

**“We Need to Be Gracious to Ourselves, We Need to Be Gracious to the Students”:
English Teachers’ Experiences and Opinions about Distance Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Finland**

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MA Thesis

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This MA thesis examines English teachers’ dynamical opinions and experiences about distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland. Distance teaching in general has been a research subject for a long time, but during and after COVID-19, the studies about the topic have multiplied. However, the dynamic, possibly changed experiences and opinions of teachers have been missing. Previous studies have also usually concentrated on higher education, and in this thesis, the focus is on comprehensive school and upper secondary school teachers.

The main aim on the thesis is to find out how English teachers’ experiences and opinions about distance teaching have changed through all distance teaching periods from spring 2020 to autumn 2021. In addition to that, the focus is also on the themes of positive and negative sides of distance teaching, the usage of time during distance teaching and its planning, ICT and support gotten for distance teaching, distance teaching working methods, test arrangements and grading and also learner differences in distance teaching. The theoretical background of the thesis consists of distance teaching and its description, differences between distance teaching and contact teaching and distance language teaching in particular. It also includes previous studies about distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and discussion about the technological and digital aspects of distance teaching.

The material for this thesis was collected by seven English teachers’ interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, and they covered the themes which the focus of this study is on. After the interviews, the material was analyzed qualitatively. The results of the thesis show that teachers’ experiences and opinions about distance teaching changed dynamically for the better. The teachers felt mostly insecure about their own ICT skills in the beginning of the first distance teaching period, but as the time passed, their skills got better and they learnt new technological and pedagogical things, and this changed their feelings about distance teaching to more positive. However, the teachers found more negative than positive things about distance teaching, and the biggest reason for that was that they were concerned about their students’ coping and well-being during distance teaching periods. The teachers also noticed major differences between different learners and their studying during distance teaching.

The most important finding of the study was that the teachers used more time when planning lessons and courses in distance teaching than in contact teaching, since this is not in line with previous study results about the topic. Also, the dynamic positive change of experiences and opinions is an important new finding since it has not been studied before. The limitations of this study have to do with the small number of participants. In the future, research could focus on learner differences in distance teaching or the pedagogical aspect of distance teaching.

Key words: the COVID-19 pandemic, distance teaching, English teaching

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1 Introduction

COVID-19 started its fast spreading all around the world in the beginning of 2020 (World Health Organization 2020). The disease reached Finland at the end of January 2020 (statista.com 2022), and in March 2020 the Finnish government decided on additional measures to address the outbreak of the virus. The government closed all schools in Finland, which led to distance teaching. The decision was made on 16th of March, and the school closure started on the 18th of March (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). This closure affected almost all students, and even though this was intended to be a shorter period, the schools were closed until mid-May when the movement towards contact teaching started gradually.

After this first nationwide school closure, Finnish Parliament accepted the government's proposal about a temporary change of Basic Education Act. This change was accepted as a part of the prevention of the spreading of COVID-19 in Finland. The temporary change included the section that the organizer of the teaching, which means the cities in Finland, could make the decision about the physical teaching arrangements. This temporary change in the Basic Education Act was active from the 1st of August to the 31st of December 2020 (finlex.fi 2020). Since this change was implemented, there were also some regional school closures and distance teaching periods during autumn 2020. There was also one government-decided three-week distance teaching period for all Finnish comprehensive school 7-9-graders and upper secondary school students in March 2021.

Distance teaching in general has been a research subject for almost a hundred years now (Black 2019, 3). Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, studies about distance teaching and its effects on teaching and learning have increased within the context of students and teachers staying safe and healthy. Studies and research have been conducted about many different aspects of distance teaching during COVID-19, for example about distance teaching and the factors influencing its adoption (Sangeeta and Tandon 2021), students' experiences about face-to-face versus distance teaching differences (Stone et al. 2021) and about digital pedagogy itself (Zhang and Yu 2021). There have also been some studies that concern teachers' experiences of distance teaching (Zhang 2020). Some studies have also been conducted in Finland, for example about primary school teachers' and also upper secondary school teachers' and students' experiences about distance teaching (Mankki 2021; Niemi and Kousa 2020).

Cynthia White (2003, 47) states that “[n]ew technologies, new learners, innovations in practice, and new ideas about access and quality provision all require new ways of thinking about approaches and practices within distance language learning. At the same time, they raise new challenges.” Previous studies have in fact revealed that using technology and ICT is found as one of the biggest issues the teachers have experienced during distance teaching (Zhang 2020, 44; Finnish National Agency for Education 2021, 34-36). Moreover, along with technology problems, the importance of interaction between the teacher and the students during distance teaching has repeatedly come up in previous study results (Mankki 2021, 7; Zhang 2020, 44). The teachers feel that interaction is hard to maintain during distance teaching (Niemi and Kousa 2020, 362; Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan 2020, 276). On the other hand, studies have also revealed that teachers find good aspects about distance teaching, for example learning new things (Bergdahl and Nouri 2020, 451).

I completed my teacher training during the academic year 2020-2021, and some of these distance teaching periods also affected my teacher studies and the lessons I held. Sometimes, when there had for example been a COVID-19 positive student in the class, we switched to distance teaching within a very short notice. With my experience about distance language teaching, I started to wonder whether English teachers had strong opinions about teaching the language remotely. In Finnish media, the ones that have been most heard about distance teaching and its impacts are usually students, and the teachers’ voices have not been heard, at least not that much. This is also why I wanted to study specifically teachers and their experiences about distance teaching. Language teaching differs from other subjects, since a big part of it is training pronouncing, speaking and interaction. I am interested in hearing English teachers’ experiences about the different aspects of language teaching from a distance.

The previous studies have usually been about experiences and opinions at that exact moment, and the dynamic aspect about the experiences has been missing. Therefore, I decided to take a dynamic aspect to my study, and hence, I am interested in how the teachers’ experiences about distance teaching changed through all the distance teaching periods that they were a part of. I am also interested in the things that happened in the teachers’ distance teaching classrooms and the teaching methods they used during distance teaching. In this study, I will concentrate on teachers that teach in Finnish comprehensive school or upper secondary school. My primary research question is:

- How did English teachers' opinions and experiences about distance teaching evolve from the first distance teaching period to the last distance teaching period?

I also have secondary research questions:

- What were the positive and negative things about distance teaching and what kinds of possible challenges did distance teaching cause?
- How did the teachers feel about using ICT during distance teaching?
- How did the teachers' distance teaching working methods and lesson activities change through all the distance teaching periods?
- Were there any major differences between different learners, and if yes, what were those?

The material for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews and the answers to the research questions were analyzed using qualitative methods. The interviewees were all qualified English teachers who had taught remotely in at least two different periods between spring 2020 and spring 2021.

This thesis proceeds in the following manner. In sections 2 and 3 I will go through the theoretical background of this thesis. The discussion will cover the topic of distance teaching, especially distance language teaching. In section 2, I will first discuss the differences between contact teaching and distance teaching, and there, my main focus is on the time usage differences between the two teaching situations. Then, after that, I will take a look at distance language teaching as a research subject. In section 3, the focus will be on previous studies about distance teaching, especially during and after COVID-19, and on the technological aspects of it. Next, in section 4, the methodology and material of this thesis are presented. The section introduces the participants, ethics interviews, and the material analysis of this study.

In section 5, the material gathered for the thesis with the interviews about English teachers' distance teaching experiences is discussed and analyzed in relation to the theoretical background. Section 5 includes five different subsections for which the material has been divided in different themes, and these themes are feelings and positive and negative sides of distance teaching, the time aspect of distance teaching, ICT and support in distance teaching, distance teaching working methods, test arrangements and grading and learner differences in distance teaching. The conclusions made from the material are discussed in section 6, and the

section also suggests future study topics for the theme. Lastly, section 6 is followed by references and appendices of the thesis.

2 Distance teaching

One key concept of teaching online, through computers or other devices, is *distance learning*. In their book about digital learning and its key concepts, Rennie and Smyth explain the term as following: “[in distance learning the] material, assessment and support is all delivered online, with no **face-to-face** contact between students and teachers” (Rennie and Smyth 2020, 157; emphasis as in the original). Furthermore, Rennie and Smyth also describe that “the term ‘face-to-face’ or simply ‘f2f’, has come to refer to meetings that take place in person (i.e. with the participants in the same room)” (Rennie and Smyth 2020, 67). In this thesis, I will be using the terms *distance learning* and *face-to-face* for the same purposes as Rennie and Smyth explain them to refer to. However, instead of using the term *distance learning* that much, I will use the term *distance teaching*, since I will talk mostly about the teacher point of view of the same matter. Sometimes I will replace the term *distance teaching* also with the terms *online teaching*, *teaching remotely* or *distance education* and the term *face-to-face* with the term *in-person* or *contact teaching* and still mean the exact same phenomena.

Furthermore, Minna Nummenmaa explains distance teaching as either the teacher, the students, or both the teacher and students are “at a distance” (Nummenmaa 2012, 21). Distance teaching includes the idea that if there is no possibility for traditional face-to-face contact teaching, the best way for conducting teaching will be found. Another idea included in distance teaching is that the quality of teaching should not be affected by the area the students live or go to school in (Nummenmaa 2012, 20).

2.1 Differences between in-person teaching and distance teaching

It would be assumed that there are differences in multiple areas of teaching whether the teaching happens in-person or online. This, especially the time used to plan distance teaching compared to the time used to plan contact teaching, is one of the aspects I will take a look at in this study. In their book about online teaching, Boettcher and Conrad (2016, 4) mention that getting the time to assist and teach online teaching is increasingly difficult, even though the demand for this kind of training is increasing all the time. They also address that teaching online differs from teaching face-to-face, and if a teacher is effective in a contact teaching environment, that might not be the case in online teaching. Also, redesigning courses from contact to online teaching might not be easy (ibid.).

According to Conrad and Donaldson and their book about engaging online learners, “[a]n effective online instructor determines appropriate communication strategies, manages time demands, defines her or his evolving role as an online instructor, and establishes a presence within the online classroom” (2012, 13). The interaction easily dries up during distance teaching since the students cannot be forced to keep their videos or microphones on. Hence, I want to find out if the participant teachers of my study have managed to come across this possible downside of talking to black screens during lessons. Furthermore, Conrad and Donaldson suggest that the teacher should also remind the students that when they are asked a question, an answer is expected (Conrad and Donaldson 2012, 33). Along with the actions in the classroom during lessons, the teacher also needs to set boundaries outside the online classroom. Conrad and Donaldson therefore suggest that the teachers should post the exact times that they are available. The students might feel that since the teaching happens online, the teacher is also always online and able to chat with the students at any time (ibid.).

There have been multiple studies that have concentrated on the time usage differences between in-person and distance teaching. Since these studies usually focus on higher-level education and are about the same course that has been held in-person and remotely, the differences between the organization in lower school levels have not been studied that much. That is one of the reasons I want to focus on the teachers who teach mostly younger, underaged students. For example, David DiBiase conducted a year-long time recording study in the United States for himself and his two teaching assistants who taught two similar courses together, one at a distance and the other face-to-face (DiBiase 2000, 6). The results of the study showed that even though it is assumed that distance teaching and its planning is more work than contact teaching, that was not the case. Nevertheless, the researchers suggested that when a distance course is considered to be more work, it usually results from the students needing more attention during the course (DiBiase 2000, 19).

Another similar study about differences between distance and contact teaching has also been conducted in the United States by Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd in 2004. They studied the time that the instructor (faculty) and altogether 43 teaching assistants spent on planning and teaching two comparable courses (Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd 2004, 103). The results of the time-and-task data collection study are similar to the ones by DiBiase: the results do not support the belief that teaching a contact teaching course takes less time than teaching a distance course (Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd 2004, 112). Both course types have their time-consuming aspects and the contact teaching course had more students participated in it

(Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd 2004, 109), but with the distance teaching course, the student enrollment took a lot of time (Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd 2004, 112). However, the topics of enrollment and many participants are not that relevant when it comes to comprehensive school or maybe even upper secondary school, which are the school levels on which I concentrate on this study.

2.2 Teaching languages remotely

In her book about learning languages in distance education, Cynthia White discusses that distance language teaching is not a new phenomenon, but the technologies behind distance teaching and learning are evolving all the time and that they reach more and more people all the time. The technological and also social changes in distance learning have resulted in new contexts, new ways of learning and new roles and responsibilities for the participants (2003, 1). According to White,

[I]anguage teaching methodologies have developed largely around the model of synchronous communication – that is, the teacher and the learner(s) working together in the same place, at the same time. This is because of the need to facilitate interaction, to provide feedback, to answer questions and to make adjustments that fit the needs of learners. (White 2003, 21)

White continues that some important limitations of distance learning context include reduced opportunities for immediate support, guidance, interactivity, feedback and incidental learning, and that learners need to manage themselves and the learning context (ibid.). These are also some themes that I am keen on finding more about in my study.

Distance language teacher needs to develop a knowledge base about distance language learners that can be used when planning the distance teaching course. The teacher needs knowledge on how to design the course and also how to deliver the course and its interactions (White 2003, 101). Along with contact teaching, the enthusiasm and support of the teacher are important for successful learning experiences in distance teaching, too (Conrad and Donaldson 2012, 6). The teacher also needs to create a supportive teaching presence, not only for the teacher-student interaction but also for the interaction among the students (Conrad and Donaldson 2012, 11).

Zhang (2020) held a questionnaire study for seven CFL (Chinese as Foreign Language) teachers and their experiences about distance teaching during COVID-19 in Denmark. Her findings support the previous arguments about successful learning experiences in distance

teaching, since she found out that the teachers were much concerned about the increasing difficulty of maintaining students' enthusiasm for learning the language remotely (Zhang 2020, 44). Zhang concludes that

[a]lthough teachers use functions of “hands-up”, “unmute microphone” and “turn-on video” [the ways of interaction in online teaching platforms, for example in *Microsoft Teams* or *Zoom*] frequently to motivate the students, what they really miss while teaching online is immediate contact, a sense of being present, instant feedback, and in-person response characterized in a face-to-face teaching setting. Direct eye-contact, an encouraging smile and a friendly nod does wonders for both teachers and students alike. These simple moments connect two individuals emotionally and adds to the experience of being human. [...] This is the authenticity of human interaction and the originality of language teaching and learning. (ibid.)

Additionally, Cynthia White argues that language teachers have developed strategies in their contact teaching classroom to prevent student boredom and lack of engagement, and the teachers need to develop these strategies to apply also with distance teaching. Flexibility and a shift in mindset are needed when teachers need to take the role of modeler and motivator also in distance teaching contexts. White also states that “[t]he ability to develop understanding of a new language learning context, the use of new mediums (e.g. course delivery tools), and new ways of learning and teaching is crucial” (White 2003, 68-69). In my study, I am interested in how teachers took on this role of motivator during distance teaching, since the role might sometimes be hard to maintain even in contact teaching.

