

Nina Foss Mikalsen

"How do you spell that?"

A Study of Beginner Learners of English in the Norwegian classroom

Bachelor's project in 4-årig grunnskolelærerutdanning for 1.-7. trinn

Supervisor: Marthe Sofie Pande-Rolfsen and Armend Tahirsylaj

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ABSTRACT

Learning English as a subject in school at the beginner stage is a very relevant topic as today it is a reality in all primary Norwegian classrooms. English is a global language and serves as the world's lingua franca, which increases the requirement of English language knowledge. This could be one of the many reasons for an early start with a foreign new language. Besides, research shows that children benefit from an early start with English. The focus of this assignment will therefore be to look at possible benefits of an early start, and how English is taught with the beginner learners in Norwegian primary classrooms. Do Norwegian classrooms make the best possible use of the potential of young people to learn a new language at an early stage? What does relevant research tell us about the most important elements when it comes to beginner learners? Even with research showing numerous benefits of an early start, it may not be enough to proclaim an early start and beginners learning as *the* key to success.

SAMMENDRAG

Det at førsteklasinger lærer seg engelsk som et fag i skolen er et svært relevant tema siden det er det som er realiteten i norsk skole den dag i dag. Engelsk er et globalt verdensspråk som utgjør en økning av kravet til engelskspråklig kunnskap. Dette er en av mange grunner til å starte tidlig med Engelsk i skolen. I tillegg viser studier at barn drar nytte av en tidlig start med engelsk. Fokuset på denne oppgaven vil dermed være å se på mulige fordeler med begynneropplæring i engelsk og hvordan engelsk er undervist for elevene på småtrinnet. Klarer norske klasserom å utnytte disse fordelene elevene på småtrinnet har ved innlæring av et nytt språk? Hva forteller relevante studier oss om de viktigste faktorene når det kommer til undervisning av elever som nettopp har begynt på skolen? Selv med studier som viser til mange fordeler av en tidlig start, er det kanskje ikke nok å erklære en tidlig start og ung alder som nøkkelen til suksess.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, there has been a trend in many countries of lowering the starting age for learning foreign languages, especially English. There are multiple reasons behind this, among them is the globalization and the role of English as an international lingua franca, and the increased knowledge of the benefits of an early start for language acquisition (Dahl & Vulchanova, 2014, p. 98). English has become a common language to people across the world and received an essential role in a country like Norway. David Crystal (2012) explains it well when he calls attention to the fundamental role English achieves when it is made a priority in a country's foreign language teaching policy. He states that: "It has no official status, but it is nonetheless the foreign language which children are most likely to encounter when they arrive in school, and the one most available to adults in further education" (p. 151). Norwegian beginner learners of English are introduced to the language when they start school, and it will be the major foreign language throughout their educational career as well as in their everyday life. The importance of English almost from day one also means that a new group of teachers is required. However, the relationship between what we know about language acquisition and what goes on in Norwegian early language classrooms cannot exactly be described as "simple" (Dahl & Vulchanova, 2014, p. 98). The question of whether the Norwegian early language classroom is able to make the best possible use of the learner's young age, is contentious at best.

In this literature review, my aim is to examine whether and how the English subject is taught to beginner learners, and whether the Norwegian early language classroom is able to make the best possible use of the learner's young age. The main reason for choosing this topic is that I am just a few steps away from being an English teacher who someday will teach the young English language learners. It is important to look into what both research and theory say about an early start in English with young learners, as this is currently a reality in all primary classrooms in Norway. Ever since the English subject was introduced as an obligatory subject in the first grade, there has been little research done to find out if an early start is beneficial to Norwegian students. One can ask what is the point of an early start with English if teachers do not make the best possible use of the of learners young age, or if students do not benefit from it. As a future English teacher, with a keen interest in the young learners and their learning process, it is really important for me to understand why and how the beginner learners actually learn English.

The concept of beginner learners is central in this review and can be defined as learners from first grade to fourth grade. In this review, I will use the terms “beginner learners” and “young learners” interchangeably. Essentially, this review is about beginner learners of English in the Norwegian classroom. Its purpose is to explore the importance of an early start as well as how teachers manage to create a rewarding start for students. Furthermore, this review is informed by and draws on knowledge produced by studies and research regarding the early English classroom in Norway. The research question addressed in this study is: *Why is an early start important for beginner learners of English, and how do teachers take advantage of this in an early elementary classroom in Norway?*

1.1 Background

How the subject of English is currently conceived or looked upon by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [NDET], is important. This because it contributes to the elucidation of why the English subject is implemented in the primary classroom and thus gives an insight as to how teachers actually teach English, how much English is emphasized in the Norwegian classroom, and what elements of the subject that are most valued. In this section, in addition to the status and importance of English as a subject, I will also look at the curriculum and examine how the English subject has changed over the years. As the English subject has received a substantial role in the primary school, it is interesting to see how it has adapted to changing circumstances, and the kind of values that have been accentuated throughout the years.

