

Finnish University Students' Views of the Strengths of Foreign Language Courses

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Abstract—Compared with younger language learners, adult learners are assumed to have greater difficulty with language learning, for instance, in reaching native-like proficiency. Most studies in the area of second language acquisition and foreign language education have focused on younger learners, with the research on adult language learning being very limited. Through an analysis of previous studies on adult language learning and small-scale empirical research, this article examines students' views of the strengths and good practices of foreign language courses in university language courses other than English. The questionnaire data collected from university students (N = 53) learning French, German and Italian as L3/L4 at the language centre of a Finnish university were analysed in a qualitative and quantitative way. The strongest evidence from our study was the indispensable role of teachers in university language courses. The analysis results indicate a mismatch between teacher-led and student-centred pedagogy. On the one hand, adult learners seemed to need strong guidance from the teacher, yet on the other hand, the best practices in the courses were those activities in which the adult learners could produce the target language in interactions with their peers. Finally, the factors that enhance adult language learning in higher education are reflected upon.

Index Terms—adult language learning, higher education, language course, languages other than English, language learning methods

I. INTRODUCTION

Adult learning is generally an interdisciplinary field of study based on diverse theories and approaches (Elias & Merriam, 2005). The area of second/foreign language (SL/FL) teaching and learning has focused on language learning by children and young adolescent learners (Ramírez Gómez, 2016, p. 201). The literature on adult SL/FL education is not very coherent because studies are often context-specific, and their findings cannot be generalised to other contexts (Murray, 2005). Generally, prior experiences of adult language learners have an influence on their language learning process both positively and negatively. Many studies have indicated that learners who have their first experiences with a language in early childhood seem to be able to 'achieve normal language acquisition while those who begin later come nowhere near native ultimate attainment' (Ioup, 2005, p. 420). Several studies have demonstrated that the ability to learn a second language gradually declines as a person ages (Bialystok & Miller, 1999; Birdsong, 2014). Although children may be better at language *acquisition* than adults, this does not necessarily mean that adults would be worse language *learners*. It is true that along with age, adult learners lose the language-learning skills they once possessed in their childhood. Accordingly, as a person ages, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to achieve native-like competence in a foreign language. Hence, age is often considered a barrier to language learning. However, in a few areas of language learning, adult learners have certain strengths, for instance, in the use of language learning strategies (Oxford & Ehrman, 1990) or in learning morphology and grammar (Krashen et al., 1979; Long, 2005).

Based on the questionnaire data collected from students enrolled in language courses other than English at the language centre of a Finnish university, the aim of this study is to determine the strengths of a language course for adult learners and identify beneficial classroom practices. First, we discuss the findings of previous studies on characteristics of adult language learners. Second, we focus on the literature related to teaching methods used in adult language learning. Third, based on our findings, we examine the strengths of language courses as reported by adult learners. Finally, we reflect on the factors that enhance adult language learning and provide implications for the development of adult language courses in higher education. The outcomes of this study can help with the planning of future FL courses in higher education, as well as with the development of language curricula and courses.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Characteristics of Adult Language Learners

As stated above, the literature has generally focused more on young learners than on adult learners. In terms of the age of language learners, we cannot avoid discussing the critical period hypothesis (CPH, introduced by Lenneberg 1967) that has affected the debate on the influence of age in language learning tremendously. CPH has especially guided the research on L2 acquisition (Long, 2005). Generally, according to CPH, late learners are less likely to reach native-like proficiency in a language than those who start early, preferably before puberty. In the 1960s, Lenneberg

(1967) concluded that brain plasticity is lost in puberty, meaning that the so-called brain fossilisation occurs, that is, a learner's linguistic development ceases. Since then, the theory of brain fossilisation has been questioned (Guglielman, 2012). The literature contains contradictory reports related to the existence of the critical period. On the one hand, the results of a few studies have indicated that the critical period does not exist (Hakuta et al., 2003; Birdsong, 2014), on the other hand, some studies have reported the negative effect of age on language learning (DeKeyser et al., 2010; DeKeyser, 2013). In addition to the debate surrounding the existence of the critical period, there are diverse opinions and research findings related to its closure. In her overview, Nikolov (2009, p. 3) concluded that there seems to be no 'sharp drop at a certain age in SLA, but a gradual decline across the lifespan'. In his review article, Ioup (2005) reported the existence of multiple critical periods. Because the term critical period has attracted controversy, the term sensitive period, which assumes a gradual decline in ability, has been suggested as being more appropriate. There are even more divergent research findings pertaining to the critical period in L2 learning than those in L1 learning (Ioup, 2005).

