (Teravainen-Goff, 2022). Therefore, it is of interest to examine language teachers' teaching practices more closely in Finland. In other words, the aim of this paper is to examine what teaching materials and teaching strategies foreign language teachers in Finland employ.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Communicative language teaching***

Language teaching has undergone a profound paradigm change from teaching language as a system to teaching language for communication, thinking, and socialisation. This change reflects the changes in the theories of language and language learning. For example, language can be seen as a system, discourse, or ideology (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Earlier in the 20th century, language learning focused on a system of learning grammatical competence and mechanical habits taught by a teacher, but from the 1980s onwards, language learning is considered to take place in interaction and through collaborative creation and negotiation of meaning between the learner and other users of the language (Richards, 2006). Thus, the role of language in meaning-making is emphasised, and language learners are seen as language users and social agents (Council of Europe, 2001, 2020). The ideal is a plurilingual individual who can use their whole linguistic repertoire to enable communication in various situations, even beyond language or cultural barriers through mediation (Council of Europe, 2020). As for language learning, according to the ecological approach, language is learned in a dialogical and functional way, in interaction between the individual and their environment everywhere in society, considering all elements of an ecosystem (such as a classroom), and not just as a cognitive process in one's head (van Lier, 2004, 2010; Salo, 2009).

To react to these various concepts of language and language learning, several methods of language teaching have been used. Hall (2016) presents a listing of competing language teaching methods in the 20th century as described in selected handbooks of language teaching. Some of these methods focused strictly on a specific competence or on an approach. For instance, the grammar-translation method highlighted the teaching of grammatical competence with a focus on memorising different forms and words and their translations into the language of schooling in written form, with no regard to using the language in real communication situations. The direct method, on the other hand, emphasised only speaking in the target language with no focus on isolated sentences, word lists, or translations into the language of schooling (Hall, 2016). However, language teaching now often follows post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Hall, 2016). We are in a post-method era, where instead of learning exclusively based on one method, the prime principles are the teacher's autonomy and their understanding of their context and the ability to combine their own practice and theories and to consider the teacher's and the learner's personal identities (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Hall, 2016).

The development of the models of language proficiency towards communicative competence in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980) still has a great influence on language teaching today. According to Kantelinen and Hilden (2016), communicative language teaching and its modifications are the most common approaches in language classrooms, including in Finland. Communicative language teaching sets communicative competence, and fluent and appropriate use of language in meaningful communication as its goal. Classroom strategies consist of “meaningful interpersonal exchange” (Richards, 2006, p. 22) with relevant and engaging content and discovery learning, and the role of the teacher is as a facilitator who provides opportunities for practising and reflecting on the language in interaction with others in meaningful and authentic situations.

In addition to the demands of communicative language teaching and the national core curricula, assessment affects teaching, which is called washback (Green, 2013). Basically, washback refers to the influence of assessment on teaching strategies and materials (Green, 2013). Although high-stakes assessment is not prevalent in basic education in Finland, upper secondary education ends with the matriculation examination that is a standardised high-stakes assessment. The tests are important for students as they use the grades of the tests to apply for higher education.

As the language tests in the matriculation examination do not include speaking exercises, it is probable that upper-secondary teachers focus on other skills in language courses. However, discussions on implementing speaking exercises into the test are in progress (Hilden et al., 2023). Therefore, it can be speculated that the washback effect in Finnish education is the highest in upper secondary education.

### *Language teaching in Finland*

In Finnish basic education (grades 1–9), the language programme consists of compulsory and optional syllabuses. All students are required to study at least two languages, the second national language, Finnish or Swedish, and one foreign language (usually English) in addition to their mother tongue. The local education provider may also decide to offer optional languages as school subjects. The most popular optional foreign languages are German, Spanish and French. However, choosing optional languages has been on the decline since the mid-1990s (Education Statistics Finland, 2023). Not all schools even offer optional languages in basic education or they have minimum group requirements that are so high that groups are not realised.

In upper secondary education, the language programme includes two compulsory language syllabuses that started in basic education. In addition, optional languages must be offered in at least two languages. Language choices in upper secondary education have, however, become increasingly one-sided in recent years. An increasing number of students only study the two compulsory languages in addition to their mother tongue and virtually all students study English as their first foreign language (Education Statistics Finland, 2023). There are many reasons for not studying optional languages, including at least individual values, school structures, appreciation of languages in society, and a heavy workload in upper secondary education (Pollari et al., 2022). However, more diverse language education is supported by higher education and liberal adult education. Languages are actively learned in language centres of higher education and liberal adult education institutions where teaching is offered nationwide in dozens of languages.