NDET (2013) proclaims that English is a universal language used all over the world. It is used in films, literature, sports, songs, trade, products, science and technology and it keeps sneaking into our own language. There has also been an increased use of English in education and as a working language in companies. In order to succeed in a world where English is used for international communication, it is necessary to have knowledge of how the language is used in different contexts (*English subject curriculum*, p. 1). As stated in government’s report “Kunnskapsløftet”, the English language is used everywhere. In meeting with people from different countries, at home or when travelling, we will not get very far without English (Saabye, 2012, p. 56). In addition to learn English for communication purposes, the subject of English contributes to providing insight into the way people live, increasing our knowledge and understanding of different cultures. Also, the development of communicative language skills

and cultural insight can promote interaction, understanding and respect between people with different cultural backgrounds (NDET, 2013, p. 1).

Already at the age of five or six, Norwegian students arrive at school, expected to start the process of learning a new language. However, it has not always been like this. In 1987, Mønsterplanen 87 (M87), the current curriculum at the time, English language learning was not an obligatory subject until students entered the fourth grade (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartement, 1987, p. 207). One could say that M87 changed the focus from language teaching to language learning. There was an increased focus on how to teach students to function in authentic situations (Flemmen, 2006, p. 159). In 1997, when parliament determined school start for six-year-olds, it was time for a new curriculum, Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen (L97). In L97 English was now formally included in the elementary school with a flexible start from first grade to third grade. There was now a new group of young learners in the classrooms. The students were expected to discover the English language through rhymes and poems; listen to excerpts from children's books; read and recite in unison; imitate; try out their own English through singing; reading or playing with words; and get to know about cultures in English speaking countries (Kirke-, undervisnings- og forskningsdepartement, 1996, p. 232). L97 did not mark a breach with the principles in M87, the difference was mainly a stronger focus on literature (Flemmen, 2006, p. 159).

The curriculum that teachers deal with today was published in 2006, Kunnskapsløftet (LK06). This curriculum entails an obligation to implement the English subject in year one as opposed to the flexible start recommended in L97. LK06 entails the introduction of competence aims after year two, four and seven in the elementary school. The subject of English is structured into several subject areas. Students will go through language learning where they get an understanding of what it means to learn a new language and actually learning the language, discovering links between English and other languages. Additionally, oral communication where they both listen to and speak in English is required, as well as written communication, which involves reading and writing, eventually giving students a broader understanding of culture, society and literature (NDET, 2013, p. 2). A year from now, the NDET will review and renew today's subject, and in 2020 there will be a renewal of today's curriculum (Fagfornyelsen). The reason given is that as society changes with technology, new knowledge and new challenges, students should be able to reflect, explore think critically and creatively. Students will have more time for in-depth learning and there will be some core elements

defining the scope and content of their learning (NDET, 2019). As for the English subject, there will be a stronger focus on communication, language learning and the reading of English texts. Compared to today's curriculum the subject is looked upon as a working and living language (NDET, 2019).

1.2 English language learning and teaching theories

How children actually learn a language is a highly discussed topic. Researchers with their various opinions, their contrasting views and positions on this topic, lead to diverse options as to how languages can be acquired and what strategies that are more beneficial than others. Knowledge about children's learning is essential when it comes to effective teaching, and in order to answer my research question, it is necessary to illuminate different theories of how children learn a second language and examine the relevant teaching strategies. The theories included are either strategies or methods that I found frequently used or highly valued in the classroom when writing this literature review. Two different theoretical positions on how children acquire language and three different theories of language teaching will now be presented and later discussed, alongside with my findings.