In the literature, the general consensus is that implicit linguistic competences in particular (e.g., native-like accent) are mostly affected by the age of a learner (Long, 2005). Long (2005) concluded that a native-like accent can be attained when the first exposure to a language occurs before the ages of 6 or 12 years. According to him, the sensitive period for lexical abilities, as well as for morphology and syntax, ends later in the mid-teens. However, he did state that an early start in language acquisition does not always guarantee a native-like accent. According to other studies (Nikolov, 2009), exceptional adults are able to reach native-like proficiency, including a native-like accent. Adults are usually considered to learn better with explicit instruction (Paradis, 2009).

However, a few areas of language learning are not affected by age to a great extent, especially those in which late learners can rely on explicit learning. Granena and Long (2013) found that late L2 learners increasingly rely on explicit mechanisms for language acquisition, which indicates that older learners use their explicit or declarative knowledge as the main resources for language learning. Memory-based processes are the strengths of young learners, whereas adult language learners are usually more successful with rule-based learning (Nikolov, 2009). The findings of Krashen et al., (1979) indicated that in early stages of learning morphology and syntax, adult learners progress faster than children. The acquisition of lexical semantics seems to remain "available throughout an individual's lifespan" (Ioup 2005, p. 421). A few grammatical structures (e.g. word order, questions) can be less difficult to pick up for late L2 English learners (e.g. university students) than others (e.g. articles, regular past), as indicated by McDonald (2006). FL learning may be easier for elderly learners if they are aware of their motivations, strengths, and weaknesses, as reported by Ram íez G3mez (2016) based on the results of a mixed-methods study conducted among older Spanish learners in Japan.

In terms of the use of metacognitive strategies in language learning, studies have yielded contradictory results related to language learning by adults compared to that by younger learners. For instance, Oxford and Ehrman (1990) indicated that adult learners are able to use learning strategies in a better manner than younger learners. By contrast, Griffiths (2013, p. 75) found no difference between older and younger students in terms of using learning strategies. Furthermore, DeKeyser et al. (2010) revealed that language learning processes in childhood and adulthood are different not only after reaching a certain level but also in their very nature. Among other things, their findings evidenced a decline in the ability to learn grammar before the onset of adulthood. In their review article, DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005) concluded that late language learners face more difficulties in learning grammar than younger learners (similarly Nikolov, 2009). To summarise, the results of the aforementioned studies vary considerably in describing how adults learn languages in comparison with other age groups.

B. Teaching Methods in Adult Language Learning

In the literature, we were unable to find teaching methods that are tailored to meet the needs of adult language learners (Ram íez G3mez, 2016, Ch. 1) and increase their motivation to learn languages. In the period of communicative approach, many L2 studies recommend the use of best practices, in which students are exposed to as much authentic input in the target language as possible and are able to communicate with their peers (Brown, 2007). Moreover, as with every type of learning, a friendly and supportive atmosphere in the classroom is very important for adult learners as well (McKay & Tom, 1999, p. 16), and the teacher plays a vital role in creating such an atmosphere.

In a friendly and supportive atmosphere, adults are more likely to risk using the new language. Adult language learners may feel uncomfortable when they are unable to express themselves intellectually in a foreign language (Johnson, 2015, Ch. 4). In learning languages other than English as L3 in the university context, students can feel frustrated when using the target language (McKay & Tom, 1999, p. 16). They can easily give up and switch to their L1 or their stronger L2 English when interacting with their peers in the classroom (Maijala et al., 2018). Another factor is that they may not get opportunities to use the target language in the classroom. As concluded by Nunan (1991, cited in Nunan, 2005, p. 226–227), who reviewed 50 classroom-based studies, on average, teachers tend to talk twice as much as students in FL classes, and in some studies, they were found to talk for more than 80% of the time. This is problematic, especially in the context of teaching languages other than English in higher education, where students' proficiency is rather low.