As described above, the communicative approach is prevalent in language teaching and learning in Finland. Language teaching is currently referred to as language education that emphasises the socialisation of an individual to their community (e.g., Salo, 2009; Mustaparta et al., 2015). Task-based language teaching, which is based on communicative tradition, has especially been emphasised in Finnish language teacher education (Kantelinen & Hilden, 2016).

Nevertheless, textbooks and other materials attached to it, such as exercise books, have maintained their central role in language teaching and learning (e.g., Lähdesmäki, 2004; Luukka et al., 2008; Harjanne et al., 2015). Some recent findings suggest that teachers continue to use textbooks as their primary teaching materials (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022, 2023). Studying passages from the textbook as well as doing oral exercises and vocabulary tests provided in the associated materials were among the most popular classroom activities reported (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022, 2023). In addition, some digital material outside the textbook was also used in lessons (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022, 2023). Whereas a quality textbook may offer a solid framework for learning, their dominant role in Finnish foreign language education has also been criticised. Textbooks have been claimed to guide teaching and learning to the extent that they act as a hidden curriculum (Luukka et al., 2008). However, according to FINEEC's most recent assessments on ninth graders' English proficiency, students' knowledge was explained by the use of English *outside* the classroom rather than *inside* the classroom (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022). The students who reported using English for watching films, listening to music or playing games in their leisure time scored higher in interpretation and production skills than those who rarely used English outside the classroom (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022). The researchers concluded that teaching materials used in the foreign language classroom should be diversified and the opportunities offered by modern technology should be further exploited, for example, for practicing speaking skills (Härmälä & Marjanen, 2022).

### ***Language teacher education and competencies***

Teachers in Finland are highly educated. Specialised language teachers have a master's degree and, either as part of it or in addition to it, they have studied sufficiently the languages they are qualified to teach (120 ECTS in at least one language at the upper secondary level, 60 ECTS in other languages or at the basic education level), and they have completed teacher's pedagogical studies (60 ECTS). Schools usually open teaching positions with one to three languages and thus many teachers have more than one language in their qualifications. However, now it may be a class teacher who teaches languages at the primary level (Mård-Miettinen et al., 2021). According to their qualification (master's degree in education), class teachers can teach any subject in grades 1–6. Some may have studied a language as a minor. However, it has been only recently that language didactics have been added to class teacher education. Since 2016, when the teaching of

the second national language was lowered to grade 6, many class teachers have taught Swedish (Inha & Kähärä, 2018; Rossi et al., 2017). Since 2020, the first foreign language has started in grade 1, and it is often taught by class teachers as well. These changes have not always been welcomed by the specialised language teachers (e.g., *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*, 2023). Nevertheless, teachers in Finland work autonomously following the school-level curricula that is based on the national core curricula (FNAE, 2020a; FNBE, 2016). Teachers are trusted to make sound pedagogical decisions on their own, and they can choose the materials and strategies they use (Niemi et al., 2016).

Language teacher competence has been examined in many studies. There are different models for the competencies, and it is evident that they emphasise slightly different skill sets. Richards (2010, p. 101) considers the following ten dimensions to be at the core of expert teacher competence and performance in language teaching:

- language proficiency
- content knowledge
- teaching skills
- contextual knowledge
- language teacher identity
- learner-focused teaching
- specialised cognitive skills
- theorizing from practice
- joining a community of practice, and
- professionalism.

Hilden (2020) compiles language teacher competencies into a model that is divided into three parts: knowledge, skills, and beliefs. Many of the competencies (in total 24) can be considered important to any teacher (applied to a particular subject). These include, for example, knowledge about learning processes; knowledge about efficient use of teaching technologies; assessment literacy; commitment to further all students' learning; and reflection skills (Hilden, 2020, pp. 19–21). The knowledge and skills that are specifically related to a language teacher include the following in a concise form: a broad conception of text and understanding multiliteracy; linguistic knowledge of school's teaching language and target languages, and culture-appropriate

communication skills; pedagogical content knowledge; and knowledge of teaching approaches and material (Hilden, 2020, pp. 19–21). Due to various changes in societies and the world, including globalisation, migration, economic upheaval, changes in the workforce and labour markets, digitalisation, and artificial intelligence, the content and ways of teaching are changing. Therefore, as Hilden (2020) states, language teachers must be willing to renew their competencies. Teachers' belief system, which comprises attitudes, values and commitment, has an important role during times of change as it helps teachers to commit to their own life-long learning and to enhancing their students' skill and knowledge base, identity development, and growth into democratic citizens (Hilden, 2020).