Over the past sixty years, there have been various theoretically grounded attempts at explaining how children acquire language and how teachers should structure their teaching. Behaviorism had a powerful influence on second and foreign language teaching, and activities such as mimicry and memorization and students learning dialogues and sentence patterns by heart, was emphasized (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 34). Behaviorists believed that a second language is learned through imitation, repetition, practice and reinforcement (Kirsch, 2008, p. 34). They further believe that second language learners transfer the rules and habits formed in the mother tongue to the second language (Kirsch, 2008, p. 34). The behaviorist perspective focuses on the learner's environment. The sociocultural theory, on the other hand, states that in order to acquire a second language individuals need to participate in social practices. Second language learning is a public activity that involves social and meaningful interaction with more experienced individuals (Kirsch, 2008, pp. 46-47). In other words, learning is thought to occur when an individual interacts with an interlocutor in a situation where the learner is capable of performing at a higher level because of the support from the interlocutor (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 47). This theory views second language learning as "doing" and "increasing" one's participation in the language practices of a social group (Kirsch, 2008, p. 47).

Moving from different theories of language learning to different theories of language teaching, one method is the grammar-translation. With this method, teachers draw the learner's attention to vocabulary items, present bilingual lists of vocabulary, and translations from and into the target language (Kirsch, 2008, p. 51). Another theory of language teaching is the total physical response (TPR), which encourages listening and a silent period where learners only listen to input rather than create output themselves. In this case, the teacher produces language and asks learners to perform related actions which confirm that they have understood the input (Kirsch, 2008, pp. 55-56). At last, the theory of communicative language teaching points to a person's actual language use and the value of communication. With this theory, the learners need to have sufficient exposure to comprehensible input in a stress-free environment (Kirsch, 2008, p. 58).

The different theories of how a second language is acquired by and taught to the young learners, have their own characteristics, and some can be seen in both previous and current curriculums. In M87 there was a focus on English learning rather than its teaching, and there was an emphasis on how students would function in authentic situations. This can be seen in the sociocultural theory where exposure to social and meaningful interaction is necessary in order to acquire a second language (Kirsch, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). In L97, behavioristic aspects can be seen in some of the activities, such as imitating the teacher or other students, and reading and reciting in unison. This is in line with behavioristic views on how a second language is acquired, through activities such as mimicry, memorization, imitation, repetition and practice. When it comes to the newer curriculum, there is a broader emphasis on communication, which can be seen in the language learning sociocultural theory as well as the communicative language teaching method. Overall, there has not been one single theoretical direction that has overruled the curriculums, but rather certain activities or competence aims that can be connected to features of a theory.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer my research question in the best possible way, I have chosen to write a literature review. This because, a literature review gives an overview of what previous studies say about the chosen topic, and I want to enlighten that the topic of second language learning and teaching needs more research. Oliver (2012) refers to a literature review as the foundation upon which the rest of the work is built (p. 1). In a literature review, one studies already

established research, what is already examined and written about the chosen topic. A literature review provides a base upon which new research can be founded, suggesting that previous knowledge gives us an anchor to which our new ideas can be attached (Oliver, 2012, p. 1). The goal of this review is to gain an insight of English teaching with beginner learners in the Norwegian classroom, and then discuss what further research is needed, and what it should include.

2.1 Data collection

To shed a light on my research question, I have put together a collection of literature that consist of two research articles, two news articles, one report and a book chapter. I think this mixture of research contributions provides a deeper insight in different perspectives on my chosen topic. When searching for the literature that I wanted in my assignment, I had to be critical to everything I came across. When reading relevant articles and books, I often looked at their list of references to find literature that suited my assignment. This was a valuable approach in order to identify relevant articles as well as those most frequently referred to.

In order to find literature, I had to carefully considered the most relevant search terms. Five such terms were identified by consulting the key literature covering the topic of the possible benefits of an early start with English language learning in a Norwegian primary classroom. The following keywords were used in the process: “early start + foreign language”, “beginner learners + Norwegian classroom”, “English language teaching + Norway”, “young language learners + Norway”, “English in primary school + Norway”.

When searching for relevant literature to include in my review, I had to decide on a set of relevant inclusion criteria (Table 1). For example, it had to be research on beginner learners, students from first grade to fourth grade and it had to be done in Norway since my review is based on the Norwegian primary classroom. Along with those inclusion criteria, it had to be research conducted and published from 1997 and onwards. This because it was this exact year that six-year-olds were included in the primary school in Norway, and the year when government implemented the English language as a subject with a flexible start from first to third grade. It was new that the young group, beginner learners, had the English subject in their curriculum, and therefore there was a new group of students to teach. In addition, the literature had to be within a certain field of study and in this case education with young students. Lastly,

the literature had to be written in either English or Norwegian, which excluded articles in other languages. Moreover, since the search was based on certain criteria, there were elements that needed to be excluded as well, which narrowed my search even more and gave me the selection of research contributions I was looking for (Table 1). For example, it had to be research done with young learners, so I excluded all articles and research done in year five and onwards. The research done on young learners outside Norway was excluded, as well as literature where there was no full-text accessible.