In general, motivational factors play an important role in adult language learning. One possible strength of adult FL learners could be their motivation. Learning a new language as an adult can be seen as an investment (Norton, 2000), for instance, to secure new professional opportunities or to learn the language for familiar reasons. D3rnyei (2001, Ch. 5) suggested the following methods to increase motivation in an FL classroom: i) creating motivational conditions (e.g.

supportive atmosphere in the classroom), ii) generating and maintaining initial student motivation (e.g. setting goals, improving positive learning experiences, and increasing learners' self-confidence), and iii) encouraging positive self-evaluation (e.g. providing motivational feedback). In FL classrooms, one strategy for cultural learning is 'bringing the outside in', that is, bringing the life experiences of language learners into the classroom (Roberts & Baynham, 2006, p. 3).

In adult language learning, the specific context of learning languages other than English has not been investigated in depth. An example of a study in this field is Johnson (2015). She conducted a semester-long case study among English-speaking college students in the USA who were learning Spanish in a traditional instructor-led classroom setting. Johnson (2015, Ch. 7) found evidence that as a result of their language study, the students improved, especially in the following areas: i) exploring new sources of knowledge, ii) becoming more self-directed, and iii) critically assessing their own language and culture. As stated above, grammar and vocabulary learning are usually the strengths of adult language learners. Adult learners often regard grammar as the most important content of FL teaching and learning (Ellis, 2002). Ellis et al. (1999) found that the focus-on-form approach (grammar and accuracy) is more widely used than the communicative approach for teaching adult English learners. However, we note that the focus-on-form and communicative approaches are not necessarily contradictory to each other. Moreover, Borg and Burns (2008) revealed that language teachers preferred more explicit grammar instruction when teaching adults. Furthermore, the dominance of grammar teaching can be observed in teaching materials as well. For instance, Tomlinson et al. (2001) evaluated eight adult English course books and found that they concentrated mostly on explicit grammar instruction and did not necessarily encourage learners to use the language communicatively.

In the Finnish context, the study of Pitkänen (2018) conducted at the Language Centre, University of Helsinki, provided an overview of goal development in English course catalogues over four decades and compared these goals with students' needs. Based on 365 students' Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) self-assessments completed in faculty-specific English courses and 20 interviews of students who had graduated from the university studies, he concluded that the focus of the English courses had shifted from receptive skills to productive skills, which students find essential for their future working life. Accordingly, the focus in the English course descriptions generated between 1977 and 2016 shifted from reading comprehension to productive skills. In addition, an analysis of students' self-assessment demonstrated that the students felt their productive skills were generally weaker than their receptive skills.

III. RESEARCH PROJECT

A. *Participants and Data Collection*

Overall, in the current study, we aimed to identify the factors that enhance adult language learning. Various voluntary foreign language courses (French, German and Italian) offered by the language centre of a Finnish university were the focus. In this context, the role of languages other than English—especially French and German—has diminished in Finland, and they are no longer as widely taught in Finnish schools as they used to be (Kangasvieri, 2019). Accordingly, the resulting decline in the knowledge of languages other than English has affected the language courses offered at universities (Pitkänen, 2018). Because English is a lingua franca, languages other than English have to be taught in a less academic and more general manner at Finnish universities. Since the 1990s, the emphasis on language instruction in Finland has gradually moved towards communicative language skills. In recent years, with the launch of a curriculum reform for basic education (FNBE, 2016), intercultural communicative competence, media literacy and language awareness have gained prominence as the goals of university language courses.

Our small-scale questionnaire study focused on courses in languages other than English that were offered by the language centre of a Finnish university. The researcher decided to gather data only at one university aiming to improve teaching in this particular language centre. A link to the web-based questionnaire was sent to several teachers at the language centre, who, in turn, were asked to forward it to their students through the Moodle platform. The questionnaire (see Appendix) was sent to students through the Moodle learning platform. It was answered by 53 university students from different language courses (see Table 1) for an approximate return rate of 42%. The respondents represented different majors, such as languages (18), history and political science (8), law (5), chemistry/biochemistry (4), social sciences (4), information technology (2), education (1), literature (1), management (1), religion (1), mathematics (2), folkloristics (2), medicine (1), geology (1) and other programmes (2). Most of the respondents were either at the onset or end of their studies (see Table 1). This may be because at these stages, students are more likely to find free time to enrol in optional language courses. For instance, fifth-year students are often engaged in writing master's theses. In the context of our study, the students were usually linguistically and culturally homogenous, save for a few international students (see Table 1). Although there were native speakers among the course teachers, these teachers had acclimatised well to Finnish society and become familiar with the prevailing social norms.