However, research suggests that teachers' classroom practices are slow to change (Borg, 2018). The Finnish core curriculum for basic education states that language teaching should make plenty of space for joy, playfulness and creativity (FNBE, 2016). The Finnish core curriculum for upper secondary education guides teachers to provide students with meaningful learning experiences that include inquiry and problem-solving methods as well as various creative activities (FNAE, 2020a). Both core curricula highlight the need for using diverse types of text in teaching and learning and the development of multiliteracy. Students should also be offered opportunities for cooperation, networking and communication between students from different schools, even at the international level (FNAE, 2020a; FNBE, 2016). In recent years, language teachers have needed to develop new skills when teaching young children who cannot yet read and write. Instead of using textbooks, they have employed movement, songs, and, for example, dance to engage children with student-centred pedagogy (Hahl et al., 2020; Korpinen & Anttila, 2022). In teaching grades 1–2, the curricular guidelines emphasise the practice of oral skills and multifaceted interaction, and the inclusion of playfulness, music, drama, games, movement and the use of all senses (FNAE, 2020b). Teachers have also taken up various action-based activities to activate older language learners (Hahl & Keinänen, 2021). The Finnish core curricula emphasise the use of digital tools in education and thus teachers have had to improve their competence in digital pedagogy (FNAE, 2020a; FNBE, 2016).

Many researchers highlight the importance of language teachers' target language competence. Richards and his team (Richards et al., 2013, p. 237) have divided the components of teachers' language competence into the following seven parts:

- exploitation of target language resources
- provision of appropriate language models
- provision of corrective feedback
- use of the target language to manage the class
- provision of accurate explanations
- provision of rich language input, and
- the ability to improvise.

It is naturally necessary for a teacher to have a high level of foreign language competence to be able to use plenty of target language in the classroom. Many studies support the idea of the teacher using mostly the target language to maximise target language input for students and to encourage students to use it as well (Crichton, 2009; Enever, 2015). Extensive use of target language in lessons is also encouraged by the Finnish core curricula (FNAE, 2020a; FNBE, 2016). In this paper, we are interested in how teachers perceive their teaching practices by answering the following research questions: 1) What teaching strategies do Finnish foreign language teachers use? 2) What teaching materials do Finnish foreign language teachers use?

## **Methodology**

### ***Data collection***

To reach as many language teachers as possible, we created an online questionnaire and distributed it via several channels (Cohen et al., 2007). Language teachers were requested to respond to the questionnaire in spring 2022 through the mailing lists of member associations of the Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland (SUKOL), in various Facebook groups for language teachers, and through our personal connections. The online questionnaire was open for about two months, and in total 671 responses were received. However, a portion of them were incomplete. We were able to use those responses that were at least 70% completed, which was 550. It was estimated that it took teachers 10–20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Perhaps some teachers had not fully completed the questionnaire because they had not had time for it during a recess, for example. As teachers responded to the questionnaire voluntarily, the data do not represent all Finnish teachers (Cohen et al., 2007).

The questionnaire started with a section with background questions (gender, age, teacher qualifications, and education, province of teaching, languages taught, years, and school levels of teaching). The following six sections contained multiple-choice questions in a matrix form. These dealt with materials, strategies, activities (two matrixes), the roles of teachers and students, and language awareness and diversity. The final section had one open-ended question and an opportunity to leave contact information for a later voluntary interview. In this study, we used the data from the background section and the matrixes dealing with materials and strategies. The data did not contain any personal information, and thus, the results, too, are anonymous and cannot be linked to individual teachers. A Likert scale from one to five was used in the questionnaire (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=almost every lesson).

### *Participants*

The responses of 550 language teachers were analysed for this paper. In terms of gender, 506 (92%) were female, and 29 (5%) were male. One teacher was non-binary, and 14 (3%) did not disclose their gender. However, it was expected that most participants would be female as most language teachers in Finland are female (FNAE, 2019). Moreover, a clear majority of the teachers (n=527, 96%) were qualified (master's thesis, subject teacher education, and education in the foreign language). The most common languages taught were English (n=375, 68%), Swedish (n=356, 65%), German (n=139, 25%), French (n=91, 17%), and Spanish (n=58, 11%). Regarding age, teaching experience, and the school level of the teachers, the information is illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Age, teaching experience, and school level of the teachers*

<b>Age</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Teaching experi- ence</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>School level</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
under 30	30	6	under 2 years	21	4	primary	245	45
30–39	110	20	2–5 years	66	12	lower secondary	278	51
40–49	200	36	6–10 years	60	11	upper secondary	193	35
50–59	177	32	11–20 years	186	34	vocational education	21	4
60–	33	6	over 20 years	217	39	adult education	63	11

As shown in Table 1, most teachers were 40–59 years old, worked at primary or lower secondary levels, and were experienced (over 10 years). Many teachers also worked at several levels simultaneously. Before answering the questionnaire, the teachers selected one educational level based on which they answered the questions. These were: primary school (n=124, 22%), lower secondary (n=224, 41%), upper secondary (n=150, 27%), vocational (n=15, 3%), and adult education (n=37, 7%). In other words, the responses of the study reflect particularly the teaching strategies and materials used in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools.