TABLE 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

	Included	Excluded
Time frame	1997 - 2019	All literature published before 1997
Publication type	All types of publication, articles, reports, book chapters, dissertations, magazine articles, conference proceedings etc.	No limitations
Focus	Studies with primary focus on English teaching in the early primary Norwegian classroom	Literature focusing on just beginner learners of English or research done in higher grades
Language	English and Norwegian	All other languages
Target teaching level	Primary school, first grade to fourth grade	Kindergarten, grade five to seven in elementary school, secondary school and high school
Geographical target	Norway	Studies done in all other countries

After a fairly extensive search, I ended up with six different articles for my review: Dahl's (2015) *Utvikling av språk - forståelse i tidlig start med engelsk*; Speitz & Simonsen's (2006) *Evaluering av prosjektet "Forsøk med tidlig start av 2. Fremmedspråk" – delrapport 1*; Sjørusen's (2015) *Engelsklærere kan for lite engelsk*; Nyberg's (2017) *Tidspress gjør at engelsklærere velger enkle løsninger*; Flognfeldt's (2018) *Teaching and Learning English in Multilingual Early Primary Classrooms*; and Dahl & Vulchanova's (2014) *Naturalistic acquisition in an early language classroom*.

2.2 Data analysis

After reading the six different articles numerous times, they were analyzed and classified through a deductive analysis approach. Deductive reasoning works from the more general to the more specific and is referred to as a “top-down” approach (Trochim, 2006). A deductive approach starts with thinking up a theory about our topic of interest, and then narrowing it down into more specific hypothesis that can be tested. In the end, it leads us to be able to test the hypotheses with specific data which is a confirmation (or not) of our original theories (Trochim, 2006). Further, in my analysis, and after several full-text re-readings, I used a color-coding system where I had a different color for each theme that repeated itself throughout the literature. These were made after reading the literature numerous times in order to identify the main themes more accurately. For example, one color had the tag “early start”, which meant that whenever authors mentioned why an early start is seen as beneficial or research that resulted in the opposite direction, I highlighted this part with a specific color. This gave me an overview of how much each theme was mentioned which then gave me a direction if my chosen categories were relevant enough. During this process, I really got to know my chosen literature, providing some direction toward an answer to my research question. Four categories were developed and identified through this process of analysis; *early start, teaching styles, the lack and value of English input, Teacher Education*.

3. DISCUSSION

This section reports and discusses the contrasting views on why an early start is considered important for beginner learners of English; what kind of teaching styles is often used in the primary classroom with young learners; what language is used and what should be used; and its meaning for further learning and implications of the Teacher Education. This is illustrated through synthesis and quotes from single studies. I will present my categories: *early start, teaching styles, the lack and value of English input, Teacher Education* in a systematic and chronologic way. In the end, all this will provide answers to my research question, *Why is an early start important for beginner learners of English, and how do teachers take advantage of this in an early elementary classroom in Norway?*

3.1 Early start

The chosen literature mention the importance of an early start when it comes to learning a foreign language, and in this case English. It has arguments from a political point of view as well as the research done within the field of children's language acquisition. There are also contrasting positions to this claim presented in some of the literature which will be presented.

The project, "Attempt with early start with second foreign language", conducted by Heike Speitz and Torill Simonsen, is led by the NDET. This report contains views from EU and the Council of Europe as to why an early start with foreign language is important in today's world. The commitment to an early start with foreign language learning has been demonstrated by both EU and the Council of Europe since the 1990s (Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 9). An early start in foreign language education is one of the main areas in the EU commission, and the reason for this is that;

The priority of the Member States [is] to ensure that language learning in kindergarten and primary school is effective, for it is here that key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed, and the foundations for later language learning are laid. (...) Early learners become aware of their own cultural values and influences and appreciate other cultures, becoming more open towards and interested in others. (Commission of the European Communities, as cited in Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 9)

Here, the commission underlines the importance of a thorough and robust initial training in foreign languages at an early stage. This will contribute to the creation of good attitudes to other languages and cultures. It is in the early years that the basis for learning foreign language and understanding other cultures is laid. This is in accordance with how the NDET (2013) viewed the English subject, it provides cultural insights which promote respect and understanding of others as well as oneself (p. 1). Vulchanova also highlights the broad agreement in Europe that young learners should start learning languages early (as cited in Sjurson, 2015).