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS (N = 53).

Gender	Age	Nationality	Year of study	Language course	CEFR-level of language course visited at the moment of data collection [2014]	Previous knowledge of target language taught in the course
42 female 11 male	19–25 years: 38 25–30 years: 11 30–40 years: 1 40–62 years: 2 No answer: 1	Finnish: 50 Other: 3	1 st : 12 2 nd : 9 3 rd : 8 4 th : 6 5 th : 14 No answer: 1	French: 18 German: 23 Italian: 12	A1–A2: 37 B1: 11 B2–C2: 5	Yes: 21 Some knowledge: 14 No: 18

As summarised in Table 1, most of the respondents enrolled in the language courses at the beginner level (A1–A2). Only a few enrolled in the courses at the intermediate (B1) or advanced levels (B2–C2). At the language centre, most of the courses in languages other than English were offered at the beginner level. The respondents were asked about their previous knowledge of the language they were taking. Most respondents reported that they had studied the language ‘a little’, ‘a little bit’ or ‘some simple and short phrases’. If they had learned the language before the course, it was mostly at school.

The questionnaire mostly contained open-ended questions and one statement with responses on a Likert scale (ranging from 0 to 4; strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively) (see Appendix 1). Because the number of respondents was expected to be limited, we opted to include open-ended questions. Moreover, responses to the open-ended questions usually provide more insightful data in the form of longer written responses (Borg, 2006, p. 169). The open-ended questions were asked in English (L2 of most of the respondents) because we expected the presence of international students. Moreover, English has become a lingua franca at Finnish universities (Pitkänen, 2018), which further cemented our choice of English. All the students responded in English; however, in the introduction to the questionnaire, it was mentioned that the respondents could answer in their L1 (Finnish). The students were informed that they were participating in a research study, and the purpose of the study was described to them (Wagner, 2015).

B. Research Questions and Methods

The specific research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are strengths of foreign language courses in higher education?

RQ2: Which practices are beneficial for adult language learning?

The student questionnaire data were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed to answer the research questions. The responses were coded, and the keywords used by the respondents were assigned to different categories, which were elaborated on using the examples and explanations provided by the respondents (Borg, 2013, p.35). The number of respondents (N = 44–53) varied across questions because not all the respondents answered all the survey questions. The analysis was conducted in the original language of the responses. First, the responses were coded according to the research questions. Subsequently, they were analysed to determine recurring themes. Based on a grounded approach, categories emerged from the questionnaire data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data were organised and quantified to determine the frequency of the responses. The number or percentage of students who mentioned the topic when answering a question is listed in parentheses. When examples were given, the notion of language was, in most cases, omitted to ensure anonymity of the teachers and students. The language in the data examples is original. As a limitation of the study, it can be said that the number of participants was relatively small and that the study was conducted in one university language centre. We would also like to emphasise that the responses are merely the students’ opinions.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Strengths of the Course (RQ1)

Through an open-ended question, the students were asked to mention the reasons for choosing the language course in which they were enrolled. Most of the students (26%) wanted to continue learning a certain language or maintain already acquired language skills. Seven out of 53 students stated that they were interested in the particular language and culture. A few students (4/53) stated that the language was useful to them or that the course fitted in to their study schedule. Reasons related to university studies were mentioned as well, such as a need for the language in their studies (3/53), willingness to study the language as a minor subject (3/53), and to study in the country where the language is spoken (3/53). Other reported motives (one per motif) were as follows: ‘the language courses are for free’, ‘[it is] good to know languages other than English’, ‘I like to learn new languages’, ‘I like the language’, ‘the language was not my first choice’, ‘my friend asked to me to join the course’, ‘another language was too difficult’, ‘the language belongs to general education’, ‘personal reasons’, and ‘my friends speak this language’. Emotional reasons such as ‘beautiful language’ were mostly connected to Italian. Practical reasons such as usefulness, by contrast, were linked mostly to German. Generally, the students were motivated to learn the language because they believed that doing so would be useful for them in the future (cf. Johnson, 2015, Ch. 2).

The students were asked if they were more interested in the target language after attending the course. They were provided an opportunity to qualify their answers. 41 of 53 respondents answered positively and many of them wished to

visit the target country after the course. In many cases, the teacher or the native speakers who assisted in the course increased the students’ interest in the language, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

[...] When I came here, I liked [...], but now, I just love it. The teacher makes it so easy to understand it that I think I can understand it quite well.