Also, according to White, feedback plays a role as support in distance language learning. Feedback is not only a form of response to the students' performances, but also a means of providing support, encouragement, and motivation to continue learning. The elements of peers' responses and the teacher's monitoring and feedback are not so readily available in distance learning contexts, so students look to written feedback. Feedback is also an important part of the student-teacher relationship, since it contributes to how the learner sees the role of the teachers and indicates how the teacher is prepared to provide individual support (White 2003, 187-188). Feedback is of course a major part of learning and formative assessment in contact teaching too. During distance teaching teachers might feel giving feedback very heavy on top of their other possible workload. This may well be one reason for the possible lack of feedback and additionally also the lack for teacher-student personal interaction in distance teaching. On the other hand, during distance teaching, written feedback could have been given through many different channels that were used during school days, but, however, giving

written feedback does not directly improve the social interaction between the teacher and the students.

Supportively, Cynthia White also mentions (2003, 55) that maintaining sufficient learner contact and an ongoing interaction is a central issue in distance language learning. In contact teaching classrooms, language teachers and learners use different social, linguistic and context cues and understand and contribute to the dynamics in there. When the physical presence is absent, these cues that support interaction and the social and affective dimensions of learning are missing (ibid.). The teachers might find it hard to keep up the social interaction if they are the only ones that have their microphone and camera on during the distance teaching lessons. Still, the matter of interaction is important for the school days staying as normal as they can during the different physical circumstances.

Furthermore, White continues that ‘social presence’ is a key difference between language teaching and learning face-to-face or within a distance. Hence, the uncertainty about the larger social context may result in students’ reluctance to participate or to take risks, both of which are important for language learning (White 2003, 59-60). White’s arguments are supported by Allen, Omori, Cole and Burrell (2019), who explain that the level of communication is usually reduced in distance teaching, and it may become less personal and lack as many of the socially supportive elements usually found in face-to-face contact teaching. Hence, Allen et al. state that creating a way for socializing in distance teaching may represent the key for student satisfaction in it (Allen et al. 2019, 125). In this study, I will concentrate on teachers’ experiences and opinion about distance teaching, but it would be assumed that the teachers have an impression on how the students enjoyed and also experienced distance learning, and of course how their students managed to handle independent studying from home. I believe that in some way, these student experiences must have influenced teachers’ performances, too.

Integrating the pedagogical knowledge with the new online teaching environment might feel hard for the teachers and cause them much more work than regular contact teaching. On the other hand, some teachers might find distance language teaching more effective and less time-consuming for themselves, if the teachers are for example very skillful already or quick learners of new online platforms and software. This is also one thing I want to find out in this study, whether the teachers felt that their own workload changed during distance teaching.

This is a study topic also in the previously mentioned Zhang's study about CFL teachers in Denmark. Zhang explains her findings:

[i]n a face-to-face classroom, teaching, keeping students' attention, and guiding them through lessons takes constant effort and consumes plenty of time and energy out of teachers' daily tasks. The majority of participants find CFL can be taught efficiently online from the perspective of subject content knowledge, provided the teachers are given enough preparation time. The efficiency of an online classroom lies in taking advantage of pedagogical possibilities of online teaching, e.g., flexibility to cater for different learning styles, needs to motivate the students in many new ways. (Zhang 2020, 43)

Zhang also notes that the teacher plays the major role in deciding which teaching tasks should be adopted. Her findings suggest that the teachers prefer a teaching scenario similar to face-to-face teaching, despite the digital tools that could give new possibilities for teaching. Hence, Zhang suggests that in most of that kind of cases the teacher does not know how to integrate technology to teaching effectively (*ibid.*). Like previously mentioned, the technological aspect of distance teaching will be discussed further in section 3.2.

Murphy, Shelley, White and Baumann studied tutor and student perceptions about what makes a good distance language teacher, and their findings are in line with the ones of teachers by Zhang earlier in this section. In the findings of their mixed methods research (n=193), Murphy et al. explain that the students pointed out that "distance teaching requires greater skills in encouraging students and motivating them to continue, along with awareness of the difficulties which distance students face [...] in other words, empathy with the student learning experience" (Murphy et al. 2011, 410). During COVID-19 distance teaching, the topic of giving too much homework for the students arose in Finland. Homework is a common and major part of schoolwork in Finland, and during distance teaching, many teachers ended up giving too much homework for the tired students that had been sitting in front of their devices for the whole day already. Homework was found to be an easy way of keeping up the schoolwork, since it also might have been the only thing that felt "normal" during distance teaching.

Furthermore, the teachers need to have empathy towards their students during this kind of worldwide emergency situation as COVID-19 and distance teaching was by finding another way of schoolwork than giving loads of homework. This is also one topic I am keen on finding out in my study, whether the teachers noticed this issue of giving homework or not and if they managed to come across this possible issue. Furthermore, another topic that came

up in the study of Murphy et al. was the maxims of empowerment, openness, appropriateness, honesty and humility. These were considered the most important qualities for a language teacher in distance teaching by tutors and students (Murphy et al. 2011, 406). Murphy et al. conclude that “[i]t could be said that these maxims and the significant themes outlined above would be important in any area of distance education, not simply in distance language teaching” (ibid.).

3 Previous studies about distance teaching

As previously mentioned, the number of studies concerning the planning and implementation of distance teaching has increased during and after COVID-19 pandemic. In the following two subsections, I will first go through studies that concern teachers' (as well as students') experiences about distance teaching during the global pandemic and state of emergency. Then I will also take a look at the technological aspect of distance teaching, since even though using information and communication technology (ICT) during lessons can be a normality today, the usage of it this broadly might have become as a new thing for many teachers.

3.1 Studies about distance teaching during COVID-19

Niemi and Kousa (2020) conducted a mixed methods study for a total of 309 upper secondary school students and teachers in a school in Southern Finland about distance teaching during COVID-19 pandemic during four different distance teaching weeks in spring 2020. Niemi and Kousa's results showed that some teachers spent more time on planning their distance teaching lessons than their face-to-face lessons (Niemi and Kousa 2020, 360). The teachers did not face technical difficulties after the first few days, and the possible problems were solved quickly and did not cause any problems in the long run (Niemi and Kousa 2020, 362). Many teachers in the study were worried about the reliability of students' learning: whether the students really learnt the studied matters or not, and the outcomes of the situation where the students had not achieved the learning goals set for them. Teachers were also concerned if the students were to be trusted with the examinations done at home. Some teachers also mentioned that they needed new methods for assessments in distance teaching (Niemi and Kousa 2020, 361). The main challenge that the teachers experienced was interaction with students during distance teaching lessons (Niemi and Kousa 2020, 362).

Bergdahl and Nouri studied quantitatively 153 Swedish teachers and their experiences about distance teaching during the nationwide lockdown in Sweden during spring 2020. The results of their study revealed that teachers had almost no time to prepare for the transition from contact to distance teaching (Bergdahl and Nouri 2020, 451). This was presumably also the case with most teachers in Finland, too, since the decision about moving to the first nationwide distance teaching period came within about a two-day notice in March 2020.

To continue with Bergdahl and Nouri's results, some teachers had had allocated time to prepare for distance teaching with colleagues, but some teachers had felt left alone with their

distance teaching devices, without any support from anyone. Some teachers also told that their schools had had some strategies or policies for this kind of a situation, but these guidelines may have been outdated or insufficient for this kind of a pandemic outbreak (ibid.). Still, even though there had been difficulties with the start of the distance teaching, when the teachers had had to manage many new things at the same time, most of the teachers attending the study reported that their distance teaching lessons had gone surprisingly well (Bergdahl and Nouri 2020, 454). Teachers worked pragmatically with what they had and learnt new skills on the way (Bergdahl and Nouri 2020, 451). The challenges that the teachers mentioned in the study were mostly about technical difficulties, both with students and with teachers themselves (Bergdahl and Nouri 2020, 455).

Also, Norwegian teachers and their experiences about distance teaching during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic have been studied. Folkman, Josefsson and Fjetland conducted a questionnaire study that consisted of six open-ended questions for 186 teachers in a municipality in Western Norway in April 2020, during distance teaching period. Their research showed that the teachers pointed to the willingness to change and adaptability to the new situation. The teachers described the digitalization of the entire pedagogical framework for teaching as challenging but also providing new opportunities. The digitalization of the pedagogical framework was experienced as a tool that could be used in innovative ways during distance teaching (Folkman, Josefsson and Fjetland 2022, 6-7). The teachers that attended the study had felt that they needed to be constantly available for the students, but this was also experienced as an opportunity to collaborate closely with the colleagues. Hence, many teachers reported that they were available also for their colleagues 24/7, as well as their colleagues were to them (Folkman, Josefsson and Fjetland 2022, 8). This finding supports the argument by Conrad and Donaldson (2012, 33) introduced in section 2.1, which is that boundaries need to be set for the physical availability of teachers during distance teaching, and it should be done not only for students but for colleagues, too.

A similar study as the one in Norway was also conducted in Turkey in 2020 by Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan. They studied qualitatively both students' and teachers' opinions and experiences about distance teaching (n=36) by using structured interviews. In Turkey, distance teaching has been conducted via internet and television, and the lack of live broadcasting and stable internet connections was considered a problem (Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan 2020, 279). The lack of interaction between the teacher and the students was again considered the most frequent disadvantage of distance teaching (Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan

2020, 276). Some teachers also stated in the study that distance teaching could never be as effective as contact teaching, and the teachers that had this opinion were thought to be older teachers who had no previous experience of distance teaching or its technology (Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan 2020, 279). The research revealed that teachers still saw distance teaching more positively than students (Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan 2020, 278). The results also showed that the teachers considered the continuation of the education important, even though the education was temporarily conducted via distance teaching (Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan 2020, 275). The last result presented might feel like something taken for granted in modern Western civilization like Finland with broad Internet connections and schools that provide devices for their students, but that really is not the case in every part of the world that COVID-19 and distance teaching affected.

To continue with the same topic, Cristina Tunegaru conducted a mixed methods study for a total of 30 Romanian rural area teachers' experiences about distance teaching during COVID-19. Her findings tell that teachers experienced the first distance teaching period from May 2020 to June 2020 as full of enthusiasm, and that the students were keen on participating and sharing their knowledge with the teachers. The students also helped the teachers if there were something about the digital tools or connections that the teachers did not understand. However, the teachers' feelings about the support from school or the local community varied, since other teachers had felt abandoned and others had felt that they could have relied on their colleagues or the school principal (Tunegaru 2021, 112-113).

When it comes to teaching methods, some teachers transferred their traditional teaching activities, for example white boards and or computer graphic tables to distance teaching, while others were creative while trying to keep the students engaged and attentive. Interactive games were for example used as a new teaching method. As a conclusion, some teachers said that they will continue to use these new online teaching activities in traditional teaching, too (Tunegaru 2021, 113). Still, the teachers felt that the students' enthusiasm towards the online learning activities wore off quite quickly (Tunegaru 2021, 114). Hence, along with ways to keep up the interaction and social connection with the students, the teachers need to find and maintain efficient ways of keeping the students motivated and eager about schoolwork in a situation when there are very little or no physical stimulus during the school days and the students get distracted easily.

According to Christina De Simone, by 2006 much of the distance education literature focuses on the learner and learning, almost excluding the view of teacher and teaching (2006, 183). De Simone states that it is critical that the training of distance education teachers is expanded to incorporate issues such as defining the teacher's role in a virtual learning environment and building an interactive learning community (2006, 184). Darling-Hammond and Hyler share the same opinion as De Simone in their 2020 article about preparing teachers for COVID-19 and beyond. They state that there are many new skills that the teachers and school leaders need, for example how to engage productively in distance learning as well as *hybrid* [teaching happens in-person and at a distance at the same time, for example when some students are online and some in the classroom with the teacher] learning models (Darling-Hammond and Hyler 2020, 459).

Darling-Hammond and Hyler also suggest that educators in the field should make it possible to learn from one another, so that innovative practices could travel from one school or classroom to another (Darling-Hammond and Hyler 2020, 460). During COVID-19 pandemic, even if in-person teaching were an option, some teachers were unable to teach in-person because of their health conditions. School leaders needed to create new roles for these teachers, and these new roles as distance teachers with also the practices of distance teaching could apply to novice and experienced teachers but also to student-teachers in the future (Darling-Hammond and Hyler 2020, 461). After COVID-19, it is possible that not all teaching happens in-person even if there were the conditions to do that. This should be also considered in future teacher training in comprehensive school and upper secondary school, too.

Some studies that reveal differences between in-person and distance teaching, which have already been introduced in section 2.1, have also been conducted during or after the time of COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the topic of stress distance teaching causes to teachers (and, of course, also to students) has been on the table during the pandemic. It has been revealed that distance teaching has been stressful for teachers, altogether with the new teaching arrangements and also the global, scary situation with the new fast-spreading disease.

To mention one study about stress, Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke and Jungmann studied a total of 380 German teachers' coping with stress and internal and external barriers they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and distance teaching (Klapproth et al. 2020, 445). Their quantitative study revealed that the school the teachers taught in and the stress they

experienced was correlated. The higher track [the more advanced students] the teachers taught, the more stress they had had during the pandemic. Also, the more the teachers spent hours on distance teaching activities, the more stress they experienced. The biggest issues on distance teaching were related to digital devices and stable internet connections, but also the students' inactivity to do their schoolwork at home, after lessons, was considered a problem. Female teachers were also more stressed than male teachers, but on the other hand, female teachers used more often functional coping strategies than male teachers (Klapproth et al. 2020, 450-451).

When discussing their study results, Klapproth et al. suggest that the teachers' digital skills should be trained for distance teaching. Both supply with technologies and training how to use them would remove at least one of the barriers the teachers experienced during distance teaching (ibid.). On the other hand, the lack of digital skills does not automatically apply to every teacher, and there might also be differences between different countries and their teachers' digital training. The matter of school digitalization and teachers' digital skills in Finland will be discussed further in section 3.2.

Ville Mankki conducted a qualitative interview study about Finnish primary school teachers' experiences about distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. His study sample consisted of a total of 20 teachers. The study revealed that

[t]eachers felt that pupils had a great need to be in touch with their teacher and that seeing, hearing, and talking to the teacher daily created a sense of security for them. Simultaneously, being in regular interaction with the pupil was experienced as giving the teacher a view of the learning and well-being of the child and the environment and circumstances at home. (Mankki 2021, 7)

Hence, the students needed the teachers to be accessible during the school days and also to provide prompt and meaningful feedback to them. In addition to these interactional matters, the teachers wanted to enable peer interaction during the lessons (ibid.). Still, like previously mentioned, the teachers need to set boundaries for the outside-classroom interaction with the students, since if the teacher is always reachable for the students, that does not give the teacher any free time during the workdays. This might also be one of the reasons for the high stress rates teachers experienced during distance teaching, and I am keen on finding out whether this topic will come up in the interviews of my study, too.

Nevertheless, In Mankki's research, the matters of thorough planning, clear instructions and appropriate amount of workload came up (Mankki 2021, 7-8). The routines were also found

important by the teachers, since they strived to keep schoolwork and also everyday life as normal, familiar, and ordinary as possible. The teachers highlighted the importance of the well-known customs that should be maintained even in distance teaching. Using familiar tools and adding new things slowly, little by little were also found important by the teachers. Additionally, some important matters that were mentioned were supervising assignments, monitoring attendance and limiting the platforms that the students used during distance teaching lessons (Mankki 2021, 8-9). It could be stated that all the results Mankki presents in his study also apply to in-person teaching, since the same topics and concerns came up in them as are every now and then discussed in Finland about teaching in general. Hence, even when Mankki's study was not straight about the differences between in-person and distance teaching, the results can be interpreted as being from one.