Speitz & Simonsen (2006) point to more recent arguments as to why children should start learning languages early. Young learners have certain benefits when it comes to learning a new language. These include the total time one has with the target language, to which Dahl (2015) agrees as a partial argument towards an early start. She states that an early start gives additional

years with the content, however this is true for all subjects in general and she points to more significant reasons for starting early with English. When it comes to children, they have a different ability when learning a new language than adults, and normally children become more proficient in that specific language than adults (Dahl, 2015, p. 4). Speitz & Simonsen (2006) mention an intuitive language acquisition as a benefit for children learning a new language, which can explain Dahl's assertion. Children have the ability of learning a language intuitively, which adults do not have, at least not to the same degree. In addition, children have better skills when it comes to imitation and have a natural curiosity (Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 21), which is fundamental in the process of language learning. Without the skill of imitation, words and phrases will not be practiced correctly, and without the curiosity, the desire of learning more is absent. Flognfeldt (2018) also confirms that children have better imitation skills than adults do yet adds that children are often less self-conscious than more mature learners (p. 244). This has an essential meaning for the language classroom. Language learning demands active students, which can lead to personal uncertainty and embarrassment when trying and failing to learn the target language. This uncertainty and embarrassment can prevent further learning.

Language learning stimulates children's cognitive, emotional and cultural development (Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 22). The Council of Europe, EU and the NDET emphasized the cultural development, but in addition, children gain cognitive and emotional growth when learning a new language. This means that an early start with languages goes beyond just learning an additional language, it also develops the child as a person, as it contributes to personal growth. Cummins asserts that "learning languages is not just a cognitive and articulatory challenge; it involves the whole person, one's identity including emotions, experiences, values, etc." (as cited in Flognfeldt, 2018, p. 243). This quote supports the assertion that an early start with language learning is more than simply adding a new language, as it involves the whole person. One needs to be open towards learning a new language, especially when it comes to emotions such as curiosity and confidence, which differs children from more mature learners. In addition to a personal growth, Speitz & Simonsen (2006) refer to studies that show that learning a language at an early stage strengthen children's competence in other subjects (p. 22). An early start promotes growth in both the personal level as well as competence in other subjects. Within the English subject, Flognfeldt (2018) adds that competence like pronunciation, intonation and the acquisition of formulaic patterns benefit from an early start (p. 244). Dahl & Vulchanova (2014) agrees with Flognfeldt. They refer to research and conclude from their own findings that

“the earlier one start acquiring a language before adulthood, the better the chances are of attaining target competence” (p. 98).

In contrast, more mature learners might have better prerequisites when learning new languages. Dahl (2015) responds to this assertion by stating that it might sound easy learning a new language when looking at all the benefits the young learner has, but as a matter of fact, one does not become proficient just by snapping one’s fingers (p. 4). Further, she asserts that more mature learners actually learn languages quicker in the beginning than what children do. She refers to studies of language acquisition at school concluding that an early start did not lead to any benefits, and that students who started later ended up with the same competence in the long term (p. 4). Speitz & Simonsen (2006) mention a few benefits that older learners have when learning a new language. They have better strategy skills, and are more mature when it comes to their understanding of the world and awareness of exactly why they are learning the language (p. 21). All this refers to previous life experiences. Flognfeldt (2018) states that older learners are more cognitively mature and therefore able to acquire formal accuracy and complexity (p. 244). Speaking of maturity, she also says that young learners often have a limited attention span. They are also in need of concrete support, while older learners are more independent in this regard (p. 244). What seems to distinguish young learners from the more mature are cognitive development and the level of maturity.

Even with both advantages and disadvantages, Stern had a wise quote which leads to my next category, what kind of teaching styles that are prevalent in the early English classroom;

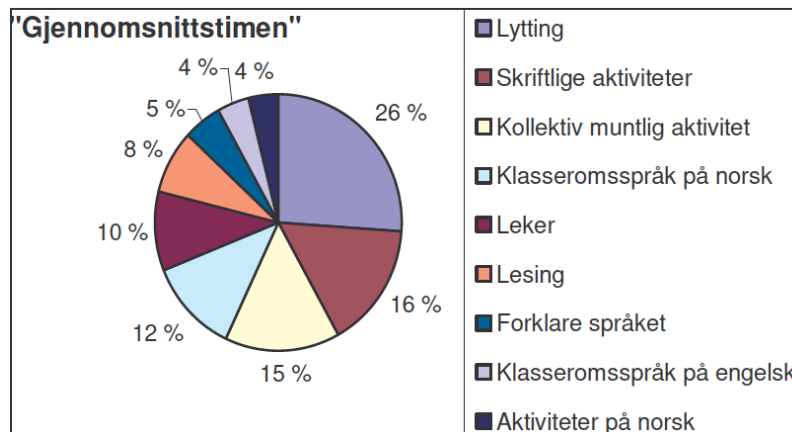
Each age of learning has its own particular advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, rather than asking whether language learning at such and such age is effective, the question should be: How can one create an environment in which effective language learning can occur? (Stern, 1976, as cited in Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 22)