The [...] exchange student gave me more motivation for studying [...] because he was so well-mannered and social (unlike some Finns).

23% of the respondents who answered ‘no’ specified that they ‘were already interested when the course started’. A few students were not satisfied with the textbook used in the course.

TABLE 2
STRENGTHS OF THE LANGUAGE COURSES MENTIONED BY THE STUDENTS (N = 52).

Strengths of the courses	Students who mentioned the strengths (N = 52) (multiple mentioning possible)		Examples
	Number	%	
Teacher	27	51.92	<i>The teacher is lovely, and her attitude is great. She also makes us do a lot of oral exercises, which I think is great. Because the teacher's native language is not Finnish, she encourages us with her own example to speak and use the language and not be worried about producing 'perfect' structures. The emphasis is on communication rather than on learning grammar perfectly. The teacher also speaks a lot in [the target language] which is very helpful.</i>
Oral exercises	12	23.08	<i>An opportunity to speak often in the target language is one of the major strengths of this course.</i>
Cultural information/ Interesting topics	9	17.31	<i>We always discuss topical issues that the students themselves have chosen newspaper articles, what is happening in different states in Germany, etc.</i>
Visits of peers from the target culture	8	15.38	<i>It is nice to have [students from the target country] visiting in the class because that way we can practise our listening comprehension in more genuine situation.</i>
Varied activities	7	13.46	<i>I think that the strength of the course is its comprehensive nature and wide range. I mean that we focus on many important aspects of language learning: grammar, vocabulary, reading aloud, pronunciation and listening, and also slightly speaking and writing training, and some [...] culture.</i>
Grammar teaching	6	11.54	<i>I think you [I] have a very clear knowledge of the grammar of the language because [our teacher] explains it really well, and you [I] also learn a lot of vocabulary.</i>
Atmosphere in the class/group	6	11.54	<i>A warm, comfortable environment that does not hinder learning or participation in the course activities.</i>
Book/Study material	5	9.54	<i>I think that we have a good teacher who has put a lot of time in the course. She has researched all kinds of books [...] and chosen the best.</i>
Planning of the course	4	7.69	<i>Very well planned course.</i>
Work in pairs/groups	3	5.77	<i>Speaking happens usually in small groups, so it is much nicer than performing in front of the class.</i>
Time to learn	2	3.85	<i>It is not too hasty. We have the time to actually learn the language.</i>
Small group	2	3.85	<i>There are very few participants in the course. This ensures that our teacher has the time to give us personal advice.</i>

As summarised in Table 2, the strengths of the course were the ‘teacher’ and ‘interaction’ with the teacher or peers. In addition, the teaching materials, which corresponded to the needs of the students, were found to be important. Mentions about the choice of the teaching materials as well as the planning and structure of the course were credited to the teacher. Fifty-two percent of the respondents mentioned the teacher as the strength of the course. It was important to them that the teacher used the target language extensively or corrected pronunciation. In general, the teacher’s characteristics mentioned by the students were very positive. Students characterised their teachers as ‘very nice and friendly’, ‘lovely’, ‘great’, ‘always ready to answer our questions’, ‘enthusiastic’, ‘positive’, ‘very helpful’, ‘very good’, ‘nice’, ‘inspiring’, ‘experienced’, ‘supportive’, and ‘encouraging’, but also as ‘strict enough’. Native-speaker teachers or teaching assistants, who ‘really can speak the language’, were mentioned 9 times in the data. In addition, the students valued the fact that the teacher ‘has time to give us personal advice’, ‘corrects [...] pronunciation more often than I am used to’, ‘gives us a lot of information about [the target country] and its culture’, and ‘makes us speak’. The positive reactions of the students correspond to the following answer statement on the Likert scale: ‘The language course meets my needs’, and 91% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

In addition to the strengths of the course, the students were asked what they would change in the course and to provide examples of such changes. Although many of the students found oral exercises in the course as beneficial for their learning, 8 students stated that the oral exercises could have been more interactive. For instance, as one respondent stated: ‘There should be more conversation in smaller groups so that even Finnish students can muster the courage to be more interactive. Now, the course mostly involves monologues in the form of students’ presentations’. This indicates that oral activities employed in the courses were not necessarily designed to foster interaction among students.