In my study, I am also interested in how the teachers have arranged their exams during the two-month distance teaching period in spring 2020 (and also during other distance teaching periods they have had), and what the reasons are behind the possible changes. In spring 2020, distance teaching lasted quite long right before the school year was about to end, so there must have been some exams or other graded assignments remotely. Thus, it would be assumed that in distance teaching, teachers need to either change their exam types or replace exams with other assignments altogether, or both. The first option would have been the best for the case study of Reedy, Pfitzner, Rook and Ellis. Reedy et al. conducted a study in three Australian universities about cheating in online exams during COVID-19. The participants in their mixed methods study were both university students and staff, a total of 1970 people. The results show that the lack of supervision in online exams and alternative assessments were seen as the main cause of cheating (Reedy et al. 2021, 15). Question design, for example when the test included too many multiple-choice questions, made cheating easier for the students. Exam duration was also one factor that enabled or minimized cheating, since the more time there was to do the exam, the more time the students felt that there was to cheat in it (Reedy et al. 2021, 16-17).

Instead, the results of Amzalag, Shapira and Dolev show a better scenario about distance teaching exam arranging. They studied the same phenomenon quantitatively among several Israeli colleges and universities. Their findings show that most of the 50 lecturers that participated in their study had altered their method of exam evaluation because of the transition to distance teaching (Amzalag, Shapira and Dolev 2021, 252). On the other hand, the results of the study show also that the teachers did not trust their students not to cheat

during online exams and that is why they had changed their evaluation (ibid.). I would suppose that if the participants of my study have altered their exam arrangements during distance teaching, that would not have happened because of their actual, pure distrust towards their students, but because of the physical arrangements and their willingness to test the students about the learnt things as well and authentically as they could.

3.2 The technological and digital aspects of distance teaching

According to Cynthia White,

”[t]echnology is a major issue for language learning and teaching in distance education. In some contexts it is *the* major issue, not only because of the new possibilities offered by technological changes, but because of the range of attendant issues for learners and teachers and for the future directions of the field” (White 2003, 65; italics as in the original).

Hence, technology used in classrooms has been a frequently studied aspect of teaching and, naturally, also distance teaching. It is also almost always a topic that comes up in general studies about distance teaching and its implementation nowadays. Therefore, I am also interested in finding out more about the topic, since the teachers that participate in my study are regular comprehensive school or upper secondary school teachers without any previous experiences about distance teaching before COVID-19.

Furthermore, Finnish National Agency for Education published a report about distance teaching during COVID-19 pandemic in Finland in 2020, and a part of the report is a summary about the current situation of technology and digitalization in Finnish schools. According to the report, the digitalization in Finnish comprehensive schools has evolved in different paces in different areas and schools. All in all, the evolution has still been positive, but it has depended most on the schools and their procedures. The teachers’ ICT skills have developed, but not so much during the last few years (Finnish National Agency for Education 2021, 34). Finnish teachers have answered a self-evaluation questionnaire called *Opeka* about their own ICT skills every year from 2015 to 2020. The total number of the teachers that have answered the questionnaire is over 40,000 during all the six years (there may of course be overlapping among the participants in different years). *Opeka*’s results show that teachers’ ICT skills have developed slowly but positively from 2015 to 2020, but still, half of teachers feel like their skills are not adequate when it comes to the curriculum. Nevertheless, the devices and platforms the schools offer have developed positively during the five years of

examination. The newest results also show that 81 % of teachers use ICT during almost every lesson (Finnish National Agency for Education 2021, 34-36).

With the same purposes as Finnish National Agency for Education, also The Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) published a report about digitalization and its progress or *digiloikka*, ‘the digital leap’ in Finnish schools in 2016. Their report considers all Finnish school grades from early childhood education to university education, and it was conducted in autumn 2015 with a questionnaire form that got 1515 answers from Finnish teachers and school principals (The Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) 2016, 4). The results of the report show that even though Finnish teachers and principals have a positive feeling about digitalization, they still feel concerned about the weakening of students’ social and interactional skills, which may be the result of digitalization and teaching with ICT (The Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) 2016, 8-9). In line with Opeka’s result presented in the earlier chapter, this report’s results also show that most teachers feel that their ICT skills are weak or moderate. The teachers know how to use computers, communication tools (e.g. e-mail or *Wilma* [a software used in Finnish schools for the teachers to keep in touch with the students and parents and vice versa, send messages, give grades, assign homework, etc.]), presentation techniques, some basic software and even social media applications, but they don’t know how to use ICT for pedagogical purposes (The Trade Union for Education in Finland (OAJ) 2016, 13).

The situation with digitalization is similar in other countries, too. As previously mentioned, Folkman, Josefsson and Fjetland studied Norwegian teachers’ experiences about distance teaching with a survey (n=186). In their study, the teachers also reported that both teachers’ and pupils’ prior knowledge about digital platforms was fundamental to teaching and cooperation between the teachers and pupils. Digitalization was also described as both challenging and providing new opportunities, and also as a tool that could be used in innovative ways during online schooling (Folkman, Josefsson and Fjetland 2022, 6-7). It would be inferred that the younger the teacher is, the more they would have knowledge about ICT and the pedagogical use of it.

Still, in their study about German early career teachers and their experiences about distance teaching (n=165), König, Jäger-Biela and Glutsch found out that even younger teachers, who are used to use digital devices, might still not have developed sophisticated digital skills (König, Jäger-Biela and Glutsch 2020, 618). The same thing is also supported in the report by

The Trade Union for Education in Finland (OAJ). Their report shows that digital teaching has become more general very slowly. The use of ICT has increased in teacher training programs in Finnish universities within the last five years, but it is still not used the same way in all the teacher training programs in Finland. From the teachers that had graduated within the last five years, only 60 % had received education about using ICT in their classroom in their teacher training (The Trade Union for Education in Finland (OAJ) 2016, 15).

Similar results about the lack of ICT skills in teaching were shown about Finnish primary and secondary school teachers and their practices of the distance education during COVID-19 by Korhonen, Juurola, Salo and Airaksinen, who conducted a qualitative interview study for 15 Finnish teachers from various parts in Finland in spring 2020. Their results show that the distance teaching period made teachers think about the gap between their own and their colleagues digipedagogical [the digital environment is taken into account when teaching is planned and learning processes are evaluated] skills: there were some teachers who had for example never been on a video call, and some teachers that acted as digital tutors in their schools. (Korhonen et al. 2021, 183). Teachers with weaker skills described being insecure in arranging remote teaching, and they also felt like they would have needed detailed guidance in selecting and using devices and software. On the other hand, several teachers in the study said that the situation forced them to adopt new digital methods. Some weaker-skilled teachers also realized that the technology was not hard, which motivated them for further use of it (ibid.).

Furthermore, in their study about Israeli novice teachers' experiences of distance teaching during COVID-19, Drir and Schatz-Oppenheimer found, along with technological and pedagogical challenges, also technological and pedagogical opportunities. Hence, ICT was not always found to be a scary or a new thing by teachers. Drir and Schatz-Oppenheimer's study was a qualitative one with 32 novice teacher participants, and the teachers in their study state that the use of technological tools was a basis for creating new instructions and also learning pedagogies. The teachers also found out how to take advantage of their own previous technological strengths, applying them to teaching in the new environment (Drir and Schatz-Oppenheimer 2020, 644). The pedagogical opportunities the teachers experienced consisted of for example having time to help children individually since the classroom discipline was easy to maintain during distance teaching. Also creating a cooperative and friendly learning space was considered an opportunity during distance teaching. On the other hand, some participants were worried about the tension that could arise among the students later on, when

the environment is different and the teaching is back in the classroom (Drir and Schatz-Oppenheimer 2020, 646-647). However, young people are usually adaptive, and they adjust to new situations easier than adults, and I personally believe that there would not have been any tension when the transfer back to contact teaching was made. At least in Finland everyone seemed quite relieved in May 2020 when the long distance teaching period was over and they were able to see their friends after a long time of studying “alone” in front of a computer or other device.

As previously mentioned, Zhang (2020) studied language teachers’ experiences about distance teaching during COVID-19. The matter of technology and technological skills came up also in her study. Along with the lack of skills, another difficulty was the lack of time (Zhang 2020, 44). Zhang found out that creating and holding a successful distance lesson was time-consuming, especially for those who did not have that much experience with digital teaching tools. In her study, the teachers revealed two main concerns about technology and time, first being the lack of time to learn new tools and second being the increased preparation time that originated from learning a new digital tool for teaching purposes (ibid.). The teachers felt time pressure under which they had to convert their in-person teaching strategies into distance teaching strategies within a very short notice. That had meant compromises made by the teachers in planning and implementing distance teaching. Hence, the teachers felt that they would have needed more support from their employers to update their pedagogical knowledge about online teaching (Zhang 2020, 47). The lack of support and training of ICT skills is an interesting and important finding for which I wanted to take a better look at during the interviews I held for this study.

4 Methodology and material

This present study is a qualitative one that aims to find out English teachers' dynamic experiences and opinions about distance teaching during COVID-19. The material of this study was gathered by semi-structured interviews. Dörnyei (2007, 136) explains that during a semi-structured interview "the interviewer provides guidance and direction (hence the '-structured' part in the name) but is also keen to follow up interesting developments and to let the interviewee elaborate on certain issues (hence the 'semi-' part)." During semi-structured interviews, the interviewer usually asks the same questions from all the interviewees, along with supplementing the main questions with various probes (*ibid.*). I made out the body of questions for the interviews based on the research I had done for the topic, but I also wanted to leave room for possible other themes to come up during the interviews. The body of the interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Before the interviews, I encouraged the participants to speak about anything that would come to their minds about the topic, regardless of it being a straight answer to an interview question or not. At the end of the interviews, I also asked if there was anything to add about any interview question or the subject of distance teaching in general. In the following subsections, I will first present the participants of my study and after that I will discuss the ethics of the interviewing process. Then, I will describe the interviews and how they were conducted, and lastly, I will discuss how the material I got from the interviews was analyzed.

4.1 Participants

The participants of this study are seven qualified English language teachers. Their working years vary between about 3 and 25 years and all but one of the participants are female. During COVID-19 and distance teaching, four of the participants taught English in Finnish comprehensive school and three in Finnish upper secondary school, and from these upper secondary school teachers, one taught mainly in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. The precise grades that the teachers taught during COVID-19 distance teaching vary between grade one (7-year-olds) in Finnish comprehensive school and year three (18-year-olds) in Finnish upper secondary school. Some of the participants also have the qualification to teach other languages, and they have taught those languages during COVID-19 distance teaching as well. Also, along with teaching English, one of the participants also worked as a class teacher during COVID-19. Still, during the interviews, we concentrated on thinking and talking about

only English teaching from a distance. In the following sections, I will refer to the teachers by using the letters A, B, C, D, E, F and G. The letters have been chosen to refer to the teachers' working years, teacher A having the least working years and teacher G having the most working years. Participants D and E were given their place and letter randomly, since they have the same number of working years, and they also teach the same grades in comprehensive school.

Table 1. Participants of the study

Teacher	Gender	Taught grades and the age of students	Experience (working years)
A	Male	Upper secondary school (16-18-year-olds)	About 3 years
B	Female	Comprehensive school, fifth graders (11-year-olds)	6 years
C	Female	Comprehensive school, grades 1-9 (7-15-year-olds)	16 years
D	Female	Comprehensive school, grades 7-9 (13-15-year-olds)	22 years
E	Female	Comprehensive school, grades 7-9 (13-15-year-olds)	22 years
F	Female	Upper secondary school (16-18-year-olds), mainly International Baccalaureate students	24 years
G	Female	Upper secondary school (16-18-year-olds)	About 25 years

4.2 Ethics

The permission for the interviews was first asked from the principals of the schools in which the teachers worked at the time. After the permissions were admitted, an official invitation for the interview was sent to the possible participants by e-mail. The invitation contained information about the aim of the study and the structure of the interview. It was also stated at the invitation that the participants had the right to withdraw their participation at any point of the study process. All the interviewees were also sent a data privacy notice about the data handling before their interview.

The only personal information that was gathered from the participants in the interviews were their number of working years and the grades that they taught during COVID-19 distance teaching. During the interviews, the teachers did not reveal the names of themselves or the schools in which they taught or any personal information about their colleagues or students. The recordings of the interviews were saved to my personal cloud space with the letters that referred to the particular teachers, so no names of the participant teachers were written down at any point of the data handling process. After the data analysis, the recordings were destroyed.

4.3 Interviews

Like previously mentioned, along with the 10 questions I asked from every participant, there was also space for open conversation and specifying questions from my end, hence the interviews being semi-structured ones. The prefabricated questions were in English, but I gave the option to answer them in either English or Finnish, since someone might find it easier or more natural to talk about teaching and its different aspects in their first language (which, with every participant, was Finnish). One participant spoke only English during the whole interview, one spoke English during the first nine questions, then switched to Finnish for a while and then back to English, and one answered the two background questions in English and all the main questions in Finnish. The rest, four participants, spoke only Finnish during the interview.

The interviews were conducted in April and May 2022. Three of the interviews were held with a computer on a digital platform, *Microsoft Teams* [a platform to hold real-time online meetings], and the rest were held face-to-face. All the interviews were recorded with the permit of the interviewees. In *Microsoft Teams*, the recording records both video and audio.

During face-to-face interviews, I used my phone's *Voice Memos* (dictator) applicator to record only the talk. The length of the interviews varied, the shortest being only about 10 minutes long, while the longest took 51 minutes. As previously mentioned, the recordings were saved on my personal cloud space behind a password and after this thesis was finished, the recordings were destroyed.

4.4 Material analysis

After all the interviews were conducted, the recordings were listened to, and the most important parts and comments were transcribed. Hence, the interviews were not transcribed thoroughly, but a tape analysis was carried out. Dörnyei explains the tape analysis as “taking notes while listening to the recordings, possibly marking parts of the data” (2007, 249). Like previously mentioned, most of the interviewees spoke Finnish during the interviews, and therefore also most of the citations presented in the next sections are translated from Finnish to English by myself. When translating the citations, I tried to keep the tone and possible feeling of the speaker as authentic as I could, still translating the speech as carefully as I could.

Furthermore, sometimes during the interviews, an answer to one question came up during the talk of another question. Thus, in the analysis section of this thesis, I have grouped the material under themes, not under the interview questions themselves. The themes are the teachers' general feelings and positive and negative things they found about distance teaching, the time aspect in distance teaching, ICT and support in distance teaching, classroom working methods, test arrangements and grading in distance teaching and learner differences in distance teaching.

5 Analysis and discussion

In this section of the thesis, I go through the material conducted from the interviews by grouping the interview questions and their answers under bigger themes, or if the question itself contains a wide subject, I will go through it alone. As previously mentioned, the body of questions can be found on Appendix 1. First, in subsection 5.1, I will discuss the feelings and experiences the teachers presented about distance teaching. In the following subsection, 5.2, I will discuss the time aspect of distance teaching, and in subsection 5.3 I will go through the technology and ICT aspect of distance teaching. After that, in subsection 5.4, the topics of efficient and non-efficient distance teaching working methods, exam arrangements and grading are discussed and analyzed. Lastly, in subsection 5.5, I will discuss the differences between different learners that the participant teachers noticed during distance teaching. While analyzing and discussing the material, I will also answer the main research question, as well as the supportive research questions.