All the teachers participated in the study voluntarily, and their anonymity was considered at all stages of the study. Following the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation, a detailed privacy notice was made available to the participants.

### *Data analysis*

The data for RQ1 (what teaching strategies language teachers use) consists of 33 statements, and the data for RQ2 (what teaching materials language teachers use) includes 15 typical teaching materials in foreign language teaching. The items of the questionnaire are based on the national core curricula (FNAE, 2020a; FNBE, 2016) and prior research (Harjanne et al., 2015; Harjanne et al., 2017). The items reflect the guidelines of the national core curricula and the main results of prior research. Given that the pedagogy of language teaching differs between the educational levels, and the amount of teaching experience affects the choices and decisions teachers make (Ukkola & Metsämuuronen, 2023), we compared whether differences in the use of teaching strategies and materials would be detected across educational levels and teaching experience. To investigate the effect of educational level and teaching experience, a two-way ANOVA was employed. The main effects of the two independent variables were examined, as well as their interaction (Toprak, 2019). Moreover, descriptive statistics were also employed to summarise and describe the dataset (Toprak, 2019).

Due to the small number of participants, the teachers in vocational education and adult education were excluded from the comparison across educational levels. Regarding teaching experience, the teachers were divided into two groups: those whose teaching experience was 10 years or less, and those whose teaching experience exceeded 10 years. The division was based on a recent Finnish study that found that pupils who were taught by teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience had better learning outcomes, for example, when studying their mother

tongue and literature than pupils taught by teachers with less teaching experience (Ukkola & Metsämuuronen, 2023).

Factor analysis was used with the dataset of RQ1. However, it was not deemed suitable for RQ2 because we wanted to examine more closely the precise use of each type of teaching material. For example, reducing songs, videos, and news to authentic material would simplify the data too much.

Regarding RQ1, factor analysis with Maximum Likelihood rotation was conducted. To investigate whether the sample was factorable, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity were explored. KMO was .86, and Bartlett's test was significant ( $\chi^2(465) = 7455.523$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Correlations across items and communalities were also investigated to ensure that factor analysis was appropriate.

When items with simultaneous loadings were excluded, the factor analysis yielded a seven-factor solution, explaining 62% of the variance. Background information on the factors is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Background information on the factors*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Eigen- value</b>	<b>% of variance</b>	<b>Cumula- tive %</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>	<b>Number of items</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
1. digital platforms and exercises	7.272	23.459	23.459	.79	7	3.01	0.69
2. mechanical exercises	3.694	11.917	35.375	.84	3	3.82	0.81
3. comprehension exercises	2.952	9.522	44.897	.80	2	3.78	0.71
4. movement exercises	1.844	5.950	50.857	.84	5	2.45	0.77
5. communicative tasks	1.327	4.280	55.126	.78	6	3.64	0.53
6. inductive grammar exercises	1.142	3.683	58.809	.72	3	3.28	0.70
7. national and international collaboration	1.004	3.239	62.048	.60	2	1.46	0.64

Note: M = mean, S.D. = standard deviation

As indicated in Table 2, all the Eigenvalues were greater than 1. Furthermore, the alpha values were at least .60, which is the recommended value. An example of an item from the questionnaire in each factor is provided below:

1. Digital platforms and exercises: We use a learning platform (for example Moodle, Google Classroom, Teams) (M=3.35., S.D.=1.24).
2. Mechanical exercises: Students do mechanical vocabulary exercises (for example, fill in the gap or linking exercises) (M=3.75, S.D.=0.93).
3. Comprehension exercises: We do reading comprehension exercises (M=3.63, S.D.=0.78).
4. Movement exercises: We use exercises that include movement (M=2.63, S.D.=1.05).
5. Communicative tasks: Students practice grammatical structures in communicative tasks (M=3.73, S.D.=0.84).
6. Inductive grammar exercises: Students discover grammar rules from the text (for example, from a text in the textbook) (M=3.06, S.D.=0.94).
7. National and international collaboration: Students collaborate with other schools in Finland (M=1.31, S.D.= 0.63).

## Results

The results will be reported in the order of the research questions. First, the results concerning teachers' teaching strategies will be shown. Second, the results regarding teachers' teaching materials will be explored.