B. Good Practices (RQ2)

Elaborate responses to activities used in the language course that contributed the most to learning were elicited through an open-ended question. Most of the students mentioned more than one activity. A few students reported that they were unable to indicate one specific activity because all activities employed in the course were beneficial for their learning. As summarised in Table 3, activities in which interaction and collaboration occurred were rated as the most useful by the students. Especially, the students found oral activities to be meaningful because these activities enabled them to produce language (Pitkänen, 2018). As one student pointed out: ‘You can always read words and texts, and even the grammar, at home by yourself, but it is more difficult to speak it alone in different situations’. When mentioning discussions, some students stated that they felt good when ‘the teacher listens and corrects our mistakes’.

TABLE 3
IN-COURSE ACTIVITIES THAT THE RESPONDENTS FOUND THE MOST USEFUL

In-course activities that the respondents found the most useful	Students who mentioned the activity (N = 51, multiple mentioning possible)	
	Number	%
Oral activities/discussions	25	49.02
Listening activities	8	15.69
Working in pairs/groups	7	13.73
Grammar exercises	5	9.80
Writing exercises	4	7.84
Reading exercises	3	5.88
Giving presentations to other students	3	5.88
Vocabulary exercises	2	3.92
Going through texts thoroughly (with the teacher)	2	3.92
Revision exercises	1	1.96
Working independently outside the classroom	1	1.96
Explanations from the teacher	1	1.96
Productive exercises	1	1.96
Translation exercises	1	1.96
Tests	1	1.96

Oral activities, listening, working in pairs/groups, and giving presentations to other students involved some type of interaction. The following excerpts from the data illustrate the need for interaction:

In this particular course, the most useful activities are conversations with others and listening to native speakers.

The activities in which students speak with one another are highly helpful and useful. Similarly, listening to texts or videos in [...] has improved my listening comprehension.

Furthermore, the students were asked how they would prefer to be assessed in the particular language course. According to the answers, 39% of the students seemed to be satisfied with the current practice, that is, mostly a written exam at the end of the course, which was often described as the ‘normal way’ or ‘like it [assessment] is done now’. In addition to the written exam at the end of the course, 30 % of students liked ongoing classroom assessments, as indicated by the comments of a few of them:

Taking in account the written exam but also your attendance and your contribution during the conversations in class.

It should take notice the whole participation and the improvement that has happened during the course.

Vocabulary and grammar tests assigned during the course as opposed to final tests were mentioned 9 times to be beneficial in the beginner courses (A1–A2) in particular:

We have word-exams and end-exam. It has been ok now when we are just beginning with a new language.

Later can be different ways.

Moreover, the teacher played the decisive role in the assessments: only one respondent mentioned the need for self-assessment. 4 students found feedback from the teacher to be important, as illustrated by the following comment:

I would like to know how well I am doing in different areas of learning, for instance, written and spoken skills. Pronouncing the target language correctly is important to me, and thus I would like to have pronunciation tests which would be graded by the teacher.

The students were asked how their own contributions affected their learning in the course. Thirty-eight percent of the students reckoned that studying outside the classroom supported learning in the course. The following excerpts illustrate this:

[...] I learn vocabulary, lessons, and grammar at home so that I can concentrate on more difficult and more important things in the classroom.

[...] I have noticed that if I have to skip a lesson or two, I get really behind. The really fast pace of the course makes it that you really have to attend to every lesson, or, if you can't, you have to use a LOT of time at home. Even attending to courses isn't enough because I think most of the learning happens at home, so your own contribution is everything if you want to learn the language.

Thirty-four percent of the respondents acknowledged that their own activities in the classroom contributed to the success of the course. Forty-six percent of the respondents stated that studying outside the classroom supported their learning in the language course, as can be seen in the comment below:

I read the texts and do my homework. I listen to [...] music and read texts (on the web) I am interested in. I want to learn [...], so I do the things that makes it possible. I have a good teacher, but she can't make the studying for me. I have to do it myself.