5.1 Feelings and positive and negative sides of distance teaching

In this section, I will discuss the dynamic feelings the teachers had towards distance teaching and also the positive and negative things they mention about it. This section of the thesis also aims to answer the main research question and also the first supportive research question: How did English teachers' opinions and experiences about distance teaching evolve from the first distance teaching period to the last distance teaching period? What were the positive and negative things about distance teaching and what kinds of possible challenges did distance teaching cause? Both research questions will be partly answered in section 5.2. The latter research question will partly be answered also in section 5.3.

As previously mentioned, none of the participants had been teaching remotely before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the situation was new for all of them. From the participants, teachers A, B and C had less stress or anxiety about moving to distance teaching in spring 2020. They describe their feelings as being a bit nervous at first, but especially teachers A and B describe their own ICT skills as being suitable enough for distance teaching. Teacher A concludes his personal situation like this:

- (1) During all the distance teaching periods, I personally have thought that there's no need for me to be distressed, since I am a geek from the 1990s. On the contrary, the situation is different with my colleagues, who don't know how to use the new [digital] teaching platforms. (Teacher A)

The comment about his colleagues made by teacher A also supports previous study results by Korhonen et al. (2021, 183). Similarly, even though she felt her own ICT skills were enough, teacher B explains that she was concerned about the students finding their way to *Microsoft Teams* or *Google Meet* [a platform to hold real-time online meetings] sessions. Hence, she mentions the non-functionality of these platforms as being her biggest fear during distance teaching. Additionally, teacher C stresses the fact that the decision for moving to distance teaching came from above, and she had nothing to say about it, but just to adjust to it, which she did with no extra pressure for herself. She also tells that she does not relate to the teachers that felt that distance teaching was extremely stressful and horrible. Still, she does not see the distance teaching periods as a good thing, since she feels that the students learn best when the teaching happens face-to-face.

In contrast, teachers D, E, F and G were more scared, even panicking about moving to distance teaching. As teacher E states it:

(2) The first weeks were like swimming in cold water. [...] The first period went... forward. (Teacher E)

Other ways that teachers D, E, F and G describe themselves feeling were unmotivated, stressful, doubtful, and even panicking. The biggest, shared reason for these feelings were the teachers' personal ICT skills, or the lack of them. For example, teacher D had not used or even heard about the platform *Microsoft Teams* before distance teaching started. However, when the first tension fell off, she was eager to accept the challenge of teaching remotely, which also support previous study results by Korhonen et al. (2021, 183). Teachers E, F and G were more afraid of the technology and their own coping with teaching with it. For example, teacher G states that she had zero knowledge about anything related to ICT when distance teaching first began. However, it was a common experience that since they just had to start using technology more, the tension about using it wore off when time passed. Teacher F puts it this way:

(3) I don't know if I learnt to use IT [information technology], but I became braver to use it. (Teacher F)

Additionally, teacher E tells that she did not have that much ICT skills in the beginning, but that she just had to use every bit of knowledge she had, which supports previous study results by Drir and Schatz-Oppenheimer (2020, 644).

Hence, it could be stated that the less the teacher had working year experience (or the younger the teacher is) the more positively they saw the upcoming distance teaching period in the beginning, in spring 2020. The reason for that was mainly the ICT skills, which were considered to be good enough by teachers A, B and also C. Still, the main feeling about moving to distance teaching was quite negative by all teachers. The teachers had felt okay and learnt how to do things during distance teaching periods, it is also mentioned by some of them that they hoped they would never go back to distance teaching in the future. Teacher D even mentions that there had been a discussion in their area about moving to distance teaching in spring 2022, and if this had happened, she would have taken a sick leave or even resigned from her job.

Another shared aspect about negative feelings towards distance teaching in the beginning was the fear of the students' decreased well-being. This is mentioned by teachers B, C and E, who were more worried about their students than their personal ICT skills or personal coping with the situation. This also came up when asked about the positive and negative sides of distance teaching. The most common negative thing, which is mentioned by all the participants, was weaker or quieter students and their getting along in distance teaching. Teacher B mentions quiet students and the worry of their coping in distance teaching:

- (4) There were a lot of quiet students who don't easily ask for help [even in contact teaching], and it was hard to know where they were going with their studies.
(Teacher B)

Teacher D also mentions the lack of support from home, and teacher C talks about similar issue:

- (5) There were a lot of students who didn't get support from home. Also handling their ordinary life and schedules was hard for them. (Teacher D)
- (6) Students that don't manage self-guided working methods suffered the most.
(Teacher C)

The fact that teachers were very well on track about their students' well-being and home circumstances during distance teaching support the previous study results by Mankki (2021, 7). However, the differences between different learners will be discussed more in-depth in section 5.5.

Furthermore, it became quite clear that every participant had more negative than positive things about distance teaching on their mind. Teacher E tells that sometimes the students did not tell that they had not understood the instructions, and hence, they had not done the

assignments or exercises they were supposed to be doing. In contact teaching, the teacher can see the confusion from the students' faces, but this was not the case in distance teaching. Teacher E also continues to explain that in contact teaching, every student does at least something during the lessons, but that was not the case in distance teaching. Other negative aspect was the lack of teacher-student interaction, which is mentioned by teachers A, B and G. Teacher G explains it this way:

(7) The interaction was quite little [during distance teaching]. It was more that I was speaking, and the students were listening. (Teacher G)

To continue with the negative sides of distance teaching, the things that are also mentioned by single teachers were the time that giving feedback, checking assignments and creating routines for teaching took, the difficulty of activating students and pacing the job, the problem of not knowing what the students were doing behind their unmuted microphones and closed cameras, the total disappearance of some students, and the lack of collegial support. The issue that the students did not really want to open their microphones and answer the questions asked by the teacher is mentioned by teachers D and G. Teachers B, D and E also present the worry the long distance teaching period and new sitting job caused for their personal physical health, especially for their neck and back, but also for their bodily functions and metabolism. In sum, the negative things found about distance teaching were related both to the teachers themselves and also to their students. Additionally, even though most of the teachers state that the first distance teaching period was the hardest one, the subsequent periods were still not welcomed happily either.

On the other hand, the teachers also found many positive things about distance teaching. For example, having a peaceful working environment is mentioned by teachers B and C. Teacher C reports the working environment and the realization she made about it:

(8) It became concrete how big part of the [contact teaching] lesson is usually spent on everything else but the teaching. (Teacher C)

Similarly, teacher B states that her senses got to rest during distance teaching and working from home, since the school she worked in during distance teaching had an open concept and some external noise was always present during the contact teaching lessons. Additionally, teacher C also states that some students did better during distance teaching because of the peaceful working environment.

Moreover, teacher B also mentions that she made other realizations about herself and her working during distance teaching. When the work was not continuously interrupted, she could think about the ways of working and methods she herself liked and aim towards them with her teaching. She also realized which were the things and methods she liked to use during lessons in distance teaching and in contact teaching. Teacher A also mentions that he was happy that he did not have to wake up that early in the mornings when he worked from home and similarly, teacher C tells that she liked working from home, because she did not have to spend time or money for commuting. Furthermore, teacher A also continues that teaching in front of a class for 75 minutes can be quite heavy, and that distance teaching might have been less mentally burdensome for him.

Another positive thing mentioned by teachers B, D, E and G was the new things they learnt during distance teaching. These were mostly about ICT but also pedagogical things. For example, teacher E still states that she is surprised about how much she learnt about using ICT during distance teaching, since she would not have thought that she would manage to learn anything at all. Moreover, the fact that for some students distance teaching worked really well is frequently mentioned. The aspect about some missing students and their comeback is mentioned by teacher D, who concludes her thoughts about this kind of students during distance teaching:

- (9) Some students that didn't normally come to school every day because of their anxiety, were on the lines and listening to teaching. I could even hear their voices during the lessons. (Teacher D)

Teacher E talks about a similar thing when she explains that she learnt to know many of her students in a new, different way during distance teaching. This is supported by teacher G, who tells that with some of her students, she might have talked more during distance teaching than normally during contact teaching. Furthermore, as a positive thing, teacher F mentions the trust towards her student during distance teaching:

- (10) Little by little I learnt to trust the students, it was easier to let go and believe that they were doing what they were supposed to be doing, even when there is no constant contact with them. The students were actually quite reliable. (Teacher F)

Teacher G also explains a different positive thing that resulted from distance teaching, which is the fact that after COVID-19, most trainings or seminars are happening online, and the participants do not have to travel anywhere to attend them. Additionally, teacher G continues

that also her personal life has gained a new aspect, since she nowadays keeps in touch with relatives by making video calls, which she never did before distance teaching.

In sum, it was a shared experience that when the teachers learnt how to work with ICT, they felt more positive about distance teaching, and this is also mentioned in previous study results (Bergdahl and Nouri 2020, 451). Even when the first thoughts about distance teaching were negative, positive things about it were also found and no teacher said that there was nothing positive about it. The positive things mentioned by the participants concerned both the teachers and also their students. Teacher G, for example, concludes that when thinking about the circumstances, distance teaching arrangements worked quite well, since no other arrangements were possible at that moment.

Still, as mentioned, more negative things were found, which was not a surprise after the experiences the teachers shared during the discussion about their dynamic feelings towards distance teaching. The most common negative thing was, along with the lack of ICT skills, the concern about the students' mental well-being. This is a result not presented in earlier studies, probably because the focus of the studies has been elsewhere. Still, it could be stated that concern about the students is a feeling that every teacher shares, regardless of whether the teaching is happening from a distance or not. Similarly, the frequently mentioned problem about the lack of teacher-student interaction is supported by previous research (Niemi and Kousa 2020; Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan 2020).

5.2 The time aspect

As previously introduced, the time used to plan and conduct distance teaching has been studied earlier, but usually as a comparison to the time used to plan contact teaching, the context being higher education (DiBiase 2000; Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd 2004). In this study, I do not concentrate on particular time-consuming things, but on thinking about the time spent on planning and implementing distance teaching in general, and on the reasons behind this possible change in the time use. In this section of the thesis, I will continue to answer the first two research questions, which are the following: How did English teachers' opinions and experiences about distance teaching evolve from the first distance teaching period to the last distance teaching period? What were the positive and negative things about distance teaching and what kinds of possible challenges did distance teaching cause?

When asked about the time the teachers used to plan the courses and/or lessons, the most common answer is that it did increase during distance teaching. All participants, except for teacher A, estimate that they had used a lot more time for rethinking and redesigning their lessons, and also for developing new working materials. Still, also teacher A notes that in the beginning he had to think about his working methods again, especially with teaching grammar. Nevertheless, he states that he didn't use more or less time on lesson planning than in contact teaching. Teacher D, on the other hand, explains her working days like this:

(11) I opened my computer in the morning and closed it in the evening, around 8 or 9 p.m. I spent 12-hour days sitting still, first having lessons and then planning tomorrow's lessons. Planning took more time, but also checking assignments and giving feedback were time-consuming. (Teacher D)

Also, teachers E and F tell that they usually spent the whole day being on their computer, preparing for the next workdays. Hence, teacher F describes the distance teaching periods as workloads.

The main reasons presented for the increased time-spending were checking assignments during and after lessons, thinking and planning how the lesson structure would work in distance teaching, searching for proper lesson material from the Internet, checking that the students had done their exercises, sizing and timing the lesson assignments, changing the lesson activities to work from a distance and even rethinking whole courses. Teacher E states, however, that even though it is very time and energy-consuming to create material for distance teaching from scratch, it is still fun to try some new things. Teacher E continues to tell that the schedule was still very tight especially in the beginning of the first distance teaching period in spring 2020, and that it was hard to find time for finding and creating brand new lesson activities and exercises, which supports the previous study results by Zhang (2020, 44).

However, something positive was also found about the time aspect. The increased time is usually mentioned only when talking about the first distance teaching period in spring 2020. Most of the teachers state that the subsequent distance teaching periods in autumn 2020 and spring 2021 were easier. For example, teacher F explains that a lot had been learnt during the first long distance teaching period and that her ICT skills had developed for the better, which supports the study results by Bergdahl and Nouri (2020, 451). Also, teacher A states that the more experience he had about distance teaching, the less time he had to use preparing his

lessons. Teacher B mentions another positive thing about learning how to use time during and after lessons, and the same topic is also discussed by teacher G:

- (12) The students were keen on giving feedback about the strain the lesson exercises caused for them and if there were a suitable number of exercises during lessons. (Teacher B)
- (13) [According to students,] some teachers gave so much homework that it got out of hand. I personally tried not to give a lot of homework [during distance teaching]. (Teacher G)

Even though the interview question about the time used for distance teaching was about the teachers themselves and their personal time-spending, most of the teachers also mention the students' point of view about it. Like previously mentioned, the topic of giving homework has been discussed during distance teaching in Finland. Teacher G tells that she had made the decision not to give too much homework, since her students were already struggling with their personal school workload. This is also supported by other teachers, since almost all of them mention the issue of giving too much homework and that they had put on the break with it. On the other hand, they were also thinking about their personal workload and the use of time when they had decreased or even stopped giving homework for the students. Checking the homework exercises took a lot of time from distance teaching lessons or from the teachers' free time outside the classroom. Teacher D mentions that even if the students checked their exercises by themselves, it took time to upload the answers for them to *Microsoft Teams* or send them directly to the students.

When it comes to the time aspect, as stated, all but one teacher say that they used more time on planning their lessons and courses during distance teaching. These results are not in line with the earlier presented results by DiBiase (2000) and Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd (2004), who state in their results that distance teaching does not take more time than contact teaching. Their studies, however, concentrated on university-level education, not on comprehensive or upper secondary school. This, and the fact that the younger the students are, the more they need to be guided and supported during their studies, might be the reason for this difference in the study results. The participants in the studies by DiBiase and Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd also had help planning and conducting their lessons and courses, unlike all but one of the participants in this present study. This one participant is teacher B, who worked as team with her colleagues by having all the lesson planning and lessons together.

The increased time used to adjust the lesson activities and methods was the most common answer when asked about the time issue. Even if there was no homework and all the exercises were done during the lessons, checking them took a lot more time than in contact teaching, and the teachers had to think about the easiest and fastest way to do that. Here also the developing personal ICT skills are mentioned. The longer the distance teaching period lasted, the more teachers found and used new ways to handle checking the exercises and assignments during or after the schooldays. On the other hand, as stated, some teachers mention that they got feedback from their students about the strain they experienced during distance teaching, and they could adjust their lessons and assignment workload also with the help of this feedback. Overall, both positive and negative things were found also on the time aspect, even though distance teaching was considered very time-consuming before, during and after the lessons.

5.3 ICT and support in distance teaching

In this section, I will go through the teachers' experiences about ICT and technology in general during distance teaching. I will also concentrate on the technical and other support the teachers received. I will also continue to answer the second research question and answer the third research question: What were the positive and negative things about distance teaching and what kinds of possible challenges did distance teaching cause? How did the teachers feel about using ICT during distance teaching?