### *Teaching strategies in foreign language teaching*

The aim of the first research question was to investigate what teaching strategies language teachers use. The results are illustrated in Table 3 (and Table 2 in Methodology). As Tables 2 and 3 depict, the teachers primarily employed mechanical and communicative exercises, as well as exercises for listening and reading comprehension. However, the amount of national and international collaboration in teaching was low.

A two-way ANOVA was performed to analyse the effect of educational level and teaching experience on the use of teaching strategies. No significant interaction between the level of education and teaching experience was found. The results regarding the educational level are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3***Use of teaching strategies across the educational levels*

	Primary		Lower secondary		Upper secondary		df	F	$\eta^2$
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.			
1. mechanical exercises	3.49	0.93	3.96	0.61	4.14	0.64	2	29.618**	.11
2. comprehension exercises	3.74	0.77	3.75	0.59	3.98	0.64	2	7.003*	.03
3. communicative tasks	3.56	0.61	3.60	0.45	3.71	0.48	2	3.499*	.01
4. inductive grammar exercises	3.29	0.77	3.33	0.61	3.23	0.69	2	.902	.00
5. digital platforms and exercises	2.67	0.67	2.89	0.58	3.47	0.58	2	67.896**	.22
6. movement exercises	3.12	0.71	2.46	0.63	2.01	0.60	2	101.787**	.29
7. national and international collaboration	1.50	0.62	1.44	0.61	1.52	0.67	2	.835	.00

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2$  = partial eta squared

Table 3 provides an overview of the differences across educational levels. The use of comprehension exercises was the most common type of teaching strategy in primary schools, while mechanical exercises were the most common type in lower secondary and upper secondary schools.

Statistically significant differences were found in five items. Tukey's post hoc tests revealed that mechanical exercises were more typical in lower secondary and upper secondary schools than in primary schools. They were also more typical in upper secondary schools than in lower secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ). Exercises about listening and reading comprehension were employed more in upper secondary schools than primary schools ( $p < .005$ ), as well as in upper secondary schools than

in lower secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ). Regarding communicative tasks, they were more typical in upper secondary schools than primary schools ( $p < .05$ ). Digital platforms and exercises were used more in lower secondary schools ( $p < .005$ ) and upper secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ) than in primary schools. Similarly, digital platforms and exercises were more widespread in upper secondary education than in lower secondary education ( $p < .001$ ). In contrast, movement exercises were employed more in primary schools than in lower secondary and upper secondary schools, as well as in lower secondary schools than in upper secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ).

The results regarding the relationship between teaching experience and teaching strategies are displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Use of teaching strategies between teachers of different experience*

	Less experienced teachers		Experienced teachers		df	F	$\eta^2$
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.			
1. mechanical exercises	4.00	0.73	3.85	0.75	1	3.845	.01
2. comprehension exercises	3.86	0.71	3.80	0.65	1	.847	.00
3. communicative tasks	3.58	0.59	3.64	0.47	1	1.330	.00
4. inductive grammar exercises	3.30	0.74	3.28	0.66	1	.115	.00
5. digital platforms and exercises	2.94	0.70	3.03	0.67	1	1.993	.00
6. movement exercises	2.51	0.74	2.48	0.77	1	.152	.00
7. national and international collaboration	1.44	0.64	1.49	0.63	1	.758	.00

As shown in Table 4, both less experienced and experienced teachers employed mechanical exercises and communicative tasks, as well as exercises for listening and reading comprehension.

No statistically significant differences were detected although the difference in mechanical exercises was  $p=.050$ . With a larger dataset, the difference might have been significant.

### *Teaching materials in foreign language teaching*

The aim of the second research question was to examine what teaching materials foreign language teachers in Finland use. The results are displayed in Table 5. Due to the uneven distribution of males and females (29 and 506, respectively), the results have not been shown by gender. The materials are listed in order of prevalence.

**Table 5**

*Use of teaching materials in order of prevalence*

	<b>M</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
1. printed textbook	4.15	1.39
2. self-made material	3.79	0.94
3. digital games and apps	3.73	0.90
4. online teaching material	3.46	0.86
5. pictures	3.34	1.03
6. songs	3.22	0.94
7. videos	3.14	0.89
8. news	2.68	0.88
9. material produced in work community	2.51	1.14
10. online texts	2.51	0.91
11. digital books	2.46	1.75
12. movies	2.33	0.74
13. magazines	2.16	0.78
14. fiction	1.90	0.78
15. non-fiction	1.90	0.78

As Table 5 displays, the most common teaching materials in foreign language teaching were printed textbooks, self-made material and digital games and apps. In contrast, magazines, fiction and non-fiction were seldom implemented in teaching.