Although it was widely acknowledged by the students that practising the target language outside the classroom contributed positively to their language learning, the influence of the target language on their daily life remained modest. Most respondents (63%) stated that the target language hardly influenced their daily life. Four students brought up the importance of using the target language outside the classroom. Here, it must be considered that the languages in question were not English. The influence of the language depended considerably on the students' own contributions. The students (N = 51) reported that they 'watch TV/films in the target language' (7), 'have native-speaker friends' (5), 'read books in the target language' (4), 'listen to music in the target language' (4), 'read news in the target language' (3), 'plan a trip to the country of origin of the target culture' (3), 'want to find a job in the country of origin of the target culture' (3), 'mix languages or have started thinking in the language' (3), 'read scientific articles in the target language' (2), 'do the homework' (1), 'need the language for a job' (1) or 'hear the target language in the campus area' (1). To summarise, it seemed that independent learning in informal contexts outside of the course seems to be very limited in the case of languages other than English. Moreover, the responses implied that implicit learning outside of the course classroom was also guided by the teacher, for instance, through assigned homework, music, and reading tips.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we aimed to find strengths and good practices of foreign language courses in higher education. The results of our small-scale questionnaire study among learners of Italian, French, and German (N = 53) at the language centre of a Finnish university indicate that the focus of university language courses might have shifted from receptive to productive language usage (cf. Pitkänen, 2018). The strongest evidence from our study was the indispensable role of a teacher in university language courses. This was the only one item that received 50%-and-above score.

To some extent, our findings imply that face-to-face communication seemed to provide learners with the feeling that they actually have learned the language. Explicit and intensive use of L3 in the classroom appeared to be an effective teaching method in adult language courses. Through guided oral activities, students seemed to notice and reflect on specific language features. At the beginner level (A1–A2), learners appeared to need strongly guided production activities. In this stage, learners required scaffolding, for instance, supportive word lists or other tailor-made inputs. These were found to be important to allow learners to produce at least something in the target language.

Our findings are consistent with the results obtained in a recent study by Pitkänen (2018) that was conducted in faculty-specific English courses at the Language Centre, University of Helsinki. The findings of both studies indicate that Finnish university students wish to improve their productive skills through language courses offered in higher education. In English courses, students need to practise discipline-specific interaction and communication, and in the case of languages other than English, students need to train in interactions for general academic purposes (Pitkänen, 2018). Activities in which interaction and collaboration occurred were rated as being the most useful by the students. Specifically, the students considered oral activities as meaningful because during these activities, they were able to produce the target language with their peers. The students clearly needed additional support for training their productive skills rather than receptive skills (Pitkänen, 2018). Explicit learning of grammar and lexical items (Krashen et al., 1979; Ellis, 2002; Long, 2005) seemed to be needed to a lesser extent than oral exercises. In terms of grammar instruction, the students appreciated a clear and structured approach. Hence, the students' views confirmed the conclusion of Pitkänen (2018) that language courses in higher education should be developed to hone students' productive and interactive skills.

Over the past decades, language education has gradually shifted from a teacher-led to a student-centred pedagogy. Although the student-centred approach is emphasised in the course goals (Pitkänen, 2018), students seemed to need strong guidance from the teacher. The findings of our small-scale study indicated a contradiction between teacher-led and student-centred practices in these language courses. On the one hand, adult FL learners in our study saw the

language teacher as a central figure in the class. They expected instruction and guiding in the target language from the teacher. This may be ascribed to the fact that in the case of languages other than English, inputs from the teacher were important because students do not necessarily hear and read the language outside the classroom. On the other hand, the students expected the teacher to guide them to use the target language in interactions with their peers. This meant that the teacher should create natural situations in which the students can use the language with their peers. Based on our findings it appeared that some teachers were able to positively influence the students' interest in the target language. In doing so, the teacher played an important role in shaping the intrinsic motivation of the students, and empowerment of students is inevitably one of the key factors in adult language learning (cf. Dörnyei, 1994). Moreover, although following students' opinions does not necessarily result in better efficiency in language courses, language teachers in adult education may find our results valuable for their teaching practice.

APPENDIX QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1–8. Basic information (Gender; Age; Nationality; Year of study at the university; Major and minor subject(s) at the university; Information about the language course (e.g. level of the course).
9. Why did you opt for this language course?
10. Did you speak the target language when you started the course?
11. What are the strengths of the course? Please provide examples where possible.
12. What would you change in your language course? Please provide examples where possible.
13. How does the target language influence your daily life?
14. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement by placing a check mark in the appropriate box. ('The language course meets my needs.')
15. Are you more interested in the target language after attending the course? Please provide examples where possible.
16. Which activities in your language course contributed the most to your learning?
17. How would you like to be assessed in your language course?
18. How does your own contribution affect your learning in the course?

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