The participants were asked about the training they had received for teaching remotely, and whether this training was considered useful when distance teaching started in spring 2020. Teachers A, C, D, E and G state that they had not had any training about distance teaching or its platforms before the first distance teaching period started. Additionally, teacher A also concludes his thoughts about technology use during his teacher studies:

- (14) Even though technology is present all the time and digital exercises are an everyday part [of teaching] these days, the digital things were not emphasized during teacher training. (Teacher A)

Teacher A's experiences about teacher training and the lack of ICT teaching during them support the earlier presented results of the report by The Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) (2016, 15).

Furthermore, teacher B tells that her current employer organized mandatory trainings for technological and digital aspects of teaching even before spring 2020 and the COVID-19

pandemic. Also, teacher F says that she thinks she had had some training, because in the IB program, there is always some distance teaching going on. Nevertheless, she herself does not teach from a distance, so she didn't have any concrete experiences about conducting it. Moreover, most of the teachers tell that after the first distance teaching period started, their employers organized trainings about it. During these trainings, teaching methods and ideas were shared and concrete things about using the online meeting and teaching platforms (*Microsoft Teams*, *Google Forms*, and others) were taught. Teacher G tells that the first training was organized immediately after the decision about the first distance teaching period came, and that they did not start live distance teaching before that. During the first two days or so, they were only giving assignments and exercises to students through *Wilma*, and this same custom is also mentioned by teacher E.

To continue with experiences of teacher G, she also notes that it was only after the *Microsoft Teams* training that they started having the live lessons. Teacher G feels that the training had been very useful and that it was organized at the right time. Similarly, teacher F tells that her school set up (ICT) support groups immediately when the decision about distance teaching came. In contrast, teacher D tells that her employer uploaded an instruction video about using *Microsoft Teams* on their website, but it was a month after the distance teaching period had started, so everything had already had to be learnt by the teachers on their own. She states that it would definitely have been useful to get training earlier. The teachers' opinions about distance teaching digital training being useful and important are in line with previous study results (Klapproth et al. 2020; Korhonen et al. 2021) presented earlier in this thesis.

However, teachers A and B tell that they did not need any help for conducting distance teaching and therefore they did not attend any training during it, since the trainings their employers organized were optional. Similarly, teacher C tells that she only attended some of the trainings that were offered, but most of them she did not need to attend, since she knew the basics of using *Microsoft Teams* and that was enough. This fact about already knowing the basics and it being enough during distance teaching is also mentioned by teacher B. Yet again, it can be interpreted that the less teaching years the teacher has experience of (or the younger the teacher is) the less they felt the need for training when distance teaching started. Younger people can be expected to be more digitally native than older people, although nothing can really be generalized. Furthermore, previous studies have still suggested that even younger teachers might not have sophisticated digital skills (König, Jäger-Biela and Glutsch 2020, 618), and this finding is not in line with the findings in my study.

When asked about trainings in the future, teachers B, E, F and G hope to get more of them. The main reason mentioned for that is the fact that technology and digital platforms develop all the time and new ones are invented every day. Teacher F actually mentions that they have a project going on at the moment, in which they share experiences about distance teaching with different countries, and this can be considered as some kind of a training, too. Furthermore, teacher G also mentions her willing to get more pedagogical training for distance teaching in the future:

- (15) I would like to get more training, but not necessarily to the technical aspect, unless there are a lot of new platforms on the way. I would rather get more pedagogical guidance [for distance teaching] because it was not given at all [during these distance teaching periods]. Nobody told me how to [pedagogically] handle my lessons. (Teacher G)

The need for pedagogical training supports previous study results by Zhang (2020, 47). In contrast, teacher A mentions that he himself does not feel the need for any training in the future. Teacher D, on the other hand, addresses a hard statement that she hopes that she does not need any tools for distance teaching in the future, because she hopes distance teaching will never take place again. That is why she feels that trainings are not useful. Still, she continues that training is always a good thing, but only if it happens in-person and not from a distance. Additionally, teacher C states that in the future, she would not use *Microsoft Teams* at all, but *Google Classroom* (which her school has started to use after distance teaching) and *Google Meet*, because she believes that these would be better platforms for organizing distance teaching and online lessons.

Furthermore, along with the official support and training gotten from their employers and colleagues, some of the teachers had support groups for example on *Microsoft Teams* or *WhatsApp Messenger* [a platform used to send text messages and voice messages, usually by phone], and assignments and experiences about good and bad lesson activities were shared through them. Teacher F explains her experiences about a support group:

- (16) We had close contact with colleagues, and we discussed teaching methods. If someone found something useful, it was immediately spread to others. (Teacher F)

As already mentioned, teacher B tells that during distance teaching, she worked as a team with two of her teacher colleagues, as *co-teachers*, which was very helpful. Supportively, teachers A, C and G also explain sharing their course and lesson materials with their language teacher colleagues. Still, teacher A states that there was less joint working among language teacher colleagues during distance teaching than there is now:

- (17) It would have been nice to hear other's experiences and what worked and what did not. [...] The teachers were mostly alone and worked independently during distance teaching periods. [...] There wasn't the same sense of community during distance teaching than there is during contact teaching. (Teacher A)

Furthermore, all the teachers mention that there was also an IT-team or IT support person(s) to help with the possible problems during school days and lessons, and the presence of digital tutors has also been mentioned in study results by Korhonen et al. (2021, 183). However, it is mentioned by teachers D and G, that the help from these ICT support persons was not received acutely, but only when they had time to help. Fortunately, this usually happened in the evening of the same day or on the next day, but sometimes the problems had already been solved by the teachers themselves before the help was received. The support and help gotten from *Facebook* [an online social media] (language) teaching groups are also mentioned by teacher B and C. Teacher C explains the help this way:

- (18) *Facebook* groups were very helpful [during distance teaching] and from them, I got tips and lesson plans which I used carelessly. I also published something in them myself, but mostly I got tips from language teachers around Finland. (Teacher C)

Supportively, teacher D tells that she herself is not on *Facebook*, but that the support groups there would definitely have been useful for her, too. In contrast, teacher D mentions a smaller *Microsoft Teams* channel dedicated to teachers in her school:

- (19) [In the channel] We shared more than things straightly related to work, for example the song of the day. This boosted the mood when there was no chance to tell stupid jokes in the teachers' common room. (Teacher D)

Facebook and other social media groups are a good way of connecting with people who like the same things or are like you. These people can be someone you already know or just some random people from anywhere around the world. During a globally new, scary situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, these groups are a good way of getting peer support and help. This help gotten from social media groups also supports the arguments about innovative practices travelling from one classroom to another by Darling-Hammond and Hylar (2020, 460). Also, the *Microsoft Teams* group teacher D mentions is a good way to take teachers' minds off the ongoing pandemic and work in the special situation and it must have been an excellent addition for the regular working days. This kind of social media or other platform groups are not presented in earlier study results, since the emphasis of the studies might have been more on the collegial support that comes from the workplace and from the employer. On the other

hand, however, it might also be inferred that not all teachers use social media or even know that these kinds of groups exist or are possible to be set up.

Again, with technology, ICT and support gotten from employers and colleagues, both positive and negative things were found by the participant teachers. Even though most of the teachers considered their ICT skills not suitable enough for distance teaching in the beginning, all the teachers describe learning new things as distance teaching proceeded. Hence, even these digitally novice teachers' feelings towards the use of ICT changed to more positive. The support gotten during distance teaching is positively mentioned by all the teachers, but not all of them got the same amount of it. Still, it could be stated that when there was a need for support, it was offered, even though it did not happen immediately. On the other hand, a preparation for the upcoming distance teaching would have been useful for most of the teachers, but only two of the participants mention that their employer organized trainings before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Similarly, one teacher tells about his teacher training, where there was no emphasis on digital teaching. ICT and digital training indeed are some aspects of teacher training and working life that should be rethought in the future.

5.4 Distance teaching working methods, test arrangements and grading

The evolution of lesson working methods and the working methods participants found being functional or non-functional is one of the major interests I have in my study. In this section of the thesis, I will go through these working methods and activities and the possible change of them from the first distance period to the last, and I will also answer the research question: How did the teachers' distance teaching working methods and lesson activities change through all the distance teaching periods? In addition, I will also discuss the exam arrangements and evaluations the teachers had during distance teaching periods.

Teachers A and C tell about the different instructions they got from above in spring 2020 and in spring 2021, which affected their lessons. Teacher A explains that in spring 2020, his workplace did not have a joint policy about distance teaching lesson arrangements, and that he could decide them by himself. In spring 2020, teacher A had organized some lessons live, and some lessons were intended for independent studying, where students did not have to attend the lesson by computer. In contrast, in spring 2021, when teacher A worked in a different school, all the lessons were held along the schedule. Teacher C shares the same experience, except for the fact that her workplace stayed the same during spring 2020 and spring 2021. Teacher C tells that the instructions were different in spring 2020, when only part of the

lessons were held live, whereas in spring 2021, all the lessons must have been held along the schedule. Hence, these differences between the distance teaching arrangements affected both teachers' lesson activities, and in spring 2020, the emphasis was on independent work that was done outside the lessons. In spring 2021, both teachers cut back the amount of independent work and homework and most of the work was done during lessons.

Teachers A, D and E tell that during the first weeks of distance teaching, the activities that could be done in *Microsoft Teams* were very slim. After a while, an option to divide the meeting participants into pairs or groups was released, which helped the work of the teacher, since they did not have to be talking alone all the time. This feature of *Microsoft Teams* enabled interactional and discussion exercises between the students. It was also found good by the teachers that the students were able to communicate more with each other, and this supports previous study results by Mankki (2021, 7). Teacher E also tells that in the beginning, he used to share only sounds in *Microsoft Teams* because the computer systems could not run screen or picture sharing to the students. Moreover, teacher E explains her personal path of grown digital skills during distance teaching:

- (20) First, I gave the students tasks, and I wrote 'do this and do that'. Then I learnt to play the chapter for them through [Microsoft] *Teams* and send and share the corrections of different pages and exercises. [...] Then I started more with screen sharing at the end of the period in spring 2020 and through all the period in spring 2021. (Teacher E)

This supports the earlier presented statement by Teacher D in section 5.3, that everything regarding the use of the teaching platform had to be learnt by oneself, and also the previous study results about learning new skills on the way by Bergdahl and Nouri (2020, 451).

Furthermore, also teacher G explains that in the beginning of the first distance teaching period, her teaching was more like lecturing, without any interaction with the students. She also tried to have all the lessons the way that she was present in the session all the time. Later she realized that a better way to have the lessons was to have a mutual start, for example going through a new subject of grammar. After that, the students could do independent work about the topic and even close the *Microsoft Teams* session if they wanted to, but the teacher was still reachable during the rest of the lesson. Her students exploited the possibility to talk to the teacher alone without anyone else hearing it, and usually the talking topics were not related to school at all. Teacher G explains that she felt like the students just wanted to talk to someone, since their daily social interaction was decreased during distance teaching. This is

supported by the arguments about sustaining student satisfaction in distance teaching by Allen et al. (2019, 125). Teacher D has similar experiences about moving towards more independent work, and this was because of technology:

- (21) I tried to have listening exercises at first, but the students complained about the sound breaking [due to non-stable internet connection], so I omitted them. [...] After that, it was more independent, for example ‘watch this video alone and then we’ll discuss it together’. (Teacher D)

Teachers F and G explain that also their lesson working methods and activities changed during different distance teaching periods, and the main reason for that was the students:

- (22) I learnt to trust the students more, it was easier to give them more extended work. (Teacher F)
- (23) I learnt to trust the students – I had to! – and that they did the work they were supposed to do. (Teacher G)

The trust aspect will be discussed further later in this section with test arrangements.

Additionally, another thing that was learnt during distance teaching, was giving feedback to the students, which is mentioned by teacher E. She tells that she gave feedback through *Wilma*, *Microsoft Teams* and *WhatsApp Messenger*, and that she really learnt the importance of it. Teacher E continues that it stuck with her, and she is giving her students more feedback on everything now than she did before distance teaching.

When talking about the lesson activities that were omitted because they did not work, all but two teachers tell they had had some. Teachers B and F tell that everything they tried had worked, at least to some extent. However, teacher B tells that she had tried some things only once and then left them behind, but that was because the methods were too much work for herself, not because they were not effective. Teacher B also continues about the helpful experiences gotten from *Facebook* teacher groups:

- (24) Because of social media, I knew to avoid some things [in my teaching], because people published stories in Facebook groups like ‘don’t try this, it doesn’t work’. [...] I was the one who waited for experiences from other teachers before I tried anything brand new for me. (Teacher B)

Furthermore, teachers C and E share a similar experience about pair work. They both tried dividing students into groups in *Microsoft Teams* first, but then came to the conclusion that it worked only partly, since some students disappeared from the session altogether and others did not speak anything in their *breakout rooms* [the sub-rooms the teachers can divide the

students into from the main session]. Teacher C concludes distance teaching pair work like this:

- (25) I saw that it [pair working in breakout rooms in *Microsoft Teams*] was a great feature, but it worked only for the students that really participated [in teaching]. There were students that attended in the lessons, but only attended and did nothing they were supposed to be doing. (Teacher C)

In contrast, teacher E tells that she would still use pair work during distance teaching today, but she would give stricter instructions and orders on what to do in pairs.

The teachers were also asked if they use some of the possible omitted distance teaching working methods in contact teaching today. Teachers C and E, who had left pair work unused after trying it, tell that they do continuously use the method in contact teaching. Teacher E also states about speaking exercises that she would never give them away in contact teaching, since they are very important in learning languages. Teacher A reports that he might have been talking too much alone during distance teaching lessons and that it really does not work in those circumstances but continues that there is a place and time for it in contact teaching.

Teacher A also mentions that in the beginning of the first distance teaching period in spring 2020 he innovatively made some teaching videos, mostly about new grammar subjects, which he used during his lessons. The procedure of making videos was new for him and he was keen on trying it out. However, he soon realized that making those videos took very much of his time and that the videos decreased the student-teacher interaction during his distance teaching lessons. For these reasons, he soon abandoned the video-making, and he does not use them today in contact teaching either. Hence, teacher A, as well as also teacher D, taught grammar with *Microsoft PowerPoint* [a program in which you can make presentations and slideshows]. However, teacher D tells that in the beginning, she used to only share her *PowerPoint* screen to the students and teach grammar this way, but she soon realized that the students did not see the *PowerPoint* well enough. She then started to share the *PowerPoint* file in *Microsoft Teams* files so that the students could open it on their own computers, too.