A two-way ANOVA was performed to analyse the effect of educational level and teaching experience on the use of teaching materials. Interaction was also considered in the analysis. The results regarding the educational level are displayed in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Use of teaching materials across the different educational levels.*

	Primary		Lower secondary		Upper secondary		df	F	$\eta^2$
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.			
1. printed textbook	4.65	0.94	4.79	0.70	3.25	1.55	2	101.243**	.29
2. self-made material	3.70	0.91	3.67	0.93	3.79	0.90	2	.755	.00
3. digital games and apps	3.66	0.85	3.88	0.87	3.62	0.90	2	4.981*	.02
4. online teaching material	3.57	0.87	3.43	0.83	3.29	0.83	2	3.648*	.01
5. pictures	3.67	1.01	3.25	0.97	3.19	1.00	2	9.564**	.04
6. songs	3.82	0.87	3.14	0.79	3.05	0.87	2	34.377**	.12
7. videos	3.09	0.93	3.01	0.80	3.27	0.90	2	4.258*	.02
8. news	2.06	0.77	2.71	0.77	2.97	0.79	2	50.060**	.17
9. material produced in work community	2.43	1.03	2.71	1.07	2.08	0.98	2	16.516**	.07
10. online texts	2.31	0.90	2.42	0.83	2.65	0.94	2	5.602*	.02
11. digital books	1.58	1.25	1.83	1.39	4.35	1.16	2	216.984**	.47
12. movies	2.34	0.67	2.54	0.63	2.21	0.75	2	10.919**	.04
13. magazines	2.05	0.73	2.17	0.74	2.12	0.81	2	1.036	.00
14. fiction	1.94	0.78	1.82	0.76	2.05	0.77	2	4.187	.02
15. non-fiction	1.90	0.73	1.85	0.75	1.87	0.74	2	.228	.00

From the data in Table 6, it is apparent that statistically significant differences were detected in 11 variables. Partial eta squared showed large effect sizes in both printed and digital textbooks as well as in material produced in work community, songs, and news. In other words, substantial differences in the use of teaching materials were found across educational levels. In primary schools, teachers mostly used printed textbooks, songs, pictures, and digital programmes. In lower secondary schools, the most common teaching materials were printed textbooks, digital programmes, self-made material, and online material. At the upper secondary level, the teachers primarily used digital textbooks, self-made material, digital programmes, and online material.

Tukey's post hoc tests showed that printed textbooks and digital books were used more in primary and lower secondary schools than in upper secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ). Digital games and apps were used more in lower secondary schools than upper secondary schools ( $p < .05$ ). Moreover, online teaching material was more commonly used in primary schools than upper secondary schools ( $p < .05$ ). In terms of songs and pictures, they were more common in primary schools than lower secondary and upper secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ). Videos were used more often in upper secondary than lower secondary schools ( $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, news was used more in upper secondary schools than primary or lower secondary schools as well as more in lower secondary than primary schools ( $p < .001$ ). Likewise, material produced in the work community was a more common teaching material in primary ( $p < .05$ ) and lower secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ) than upper secondary schools. Material produced in the work community was also more used in lower secondary schools than primary schools ( $p < .05$ ). Online texts were more common in upper secondary schools than primary ( $p < .001$ ) and lower secondary schools ( $p < .05$ ). Lastly, movies were more common in lower secondary schools than primary ( $p < .05$ ) and upper secondary schools ( $p < .001$ ).

The results regarding the relationship between teaching experience and teaching materials are displayed in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Use of teaching materials between teachers of different experience*

	Less experienced teachers		Experienced teachers				
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	df	F	$\eta^2$
1. printed textbook	4.40	1.20	4.25	1.31	1	1.252	.00
2. self-made material	3.48	0.96	3.80	0.89	1	12.343**	.02
3. digital games and apps	3.85	0.78	3.71	0.91	1	2.435	.01
4. online teaching material	3.38	0.88	3.44	0.83	1	.465	.00
5. pictures	3.27	1.00	3.37	1.01	1	.865	.00
6. songs	3.19	0.89	3.32	0.89	1	1.897	.00
7. videos	3.13	0.88	3.10	0.87	1	.115	.00
8. news	2.50	0.93	2.68	0.81	1	4.469*	.01
9. material produced in work community	2.53	1.06	2.42	1.07	1	.991	.00
10. online texts	2.40	0.85	2.49	0.91	1	.878	.00
11. digital books	2.47	1.76	2.54	1.76	1	.177	.00
12. movies	2.29	0.71	2.42	0.68	1	3.558	.01
13. magazines	1.99	0.81	2.17	0.73	1	5.847*	.01
14. fiction	1.87	0.81	1.94	0.76	1	.854	.00
15. non-fiction	1.86	0.74	1.88	0.75	1	.065	.00

As shown in Table 7, both less experienced and experienced teachers used mainly printed textbooks, self-made materials, and digital programmes. Statistically significant differences were found in three items. Experienced teachers used more self-made materials, news, and magazines than less-experienced teachers.