Furthermore, teacher G tells that sometimes during distance teaching, she asked the students questions one by one, going in order. The students were terrified about the habit, which resulted to her omitting the habit, even though it might have been the only way to hear some students talking during distance teaching, and this supports the study findings about empathy towards students by Murphy et al. (2011, 410). Nevertheless, teacher G continues by saying that she hardly ever uses the habit in contact teaching classroom either. This is also supported

by teacher E, who tells that her students were not always very willing to answer the teacher's questions when the whole group was hearing the answers. Another experience supported by the results of Murphy et al. (2011, 410) and also of Mankki (2021, 7-8) was the experience about giving the students independent work by teacher D:

- (26) Written assignments that needed to be returned were left lesser [by me] after the beginning, because the students gave feedback about a too big workload. [...] I didn't give that much homework at any point, except for sometimes finishing some lesson exercises at home. Later we made a joint decision at our school about trying to keep the amount of homework at minimum. (Teacher D)

The teachers also mention many new lesson working methods they tried successfully during distance teaching, and whether they still use these methods in their contact teaching lessons. Most of the efficient new methods and activities are related to ICT since they are for example teaching platforms and teaching games. Three teachers mention using *Google Forms* [in which you can create and have surveys online] for having tests remotely, and this, along with other test arrangements, will be discussed more later in this section. Other thing three teachers mention are the already introduced feature of dividing the students into sub-groups in *Microsoft Teams*, which is naturally not used in contact teaching, because the teaching happens live and not through the platform. Teacher G tells that during distance teaching, she used this feature of *Microsoft Teams* to group the students into random groups. She continues that she uses random groups in contact lessons now, too, although forming random groups takes more time than if the students were all working with the friend next to them. Furthermore, teachers B and C tell that in distance teaching, they used some working methods they already knew, but more in-depth:

- (27) I used *Google Classroom* [a platform used to create, assign, return and grade assignments] more efficiently even though I already knew how to use it: I got everything out of it [during distance teaching]. I used it already before the distance teaching periods, but not as broadly as I do now. (Teacher B)
- (28) *Quizlet Live* and *Kahoot!* [both are teaching games, used for example for learning new words] were already familiar to me, but [during distance teaching] you were able to assign them as homework. I used those, and I still use them today. (Teacher C)

Furthermore, teacher C also mentions that during distance teaching she started using *Wilma* for writing down lesson activities and homework, so that the students that did not attend the lesson (and their parents) saw what they needed to do before the next lesson. She tells that she still uses *Wilma* for the same purpose today.

Additionally, as new method, teacher A mentions *Socrative* [a platform which the teacher can use for formative assessments for example to tell how the students have understood the subject in question], and teacher D mentions that she showed the students videos that she had found from the Internet, on the grounds of the students had to answer to some questions. Similarly, teacher G explains that during distance teaching, she realized that she does not have to go through and check every exercise together with the students. During distance teaching periods, the students checked some exercises independently based on the material the teacher had shared for them, and the same procedure is still used in contact teaching, since it saves time from the lessons.

Moreover, teacher B tells that during distance teaching, she started to be better prepared for the lessons. She tells that she for example had all the needed websites and software opened before the lesson started, and that this is a habit she now has during contact teaching, too. Additionally, also teachers A and D mention still using the aforesaid methods in contact teaching today, which supports the previous study results by Tunegaru (2021, 113). On the other hand, teacher A tells that during distance teaching, he did not assign any group work that would have been presented to the rest of the class, even though this is a working method he uses in contact teaching all the time.

The exam arrangements during distance teaching were briefly mentioned already. Again, all seven participants tell that they had exams during distance teaching and that they had altered their contact teaching exams, exam arrangements and also exam evaluation, grading and emphasis during distance teaching. All teachers also mention having word tests during distance teaching. For example, teacher G tells that the value of the word tests held online was practically zero, because the teacher couldn't tell if the students used their books while doing the test. On the other hand, teacher B tells that she had word tests in *Kahoot!*, and these word tests had more value in her grading than the regular exams.

Similarly, when talking about word test arrangements, teacher D also tells that she used *Kahoot!*. She tells that during distance teaching, she used to assign the students to do *Kahoot!*s at their own pace as word tests, and that she could see how many of the questions one student had answered altogether. She continues to mention that this feature of *Kahoot!* has now changed into being chargeable, which it was not during COVID-19 and distance teaching, and therefore, she does not use this feature anymore. Furthermore, teacher E tells that during distance teaching, she assigned the students to design their own word tests for the

next lesson, and this was a good way for the students to read and learn the words. She also told the students to check their own answers after they had done the word tests, since during contact teaching earlier, they had done this in pairs and the procedure was already familiar for the students.

When talking about bigger course exams, the most common platform used for exam arrangements during distance teaching is *Google Forms*, which is mentioned by four teachers. The biggest issue mentioned about distance teaching exams was not knowing if the students use their books while doing the tests even when they were not supposed to do that. Hence, teacher B and D explain that they changed their exams from the ones they have in contact teaching by for example adding new question types and altering old ones:

(29) I tried to make test exercises which you can't survive from by using a translator, for example 'watch a video and find the expressions'. Then I could instantly tell if the student had been lazy and just put everything in a translator instead of trying to find the expressions on their own. (Teacher B)

(30) I had some sentence translations which a translator didn't translate correctly. I changed the sentence so long that I got the translator to make certain mistakes, from which I then saw if the student had used a translator [while doing the test]. (Teacher D)

Teacher B also mentions that she used very much time and effort in making the tests, and that she still uses the same *Google Forms* tests that she made during distance teaching.

Additionally, teacher E tells that during distance teaching, she used the same tests with one of her colleagues, since they use the same tests in a normal contact teaching situation, too.

Teacher E continues that she would use *Google Forms* tests in distance teaching now, too, but that she would make them more effective, since they cannot be too easy. On the other hand, she tells that she would not use *Google Forms* tests in contact teaching at all.

Furthermore, teachers A, C and D mention that they allowed the students to use books during some of the bigger exams. Teacher D explains it the way that the students need to learn how to use helping tools, too. Some of her students really wanted to learn and made the effort by using their books for help. This way, they got better grades from the tests than they usually do, and this was also shown in their final grades, too. However, some students did the exams very quickly and could have done better in them. Moreover, teachers A and B explain having told their students that the tests are for them themselves, not for the teacher. Still, teacher A tells that making and arranging tests puzzled him since he wanted to keep test results authentic. Similarly, teacher C explains that when there had been a mixture of contact

teaching and distance teaching, she emphasized the grades given during contact teaching in her final grading. She continues to tell that she also took into account the grades given during distance teaching, but with the awareness about the possibility that the student might not have done all the exercises and tests on their own.

When asked about test supervision, none of the teachers tell that they supervised the tests, which differs from the study results by Mankki (2021, 8-9). Teacher C, for example, mentions separately that she did not make her students put their cameras on during tests. Teacher A mentions that he purely trusted his students during distance teaching and did not himself stress too much about cheating, and teacher F and G mention the fact that they know their students and their level well enough to notice if their exam grades had suddenly bettered suspiciously during distance teaching. Still, some of the teachers explain having totally changed the test exercises to minimize cheating, which supports the previous study results by Amzalag, Shapira and Dolev (2021, 252). For example, teacher A mentions that in the distance teaching exams, he used to have translation exercises as picture formats, so that the students could not just copy and paste the sentences into an Internet translator. Teacher E also used pictures, but in a different way, since she added some pictures into the tests as exercises and the students had to make for example conditional sentences based on these pictures. Teacher E tells that she uses this method in her tests today in contact teaching, too.

Furthermore, using written assignments instead of tests is also mentioned by teachers B, D and E, and this is in line with earlier study results by Niemi and Kousa (2020, 361). Additionally, teacher A tells that there were quite a lot of written assignments, but they did not replace tests. Also, teacher B, for example, notes that she did not want to punish the students from being outside of their own comfort zone and having trouble learning, and that is why she had valued more written assignments than tests in her grading. Still, even though teachers B, D and E say that written assignments were a good way of testing what the students had learnt, all of them tell that they were very much work to go through and check. Teacher E also mentions that she does not use written assignments that much during contact teaching today. Teacher A, who also had written assignments during distance teaching, but not as tests, states that these written assignments his students had went with varying success. All in all, it could be stated that all the participants found efficient ways of making exams or testing their students in other ways during distance teaching.

When asked about the grading and value of distance teaching exams, all teachers tell that they changed them, at least to some extent, and this also supports previous study results by Amzalag, Shapira and Dolev (2021, 252). For example, teacher B tells that the exams had 50 % of the value they normally do, while teachers A and D tell that the value was lesser than during contact teaching, but still big. None of the teachers tell that the exam grades had changed radically during distance teaching, which is of course a good thing. This too tells about the pedagogical skills of the teachers. Furthermore, teacher G explains her course grading this way:

- (31) The [course] grades had to be based on something even though lesson activity was absent during distance teaching. Many grades were probably a bit higher than they should have been, so that the students maintained their motivation at least in some way. (Teacher G)

Similarly, teacher D explains that when giving grades, the emphasis was more on the positive than on the negative test and assignment results, since she did not want to radically drop any student's grade based on distance teaching. These two experiences about motivating the students and having empathy towards them support previous study results by Murphy et al. (2011, 410). Additionally, teacher C tells that in spring 2020 in her school, they got directions from above that distance teaching itself cannot affect any grades lowering. Furthermore, the teachers still mention that they took into account in their grading the fact that students may have used their books or translators while doing the tests.

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers were good at implementing their contact teaching lesson working methods into distance teaching. No teacher describes themselves being totally lost with their distance teaching lessons even in the beginning, and even though some inefficient distance teaching working methods and lesson activities were omitted on the way, it only tells about the teachers' pedagogical skills and that they know their students well enough to not to do things with them that do not work for them. The teachers also tell that they got tips from their teacher colleagues on how to do things during their distance teaching lessons. Furthermore, the aim of this section was to answer the research question: How did the teachers' distance teaching working methods and lesson activities change through all the distance teaching periods? All participants state that their lesson working methods changed for being more efficient through all the distance teaching periods. The main reason for the change was the increased certainty of using ICT and digital platforms, and also the fact that the more things were tried, the more the teacher learnt about conducting efficient distance teaching lessons. The teachers also found the best ways for testing their students and having

exams at a distance with online platforms. Hence, the findings in this section are not in line with the ones by Zhang (2020, 43), who suggests the teachers don't know how to integrate technology into teaching efficiently.

5.5 Learner differences in distance teaching

When discussing students in distance teaching, learner differences is one of the most interesting topics. Some differences between different learners have already been mentioned in different sections among other themes, as well as the concern the teachers had towards their students and their getting along during distance teaching. However, in this section of the thesis, I will discuss and analyze the learner differences the teachers noticed during distance teaching more in-depth. I will also answer the final research question: Were there any major differences between different learners, and if yes, what were those?

As mentioned, it has already been discussed that for some students, distance teaching worked well, and for others, it really was not the best way to go to school. Teacher C outlines that in her opinion, distance teaching in general required too much from comprehensive school students since they were supposed to control their own learning. Additionally, teacher E explains her opinion about the impact of distance teaching for the current 9th graders (in spring 2022) who have been in distance teaching in 7th and 8th grades:

- (32) Those that are now 9th graders have suffered the most, they have had for example only one practical training [where you learn about working life] in junior high school. [...] They do not have all the things [knowledge-wise] we demand of them, maybe it's the teachers' fault, but still, the situation was demanding. They still would have needed more challenges and greater, bigger areas to work with [during distance teaching]. But still, they are doing pretty okay, they are not doing bad. (Teacher E)

This opinion about 9th graders also again supports previous study results about empathy towards students by Murphy et al. (2011, 410). Furthermore, teacher E continues that teachers need to be gracious to the students, as well as to themselves, about coping in this new situation as distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was.

Furthermore, the participants continuously mention the fact that some weaker students were in danger of completely falling out of schoolwork. The teachers mention multiple reasons for that. The weaker students suffered for example from having challenges with their devices and technology, having neurobiological challenges, for example problems with concentration or ADHD, the inability to do self-guided work and handle their own schedule and the lack of

guidance, presence and friends and teachers physically. Also, the fact that for dyslexic students the increased number of written assignments must have been very heavy is mentioned by teacher D. Furthermore, teacher E explains weaker students and their challenges this way:

- (33) The weakest students were weak in different ways. For some of them, the weakness was also because of the environment at home. That was the saddest thing, that they did not have the support they needed from home. (Teacher E)

The support gotten from home and the general home circumstances are also mentioned by teacher B. On the other hand, the fact that the students that receive intensified or special support on regular teaching situations were able to study physically at school during distance teaching is mentioned by teachers C and D. Similarly, teacher B explains that she and her two co-teacher colleagues offered a support group for the students that receive support and for immigrant students to help them manage their schedules and assignments. She continues to note that this would not have been possible without co-teaching, since there would not have been time then. Additionally, teacher E mentions that she tried to keep in touch with the weaker students during contact teaching by calling them at least once, which supports the study results about the importance of student-teacher interaction by Mankki (2021, 7). She felt that this way, the students were able to tell if they had some major problems with their assignments, exercises, or studying in general. Teacher E continues that she thinks that she was able to reach almost all her weaker students like this.

In contrast, the fact that stronger students get along regardless of the physical situation, is mentioned by all participants. Even some quieter students of teacher C enjoyed the changed learning situation:

- (34) Some students really shined, because of the Internet was a good environment for them, and the fact that they could be alone without any distraction. Some students learnt better and did better in their assignments and some students were also able to disclose themselves better and more bravely, even if they had been quieter in a normal classroom situation. (Teacher C)

When discussing the quieter students, teacher D tells that with some of them, their microphone was always “not working”, but still, some of the most conscientious students always wrote their answers to the chat box in *Microsoft Teams*. Teacher D also continues to mention that some students that do not bother to do the exercises, act more arrogantly and are keen on commenting everything in a normal classroom came out more positively during distance teaching, since they really listened to the teaching and were on track with it.

Sometimes these students were the biggest reason for the smooth procession of the lessons, since they answered the teacher's questions when nobody else did. Similarly, teacher D tells that there were some quieter students who were brave enough to talk more during distance teaching lessons. Teacher D continues to wonder if this resulted from the fact that nobody could see them or bothered to make stupid comments.

Additionally, as it has already been mentioned in section 5.1, teacher D tells that there were some students who had a lot of absences during contact teaching, but still attended the distance teaching lessons and participated better during them. This was also supported by teacher F, who explains that even more silent students had the chance to say something during distance teaching lessons, because they were not talked over by the rest of the group. Also, quieter students longing for some interaction supports the previous study results by Zhang (2020, 44). In contrast, teacher C describes that some students who participate and talk more during contact teaching just disappeared somewhere and did not participate actively during contact teaching.

Moreover, teacher D tells that for some students, written assignments that were already mentioned in section 5.4 were a good fit, since they were able to disclose their knowledge better through them, while other students that do not like written assignments and are more talkative during lessons, were not able to disclose their knowledge that well. Teacher G also mentions that the students that are not that social and do not long for the physical presence of other people managed to handle the distance teaching situation very well. Additionally, this is also supported by teacher A, who explains that differences between different learners are emphasized in small group work. The stronger students were doing what they were supposed to do and had discussions in their groups, while the weaker students stayed silent and did not always do anything in their groups.

On the other hand, along with these two extremities, teacher G explains that among her students, there were also the ones that were somewhat bothered about distance teaching but still accepted the changed situation. Teacher F also states that the students were a bit bored with distance teaching and the whole system, which supports previous study results about the importance of maintaining student enthusiasm by Zhang (2020, 44) and the argument about the issue of student boredom teaching by White (2003, 68-69). Similarly, teacher D tells that during her lessons, the students that were mostly talking were the ones that are talking during contact teaching lessons, too.

The different ways the students learn, and its impacts are also mentioned by two teachers. Teacher E explains that visual learners are more reachable during contact teaching, when there are the video projector and the board. During distance teaching, however, when visual learners are at home with their mobile phones in their hands, the instructions do not reach them that well, which leads for them not learning the things they are supposed to learn. Additionally, teacher B describes the learning process of some of her students:

- (35) When we came back to school for the last two-week period [in spring 2020], the students said that they had realized for example that they need support from the teacher. In contrast, other students said that it was wonderful that they were able to do everything at their own pace and they had more free time. For the students, distance teaching was an eye-opening lesson, since some liked it and also understood why they liked it, and some who needed support realized that it is not for them to study remotely. [The students were] learning to learn. (Teacher B)

Teacher E also concludes that the different learners have done better in contact teaching now, after all distance teaching periods. To continue, teacher A reports that distance teaching did not do good for the level differences between different learners. He continues to tell that the English grade in the comprehensive school diploma does not always tell the real level of the student if the grade has been given during distance teaching periods. This is immediately revealed when the student starts studying the language in upper secondary school.

Overall, the biggest difference the teachers noticed between different learners during distance teaching was the fact that the talented students always get along, no matter what the physical circumstances are, while weaker students struggle and might miss many things. The teachers noticed that there were also some students that fell somewhere in between these two extremities, and even though these students might not have liked distance teaching that much and they felt that it was not for them, they still got along and managed to handle their studies and schedules self-guidingly from home.

Another difference between different learners was that some students are longing for the presence of other people, either other students or the teacher, and social contacts, while others enjoy working alone from home in a silent environment. The teachers also mention some positive changes their students experienced during distance teaching, since some quieter students got courage to speak up during the lessons, and some disappeared students returned to the lines and participated in teaching. On the other hand, some students just disappeared altogether when distance teaching first began. In sum, regardless the students being talented or weaker, some teachers present their worry about their coping with the situation and

learning the things they were supposed to learn, which supports previous study results by Niemi and Kousa (2020, 361).

6 Conclusion

In this study, I have described and analyzed English teachers' dynamic experiences and opinions about distance teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland. The material of the study was gathered with semi-structured interviews of seven qualified English teachers, and it was analyzed qualitatively. In the different analysis sections I have discussed the teachers' dynamic experiences and opinions about distance teaching as well as the positive and negative things they find about distance teaching, their consuming of time in planning and implementing distance teaching, their experiences about the use of technology and ICT during distance teaching and the support they got from colleagues and employers during distance teaching, their distance teaching classroom methods, activities, test arrangements and grading, and the differences they noticed between different learners during distance teaching.

The results of this study reveal that most of the teachers were very concerned about implementing distance teaching when it first began. They were worried about their own coping with it, mostly because of the lack of their own ICT skills and training gotten for it, which is in line with previous studies about the topic (Zhang 2020; Korhonen et al. 2021; Finnish National Agency for Education 2021). All teachers were also worried about the students' coping with self-guided studying, as well as their mental well-being when there are no physical social contacts or that much interaction during the school days, which supports previous study results as well (Niemi and Kousa 2020; Hebebcı, Bertiz and Alan 2020). The participant teachers also describe feeling empathy towards the students and therefore reducing the number of homework and other returnable assignments, and this too is in line with previous study results (Murphy et al. 2011). Additionally, the teachers eased off also on themselves and just worked with the ICT and pedagogical skills they had at the moment during distance teaching, without stressing too much about learning everything new.

The main hypothesis in this study was that the teachers' opinions about distance teaching have changed throughout all distance teaching periods that they were a part of. The findings of the study suggest that this indeed was the case, since all the teachers explain that the first distance teaching period was the hardest, and the subsequent ones were found being easier. The teachers mention that after the first distance teaching period, they already had some experiences about implementing their contact teaching working methods and lesson activities into distance teaching online classroom, which made the transition into distance teaching easier. Most of the teachers also report that their ICT skills got better as distance teaching

proceeded, and they had the courage to try out more new technological and digital things during lessons. As earlier presented, however, most of the teachers state that they still were not happy about moving to distance teaching for the subsequent periods.

The most important new finding in this study was, as previously introduced, that the results about the time aspect are not in line with previous studies about the topic (DiBiase 2000; Bender, Wood and Vredevoogd 2004). The present study results reveal that all but one participant estimate having used more time to prepare and plan the lessons during distance teaching, which was not the case with the earlier studies. It should be noted, however, that the earlier studies have concerned higher education than the present study, since they have been about distance teaching at university level. The present study concerns mostly teaching underaged children, those that are in comprehensive school and upper secondary school. Another important new finding was naturally the mostly positive dynamic change of the teachers' opinions about distance teaching, since, as stated, the topic of dynamicity of distance teaching experiences has not been studied before.

The limitations of this study concern the rather small number of its participants. In order to get the study results to be more representative in the future, more participants could be included. For the study to be as effective as it could be, some of the questions could be asked quantitatively before the interviews, for example with a questionnaire form. The questionnaire form could include at least the background questions. This way, the study would be a mixed methods study, and grouping the participants according to for example their teaching background and age would probably be faster.

Additionally, the teachers that do not fit the exact requirements of a study participant could then be eliminated from the study before the interviews. The present study, for example, includes one participant that taught mostly on IB program during COVID-19 distance teaching (teacher F), and her students represent quite a different student material than the students that study in general upper secondary school in Finland. Her students were already used to for example self-guided work and written assignments before distance teaching first began, and hence, teacher F herself stated that she might not be the perfect fit for this study. Her students might also have had experience about distance teaching before COVID-19, since, as she stated, there is always some distance teaching going on in the IB program. Nevertheless, I considered the option of eliminating her answers from the study material, but

as she herself did not have any prior experience about distance teaching before COVID-19, I decided to include her in the study after all.

Moreover, the topic of learner differences during distance teaching is an interesting topic, but it was not the main interest in this study. Hence, I discussed the topic only briefly since my main interest was teachers' personal experiences and opinions about distance teaching. Learner differences as well as the pedagogical aspect of distance teaching could be an interesting topic for future research. Different learners and their ways of learning are after all one of the major influences when teachers are planning their courses and lessons, both in contact teaching and in distance teaching, and hence, this topic could be studied further in the future. Another future research topic came up in the interview of teacher A, who expressed his interest in the topic of how the multiple distance teaching period has affected the level differences between different learners.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that teachers' experiences and opinions about distance teaching during COVID-19 have changed throughout distance teaching periods, and mostly for the better, at least working method-wise. Even though distance teaching was mostly found heavy, stressful, and time-consuming, the teachers have survived from it and gotten new technological and pedagogical skills for the future, concerning both their lessons and also their exams, which also supports previous study results (Bergdahl and Nouri 2020; Folkman, Josefsson and Fjetland 2022). Even though the number of participants in the present study is quite small, the interview answers and thus also the results of the study were compatible. The biggest differences between different participants were about their personal ICT skills they had before distance teaching started. Hence, it could broadly be stated that the present study represents quite well the experiences and opinions English language teachers have about distance teaching in Finland.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions for teachers

Background questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. Which grades did you teach during COVID-19 distance teaching periods?

Main questions:

1. How did you feel about distance teaching in the beginning (spring 2020)? Did this feeling change through all the distance teaching periods and if yes, how and why?
 - Thinking afterwards, what were the good and/or bad things about distance teaching?
 - Had you had any training about distance teaching and its technological aspects before it started? What and how? If yes, was it useful? If not, do you think it would have been useful? Do you wish to get (more) training in the future?
 - When compared to contact teaching, did you use more or less time planning the courses and/or lessons?
 - If needed, did you get any help or support from your language teacher or other teacher colleagues, or from other personnel at your school? If yes, what kind of help or support was that?

2. How did your distance teaching classroom working methods/classroom activities evolve from spring 2020 to spring 2021?
 - Did you use some working methods or lesson activities at first that you later left unused? If yes, what were those and why? Do you use them today in contact teaching?
 - Did you find and use any new working methods or lesson activities? If yes, what were those and do you still use them in contact teaching?
 - Did you have any tests at a distance? If yes, how did you supervise and evaluate them? How did you value them when giving grades?
 - Did you notice any major differences between different learners during distance teaching? If yes, what were the biggest or most important ones?

Appendix 2. Finnish summary

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman aihe on suomalaisten englannin kielen opettajien dynaamiset kokemukset COVID-19-pandemian aikaisesta etäopetuksesta. Etäopetus yleistyi sekä Suomessa että maailmalla nopeasti vuoden 2020 alussa, kun COVID-19 levisi ympäri maailman. Suomen hallitus päätti sulkea kaikki peruskoulut ja lukiot maaliskuussa 2020 (Opetushallitus 2020), ja etäopetusjakso oli kaksi kuukautta pitkä. Tämän ensimmäisen etäopetusjakson jälkeen perusopetuslakiin tuli muutos, joka salli alueiden itse päättää opetuksen fyysisistä järjestelyistä. Kevään 2020 jälkeen Suomessa onkin ollut myös muita alueellisia sekä koko maan laajuisia etäopetusjaksoja, esimerkiksi keväällä 2021.

Etäopetusta ja sen järjestämistä on tutkittu jo kauan, mutta tutkimukset lisääntyivät luonnollisesti paljon COVID-19-pandemian myötä. Pandemian aikaiset ja jälkeiset tutkimukset ovat käsitelleet esimerkiksi etäopetukseen siirtymiseen vaikuttavia syitä (Sangeeta ja Tandon 2021), etä- ja lähiopetuksen välisiä eroja (Stone et al. 2021), digipedagogiikkaa (Zhang ja Yu 2021) sekä opettajien kokemuksia pandemian aikaisesta etäopetuksesta (Zhang 2020; Mankki 2021; Niemi ja Kousa 2020).

Aikaisempien tutkimuksien aiheena on usein ollut tietyllä hetkellä esiin nousseet kokemukset etäopetuksesta, ja niistä on puuttunut dynaaminen aspekti etäopetuskokemuksiin. Tämän tutkielman aiheeksi valikoituikin opettajien dynaamiset kokemukset ja se, kuinka heidän mielipiteensä etäopetuksesta muuttuivat eri etäopetusjaksojen aikana ja myötä. Aiemmat tutkimukset ovat myös harvemmin koskeneet opettajia, jotka opettavat alaikäisiä oppilaita, ja sen vuoksi tämän tutkielman materiaali kerättiin peruskoulun ja lukion englannin opettajien haastattelujen avulla. Taustatutkimuksen perusteella esiin nousi eri teemoja, joita käsiteltiin haastatteluissa. Näitä teemoja ovat esimerkiksi etäopetuksen suunnittelun ja toteutuksen ajankäyttö sekä IT-asiat (*informaatioteknologia*) etäopetuksessa. Teemojen perusteella muodostettiin yksi primäärinen ja neljä sekundaarista tutkimuskysymystä.

Primääritutkimuskysymys on:

- Kuinka englannin kielten opettajien mielipiteet ja kokemukset etäopetuksesta kehittyivät ja muuttuivat ensimmäisestä etäopetusjaksosta viimeiseen etäopetusjaksoon?

Sekundaariset tutkimuskysymykset ovat:

- Mitkä olivat etäopetuksen hyviä ja huonoja puolia, ja mitä mahdollisia hankaluuksia etäopetus tuotti?
- Miten opettajat kokivat IT:n käytön etäopetuksessa?
- Kuinka opettajien etäopetuksessa käytetyt tuntityöskentelykeinot ja tuntiaktiviteetit muuttuivat eri etäopetusjaksojen aikana?
- Oliko eri oppijoiden välillä eroja etäopetuksessa, ja jos kyllä, niin mitä?

Teoria

Etäopetus sisältää ajatuksen siitä, että joko opettaja tai oppilaat, tai opettaja ja oppilaat ovat “etäällä”, ja perinteiseen lähiopetukseen ei ole mahdollisuutta (Nummenmaa 2012).

Etäopetuksen aikana on tärkeää saada oppilaat osallistumaan opetukseen, ja tämä vaatii erilaisia kommunikaatiostrategioita sekä opettajan täydellistä läsnäoloa opetustilanteessa (Conrad ja Donaldson 2012). Opettajan on hyvä myös vetää rajat sille, kuinka paljon hän on tavoitettavissa etäopetuksen aikana, etteivät oppilaat oleta opettajan olevan tietokoneen ääressä heitä varten aamusta iltaan (Conrad ja Donaldson 2012). Tämä linkittyy vahvasti etäopetuksen ajankäyttöön, jota on tutkittu aiemminkin. Vaikka voisi olettaa, että opetuksen suunnittelu ja toteutus vie enemmän aikaa, aiemmat tutkimukset kuitenkin todistavat toisin (DiBiase 2000; Bender, Wood ja Vredevoogd 2004). Nämä kyseiset tutkimukset ovat kuitenkin koskeneet korkeakoulujen opettajia, joten niiden tuloksia ei voi suoraan peilata tämän pro gradun tuloksiin.

Kielten opettaminen etänä ei ole ilmiönä uusi, mutta teknologia sen taustalla kehittyä koko ajan muuttaen myös kielten etäopettamisen muotoa (White 2003). Tällä hetkellä kielten etäopetuksessa pidetään tärkeänä synkronista kommunikaatiota, interaktiivisuutta ja palautteen antamista (White 2003). Myös opettajan innokkuus, tuki oppilaille ja hyvän opiskeluilmapiirin luominen on tärkeää, jotta etäopetuksessa saadaan hyviä tuloksia (Conrad ja Donaldson 2012). Tutkimusten mukaan opettajat ovatkin olleet huolissaan oppilaiden innokkuuden ylläpitämisestä etäopetuksen aikana (Zhang 2020). Myös tässä aiheessa korostuu palautteen antamisen lisäksi mallina ja motivaattorina olemisen sekä opettajan ja oppilaiden välisten sosiaalisten kontaktien ylläpitämisen tärkeys (White 2003). Myös empatia oppilaita ja heidän etäopetuksen aikaista työmääräänsä kohtaan on tärkeää (Murphy et al. 2011). Suomessa kotitehtävät ovat tärkeä osa koulutyötä, ja etäopetuksen aikana nousikin esiin kotitehtävien alati kasvanut määrä ja sen luomat ongelmat.

COVID-19-pandemian aikana ja jälkeen tehtyjen tutkimusten mukaan opettajat ovat olleet huolissaan etäopetuksen aikaisista oppimistuloksista sekä opettajan ja oppilaiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen vähydestä (Niemi ja Kousa 2020; Hebecci, Bertiz ja Alan 2020). Esiin on noussut myös se, että opettajilla ei ollut juuri lainkaan aikaa valmistautua siirtymään lähiopetuksesta etäopetukseen pandemian alussa (Bergdahl ja Nouri 2020). Opettajat ovat myös kokeneet työnantajalta ja kollegoilta saadun tuen hyvin vähäiseksi etäopetukseen siirtymisessä ja sen aikana (Tunegaru 2021). Myös opettajien etäopetuksen aikana kokemaa stressiä on tutkittu, ja sen on huomattu osittain kasvaneen (Klapproth et al. 2020). Hyviäkin puolia etäopetuksesta on tullut tutkimuksissa esiin, kuten esimerkiksi uusien opetusmenetelmien löytäminen ja käyttöönotto sekä pedagogisen viitekehyksen digitalisaation on huomattu tarjoavan uusia mahdollisuuksia opetukseen (Tunegaru 2021; Folkman, Josefsson ja Fjetland 2022). Myös opettajien etäopetuksen aikaisia koejärjestelyjä ja arviointimenetelmiä on tutkittu aikaisemmin ja opettajat ovat raportoineet muuttaneensa niitä etäopetusta varten (Reedy et al. 2021; Amzalag, Shapira ja Dolev 2021).