A two-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant interaction between the effects of educational level and teaching experience in self-made material ( $F(2, 493) = 4.581$ ,  $p < .05$ ), fiction ( $F(2, 493) = 4.642$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and song ( $F(2, 493) = 5.446$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Simple main effects analysis showed that 1) less-experienced teachers used less self-produced material in primary and lower secondary schools ( $p < .05$ ), 2) less-experienced teachers used more fiction in upper secondary schools ( $p < .05$ ), and 3) less-experienced teachers used more songs in primary schools ( $p < .001$ ).

To summarise, the main results of this paper show that: 1) language teachers primarily used printed textbooks, self-made materials, and digital programmes, 2) non-fiction, fiction, magazines, and (inter)national collaboration were rarely implemented into teaching, 3) mechanical exercises, comprehension exercises and communicative tasks were the most typical forms of teaching strategies, 4) teaching strategies and teaching materials heavily depended on the educational level of students, and 5) the influence of teachers' teaching experience on the materials and strategies they use was minor.

## **Discussion**

This quantitative study has examined the teaching strategies and materials used by language teachers in Finland. Data were collected from 550 teachers with an online questionnaire, and various statistical tests were employed to find answers to two research questions about the teaching strategies and materials that foreign language teachers in Finland use. Also investigated was whether there are differences in the results between teachers working at different educational levels or teachers with less teaching experience (up to 10 years) or more teaching experience (over 10 years). In answer to the first research question, both mechanical exercises and communicative tasks (including listening and reading comprehension exercises) were commonly used by teachers. This corroborates the findings of a study by Harjanne and colleagues in the 2010s (Harjanne et al., 2015) stating that both communicative and mechanical (non-communicative) exercises were used by Finnish language teachers. What is different compared to the previous research is that in the present study, the use of mechanical exercises was slightly more popular

than the use of communicative exercises in general. However, the preference for certain teaching strategies depends on the educational level of the students. At the primary level, the use of communicative tasks and listening and reading comprehension exercises were more common than the use of mechanical exercises. Use of movement was also much more common at the primary level than the other school levels.

Regarding the second research question, printed textbooks were the most common choice for materials at both primary and lower secondary education. While song was the second most common teaching material used at the primary level, it was followed closely by self-made material, pictures, and digital programmes. Digital books were the most common at the upper secondary level. Digital programmes and self-made materials were popular at lower and upper secondary levels as well. In comparison to materials used in foreign language teaching in Finland about a decade earlier, there has been a great change due to digitalisation and the increase of the use of digital programmes and digital books (Harjanne et al., 2015). On the other hand, the use of printed textbooks and self-made material has stayed popular (Harjanne et al., 2015). The popularity of the use of song (and the use of movement as part of a teaching strategy) at the primary level may be related to the lowering of the first foreign language syllabus (A1 language) to grade 1 in 2020 instead of the previous grade 3. In grades 1 and 2, the students are still acquiring basic reading and writing skills in their mother tongue and therefore their foreign language education relies heavily on the oral mode (FNAE, 2020b). Furthermore, a two-way ANOVA revealed that less-experienced teachers used more songs at the primary level. Along with the earlier start of the foreign language teaching, it may now be a class teacher teaching the foreign language in the first grades, which is a change from before. It is still too early to evaluate the effects of lowering the first foreign language to grade 1 on language teaching strategies in general. However, it is possible that if the preference for the oral mode along with the use of song and movement are found to be effective and engaging language teaching strategies in the first two grades, they may gain in popularity at other levels as well (Hahl & Keinänen, 2021).

Finnish language teacher education and the core curricula have for decades supported the adoption of communicative language teaching (Kantelinen & Hilden, 2016). The results of this study show that communicative tasks are among the most popular, but traditional language teaching strategies, such as mechanical exercises and the use of either printed or digital textbooks

still hold their ground especially in lower and upper secondary education. This challenges the goal of meaningful and authentic situations in language learning (Richards, 2006). However, as language competence can be seen as a complex, dynamic and holistic construct (e.g., The Douglas Fir Group, 2016), different types of activities are needed in foreign language learning contexts and depending on other factors such as a learner's language proficiency level (see, e.g., Ellis, 2016). Thus, language learners can benefit from both explicit instruction, including a more controlled practice of linguistic forms (cf. mechanical exercises), and meaningful communicative activities (Ellis, 2016). The core curricula (FNAE, 2020a; FNBE, 2016) also encourage offering students an opportunity for authentic language use in international contexts, but our results show that collaboration with international (and national) partners is rare.

The reasons for using mechanical exercises side by side with more communicative tasks should be investigated in a separate study. However, they may be related to the conflicting demands of foreign language education in Finland: on the one hand, the ideals of communicativeness and authenticity are supported by the national core curricula (FNAE, 2020a; FNBE, 2016), and on the other hand, the traditions of language teaching are slowly changing (Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Hall, 2016), maintained by high-stakes assessment (the matriculation examination) at the end of upper secondary education. Teachers' preferences for mechanical exercises may be related to their desire to secure the competence of their students in the matriculation examination which still relies on mechanical exercises, such as gap filling tests, although more communicative tasks have appeared during the past decade (Hilden et al., 2023). Succeeding in these tests is important because students are awarded points from the matriculation examination grades when they are applying to higher education institutions. Nevertheless, we know that students in upper-secondary level education find language learning burdensome and are dropping language courses (Pollari et al., 2022). It is worth asking if this would be the place to rethink language education to increase motivation in language learning.

Another reason for favouring the use of mechanical exercises may be that traditional teaching approaches are trusted to give better learning outcomes at least with less proficient learners. Communicative language teaching emphasising abundant input in the target language and reflection on its structures and regularities may be challenging, especially for learners with special needs. It has been suggested that for these learners, explicit explanations and controlled activities

are more efficient than the grammatical inferring and free production activities often used in communicative language teaching (Kormos & Smith, 2012, see also Nijakowska, 2008). Therefore, using mechanical exercises side by side with more communicative tasks might be related to the desire to meet the needs of different learners. In addition, prior research has shown that mechanical exercises are more common than communicative activities in foreign language textbooks (e.g. Ellis, 2002; Fernández, 2011). Given that printed and electronic textbooks were the most common choice for materials among language teachers, it is important that textbooks include enough activities encouraging communicative and authentic use of language. In addition, using movement in language teaching has been considered effective by teachers in other studies (e.g. Hahl & Keinänen, 2021; Korpela & Anttila, 2022) and in the results of this study it was more popular in the lower grades than in the higher grades.

To conclude, the findings indicate that language teachers in Finland use a range of teaching strategies and materials, but textbooks and mechanical exercises still seem to be the most common practices. This is problematic from the perspective of engagement as mechanical exercises are not necessarily as engaging as communicative tasks. Therefore, the abundant use of mechanical exercises might disengage students (Teravainen-Goff, 2022). To reach the ideals of communicativeness and authenticity supported by the national core curricula, it is therefore important to continue developing teaching materials (textbooks) and the matriculation examination towards a more meaningful learning and testing of communicative skills. An important step towards this would be including an oral proficiency test in the matriculation examination that has been worked on for years (Hilden et al., 2023). Furthermore, the results of this study indicate a clear need for developing teaching strategies and materials. For example, movement was rarely used in lower secondary and upper secondary education, while non-fiction, fiction and (inter)national collaboration were scarcely used at all levels of education. Thus, it is essential to provide in-service training for language teachers to become familiar with these strategies and materials that have not yet gained popularity in teaching. It would also be important to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate and share their experiences during the workdays. The implications of this study should also be considered in teacher education so that future teachers would be better equipped with a more diverse selection of methods and an understanding of the need for a balance between communicative activities and mechanical exercises (Ellis, 2016).

### Limitations and future research

Although this study has successfully demonstrated that several noteworthy differences can be detected in the use of teaching strategies and materials in foreign language education in Finland as reported by the teachers' themselves, certain limitations need to be acknowledged. Despite the large dataset, the gender distribution was skewed as 92% of the participants were female. However, the majority of teachers in Finland are female, so their proportion in responses can also be expected. Moreover, the participants do not nationally represent all teachers in Finland. The participants were also experienced teachers, working primarily in basic education and upper secondary education. In other words, the perspectives of male teachers, novice teachers, and teachers in vocational and adult education were scarcely considered in the results. Furthermore, as the data collection was executed online, it may have hindered some teachers from participating.

To develop a better understanding of the status quo of foreign language teaching, more research is required. As this study relies on teachers' self-reported practices, subsequent studies should use observations to pinpoint how teachers actually teach in the classroom. Studies with more advanced quantitative methods will also allow for a detailed mapping of teacher profiles and background factors that explain the use of strategies and materials. The opportunities provided by remote teaching in the post-pandemic era also provide interesting areas for future research in terms of foreign language teaching.

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