Monet opettajien etäopetuksen aikana kokemista ongelmista liittyvät teknologiaan ja IT:n käyttämiseen. Opettajat ovat kokeneet omat IT-taitonsa puutteelliseksi, vaikka 81 % suomalaisista opettajista käyttääkin teknologiaa opetuksessaan melkein joka tunnilla (Opetushallitus 2021). Vaikka opettajat ovatkin epävarmoja omista IT-taidoistaan, he kokevat silti opetuksen digitalisaation eli digiloikan positiivisena asiana (OAJ 2016). Suomen lisäksi myös muualla maailmassa on tutkimusten avulla saatu selville, että edes nuorten opettajien IT-taidot eivät välttämättä ole riittävät (König, Jäger-Biela ja Glutsch 2020). Toisaalta juuri nuoret opettajat kokevat etäopetuksen ja IT:n luovan paljon pedagogisia mahdollisuuksia, kuten kurin pitämisen ja yksittäisten oppilaiden auttamisen helppouden (Drir ja Schatz-Oppenheimer 2020). IT ja teknologian käyttö opetuksessa ovatkin siis asioita, joihin tulisi panostaa tulevaisuuden opettajankoulutuksessa sekä täydennyskoulutuksissa.

Aineisto ja metodologia

Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma on kvalitatiivinen tutkielma, jonka aineisto kerättiin englannin kielen opettajan haastatteluilla. Lupa opettajien haastatteluihin kysyttiin ensin heidän koulujensa rehtoreilta, jonka jälkeen opettajia lähestyttiin henkilökohtaisesti. Haastattelu oli puolistrukturoitu, johon oli valmiina kysymysrunko, mutta haastattelujen edetessä oli mahdollisuus kysyä täydentäviä kysymyksiä eri aiheista. Haastattelurunko oli englanniksi, mutta opettajilla oli mahdollisuus vastata kysymyksiinsä halutessaan myös suomeksi.

Haastateltavat saivat tutustua kysymysrunkoon jo etukäteen. Haastattelut toteutettiin huhtitoukokuun 2022 aikana joko etänä *Microsoft Teams*issa tai kasvokkain. Kaikki haastattelut nauhoitettiin ja niiden pituudet vaihtelivat 10 ja 51 minuutin välillä. Haastattelujen jälkeen materiaali kuunneltiin ja käytiin läpi kirjoittaen tärkeimmät asiat ylös, mutta haastatteluja ei litteroitu kokonaan. Nauhoituksia säilytettiin salasanan takana pilvipalvelussa ja tutkielman valmistumisen jälkeen nauhoitukset tuhottiin.

Tutkimukseen osallistuneet opettajat ovat kaikki muodollisesti päteviä englannin kielen opettajia joko peruskoulussa tai lukiossa. Heidän opetuskokemuksensa vaihtelee 3 ja 25 vuoden välillä, ja kukaan heistä ei ollut opettanut etänä ennen COVID-19-pandemiaa ja kevättä 2020. Opettajilta ei kysytty mitään muita henkilökohtaisia tietoja kuin heidän opetuskokemuksensa vuosina sekä ne luokka-asteet, joita he opettivat etäopetuksen aikana. Aineiston analyysissä heidät on nimikoitu kirjaimin A-G.

Analyysi

Materiaalin analyysi on ryhmitelty viiden eri teeman alle. Nämä teemat noudattavat melko tarkasti tutkimuskysymyksiä, kuitenkin kysymyksiä ja niiden vastauksia on ryhmitelty yhteen suurempien kattoteemojen alle. Nämä analyysin teemat ovat opettajien tuntemukset etäopetuksesta ja etäopetuksen positiiviset ja negatiiviset puolet, etäopetuksen ajankäyttö, teknologia ja IT sekä työnantajalta ja kollegoilta saatu tuki etäopetuksessa, toimivat ja ei-toimivat etäopetusmenetelmät sekä koejärjestelyt ja arviointi etäopetuksessa ja oppijoiden väliset erot etäopetuksessa.

Tulokset

Opettajat löysivät etäopetuksesta sekä hyviä että huonoja puolia. Monet tutkimukseen osallistuneet opettajat kokivat omat IT-taitonsa melko heikoiksi, mutta kun taidot karttuivat, mielipide etäopetuksesta vaihtui positiivisempaan päin, mikä tukee aiempia tutkimustuloksia aiheesta (Bergdahl ja Nouri 2020). Vaikka opettajien ensimmäiset ajatukset etäopetukseen siirtymisestä olivat melko negatiivisia, niin yksikään opettaja ei kuitenkaan sanonut, etteikö etäopetuksessa olisi ollut mitään hyvää. Nämä positiiviset asiat koskivat sekä opettajia itseään ja heidän työskentely-ympäristöään, sekä myös oppilaita ja heidän pärjäämistään etäopetuksessa. Kokonaisuudessaan opettajat kokivat etäopetuksessa kuitenkin olleen enemmän huonoja kuin hyviä puolia. Huonoiksi puoliksi luettiin omien IT-taitojen puutteen lisäksi huoli oppilaiden mielenterveydestä ja sosiaalisista kontakteista. Myös opettajan ja

oppilaiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen väheneminen nousi tutkimustuloksissa useasti esiin, ja tämä on mainittu myös aiemmissa tutkimustuloksissa (Niemi ja Kousa 2020; Bertiz ja Alan 2020).

Kun opettajat kertoivat opetuksen suunnitteluun sekä toteutukseen kuluvasta ajan käytöstään etäopetuksen aikana, suurin osa heistä totesi tämän ajan lisääntyneen huomattavasti, mikä ei vastaa aiempia tutkimustuloksia aiheesta (DiBiase 2000; Bender, Wood ja Vredevoogd 2004). Tuntien ja kokonaisten kurssien muuttaminen etäopetettavaan muotoon vei opettajilta paljon aikaa etäopetuksen alussa. Osa opettajista myös korvasi kokeita tarkastettavilla ainekirjoituksilla, mikä lisäsi siis myös tehtävien tarkastamiseen kuluvaa aikaa. Myös ajankäytön suhteen mainittiin kasvaneet IT-taidot ja niiden tuoma apu tuntien suunnittelussa ja siihen käytetyssä ajassa. Myös aika-aspektista löytyi siis sekä hyviä että huonoja puolia, vaikka etäopetuksen koettiin vievän enemmän aikaa ennen, aikana ja jälkeen oppituntien.

IT- ja teknologiataidot nousivat esiin jo aiemmissakin teorian kappaleissa, niiden ollessa suuri osa etäopetuksen toteuttamista. IT-asioista sellaisenaan löydettiin myös sekä hyviä että huonoja puolia. Vaikka, kuten aiemmin mainittu, monet opettajista kokivat omat IT-taitonsa heikoiksi etäopetuksen alussa, oppivat he koko ajan uutta, mitä pidemmälle etäopetus eteni. Myös työnantajalta ja kollegoilta saatu IT- ja muu tuki nousi positiivisena esiin, vaikka kaikki opettajat eivät olleet saaneet tukea etäopetuksen järjestämiseen yhtä paljon. Myös henkinen ja pedagoginen tuki erilaisista sosiaalisen median opettajaryhmistä esimerkiksi Facebookissa nousi positiivisena esiin.

Osalle opettajista oli järjestetty IT-koulutuksia etäopetuksen järjestämistä varten hyvin nopeallakin aikataululla keväällä 2020, kun taas osa joutui pärjäämään täysin omin avuin sekä kollegoiden avulla pitkälle kevääseen, ennen kuin mitään koulutuksia järjestettiin. Kaikilla opettajilla oli kuitenkin ollut mahdollisuus osallistua IT-koulutukseen jossakin vaiheessa etäopetusta, ja kaikissa kouluissa oli IT-vastaava, joka pystyi auttamaan ongelmatilanteissa maksimissaan päivän viiveellä.

Kaikki opettajat kertoivat, että he muuttivat opetusmetodejaan etäopetusta varten. Tutkielman tulokset osoittavatkin, että opettajat olivat hyviä muuntamaan lähiopetuksen opetusmetodit ja -sisällöt etäopetukseen, sillä haastatteluissa nousi esiin hyvin vähän tuntien sisältöjä, jotka eivät toimineet etäopetuksessa lainkaan. Yksikään opettaja ei myöskään kertonut olleensa täysin hukassa tuntiaktiiviteettiensa kanssa edes etäopetuksen alussa, mikä kertoo opettajien hyvistä pedagogisista taidoista. Opettajat ottivat etäopetuksen aikana käyttöön myös joitakin

heille uusia opetustapoja, kuten erilaisia digialustoja, joita he hyödyntävät vielä tänäkin päivänä opetuksessaan.

Myös etäopetuksen kokeiden kerrottiin olleen osittain hieman erilaisia kuin lähiopetuksessa. Osa opettajista kertoi muuttaneensa kokeidensa tehtäviä vähentääkseen huijaamisen mahdollisuutta ja tämä tukee aiempia tutkimustuloksia aiheesta (Amzalag, Shapira ja Dolev 2021). Osa opettajista kuitenkin kertoi, ettei edes valvonut koetilanteita ja vain luotti oppilaisiin niiden aikana, mikä taas on ristiriidassa aiempien tutkimustulosten kanssa (Mankki 2021). Kuten aiemmin mainittu, osa opettajista korvasi kokeita myös esimerkiksi erilaisilla kirjoitustehtävillä, ja tämä on linjassa aiempien tutkimustulosten kanssa (Niemi ja Kousa 2020). Suurin osa opettajista myös vähensi arviointinsa painotusta etäopetuksessa verrattuna lähiopetuksessa saatuihin arvosanoihin, kuten aiemmissakin tutkimuksissa on tullut ilmi (Amzalag, Shapira ja Dolev 2021).

Eri oppijoiden välisistä eroista tutkielmassa nousi vahvimpana esiin se, että monet opettajat sanoivat taitavampien oppilaiden pärjäävän missä olosuhteissa tahansa, kun taas heikommat kärsivät etäopetuksessa valtavasti ja jäivät jopa opetuksesta jälkeen. Sama päti myös sosiaaliin ja vähemmän sosiaaliin oppilaisiin, kun osalle etäopetus sopi todella hyvin, ja taas toisille se ei sopinut lainkaan. Osa oppilaista myös toi etäopetuksessa esiin uusia puolia itsestään esimerkiksi olemalla enemmän aktiivinen tunneilla tai vaihtoehtoisesti jopa katoamalla kokonaan koulutyöstä, kun etäopetus alkoi. Opettajia yhdisti huoli heidän oppilaistaan ja näiden pärjäämisestä muuttuneessa opetusympäristössä ja maailmantilanteessa, mikä tukee aiempia tutkimustuloksia aiheesta (Niemi ja Kousa 2020).

Johtopäätökset

Tämän tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että monet opettajat olivat etäopetuksen alussa keväällä 2020 sen järjestämisestä erittäin huolissaan. Aiempien tutkimustulosten linjassa heidän huolensa kohdistui erityisesti heidän omiin IT-taitoihinsa (Zhang 2020; Korhonen et al. 2021; OAJ 2021) Myös heidän oppilaidensa henkinen pärjääminen epävarmassa tilanteessa ja uudessa kouluympäristössä sekä oppilailta vaadittu tietynlainen itseohjautuvuus ja itsesäätely huolestutti opettajia etäopetuksen alussa ja aikana. Tämän vuoksi opettajat vähensivätkin esimerkiksi annettujen kotitehtävien määrää etäopetuksen aikana, jotteivat oppilaat olisi kuormittuneet liiaksi, mikä on linjassa aiempien tutkimustulosten kanssa (Murphy et al. 2011).

Tutkielman päähypoteesi oli, että opettajien kokemukset ja ajatukset etäopetuksesta muuttuivat läpi eri etäopetusjaksojen vuosien 2020 ja 2021 välisenä aikana. Tutkimustulosten perusteella tämä piti paikkansa, sillä suurin osa opettajista koki ensimmäisen etäopetusjakson keväällä 2020 kaikista kuormittavammaksi, ja vaikeivat muut etäopetusjaksot olleet täysin helppoja, olivat ne kuitenkin helpompia kuin ensimmäinen. Muita etäopetusjaksoja helpotti opettajien kasvaneet valmiudet ja IT-taidot etäopetuksen järjestämiseen. Myös opettajien rohkeus kokeilla uusia teknologioita ja IT-ympäristöjä oppitunneilla kasvoi eri etäopetusjaksojen myötä.

Tutkielman tärkein löydös on se, että opettajat kertoivat käyttäneensä enemmän aikaa etäopetuksen suunnitteluun kuin lähiopetuksen suunnitteluun, mikä ei tue aiempia tutkimustuloksia aiheesta (DiBiase 2000; Bender, Wood ja Vredevoogd 2004). Aiemmat tutkimukset ovat kuitenkin kohdistuneet korkeakouluihin, ja alaikäisten oppilaiden opettajien kokemuksia etäopetuksen ajankäytöstä ei juurikaan ole tutkittu. Myöskään opettajien dynaamisia kokemuksia etäopetuksesta ei ole tutkittu aiemmin, joten opettajien eri etäopetusjaksojen aikana muuttuneet mielipiteet ja kokemukset etäopetuksesta ovat myös uusia tutkimustuloksia. Kuitenkin, jotta tulevaisuudessa voitaisiin saada luotettavampia tuloksia, haastateltavia opettajia tulisi olla enemmän. Osallistujien pieni määrä onkin tämän tutkielman suurin rajoite.

Tämän tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että englannin opettajien kokemukset ja mielipiteet etäopetuksesta muuttuivat eri etäopetusjaksojen aikana. Tulokset vastaavat myös aiempia tuloksia siitä, että vaikka etäopetus koettiin raskaammaksi, kuormittavammaksi ja aikaavievemmäksi kuin lähiopetus, opettajat kuitenkin oppivat siitä paljon, esimerkiksi uusia pedagogisia taitoja, IT-taitoja ja opetusmenetelmiä (Bergdahl ja Nouri 2020; Folkman, Josefsson ja Fjetland 2022). Eri oppijoiden välisiin eroihin ja niiden syihin ei paneuduttu tässä tutkielmassa kovinkaan syvällisesti, ja se voisikin olla yksi mahdollinen tutkimusaihe tulevaisuudelle. Toinen mahdollinen tulevaisuuden tutkimusaihe voisi olla myös etäopetuksen järjestämisen pedagoginen puoli ja pedagogisen viitekehyksen muuttaminen lähiopetuksesta etäopetukseen. Myös etäopetuksen vaikutus eri oppilaiden välisiin tasoeroihin eri oppiaineissa nousi yhdessä tämän tutkielman haastattelussa esiin, ja tämäkin voisi olla mahdollinen tutkimusaihe tulevaisuudessa.