3.2 Teaching styles

Creating an environment where effective language learning can occur can be referred to as the different teaching strategies and styles used within the four walls of a classroom. In my chosen literature, there are several findings from studies that show different strategies used with the young learners in the English classroom. These will be presented in this section.

Lund's report is based on observations of 15 English lessons in 15 different third year classrooms, as well as interviews with 15 English teachers. She gives a thorough qualitative description of how English teaching takes place in primary schools (Lund, 1997, as cited in Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 6). Lund put together a table that described what happened in the early English classroom on the basis of her observations:

TABLE 2. "The average lesson"



From the top to the bottom (Table 2.), these are the teaching strategies and activities Lund observed in her study; listening (26%), written activities (16%), collective oral activity (15%), classroom language in Norwegian (12%), play (10%), reading (8%), explaining the target language (5%), classroom language in English (4%) and the last one, activities in Norwegian (4%). As seen, the most common teaching style is having the students passively listening to the teacher, which is followed by written activities and collective oral activity. Another, fairly common teaching strategy is the use of Norwegian instead of English, followed by playing and reading. The three teaching strategies least used, are explaining the target language, classroom language in English and activities in Norwegian.

Dahl (2015) states that it is common to distinguish between explicit and implicit language learning (p. 4). Explicit language learning involves, for example, explanation of grammar or the meaning of new words. Implicit, on the other hand, occurs more or less automatically and involves using the actual language. Flognfeldt (2018) believes a combination of implicit learning and differentiated explicit instruction, would be the best teaching strategy for the young learners (p. 244). When referring to implicit learning, she gives examples like learning through reading and engaging with children's literature, chants, films, songs and stories. When

talking about reading and engaging with children's literature, the associate professor, Rebecca Charboneau, illuminates the importance of reading as a teaching strategy for the young learners (as cited in Nyberg, 2017). She had 370 teachers from different parts of Norway answer her questionnaire about English in the early primary classroom. Through her research, she found that almost half of these teachers did not have any other English literature in their classroom other than the textbooks. One fifth of these teachers did not have English literature in their school library (as cited in Nyberg, 2017). In addition, there were schools that based their lessons exclusively on textbooks. When it comes to quiet reading, this was not a priority in the classroom, and Charboneau affirms that the importance and the amount of input of quiet reading has support in reading and language research and therefore should be used more in the classroom. In contrast, another teaching strategy, reading out loud has been sort of a traditional strategy for the beginner learners, but this was not the case in this study. Charboneau was surprised by this finding since it has been a tradition in the English classroom in Norway and previous studies show that this method works (as cited in Nyberg, 2017).

Further on, Dahl (2015) refers to studies that indicate our ability to implicit learning diminish with age, which is the foundation of the assumption that children are better language learners (pp. 4-6). Dahl & Vulchanova (2014) state that when teaching languages to young learners, the learning style is quite different from what one might have done with the older learners. For example, young learners are more likely to apply implicit learning whilst older learners are better when it comes to explicit learning (p. 98). Speitz & Simonsen (2006) point to short but frequent lessons when it comes to the young learners (pp. 25-26). It would be better to organize the language learning as short, daily sequences rather than a long, weekend-based language lesson. The emphasis here is that the kind of teaching strategy used with the more mature learners should not be transferred to a classroom of younger learners. Beginner learners have different prerequisites when it comes to language learning, which implies that teaching styles should differ as well.

In Mona Flognfeldt's (2018) small-scale case study of different primary classrooms from first to fourth grade learning English, a frequent teaching strategy was an instant translation into Norwegian. This was a deliberate strategy in order to ensure that everybody understood given tasks and grammatical explanations (p. 245). This finding is supported by Lund's study, where in an average English lesson in the primary classroom, 5% of the time the teacher explained the target language (see Table 2). In Charboneau's study, the schools also had a common strategy

where the students translated texts, reading these out loud in turns and in groups (as cited in Nyberg, 2017). In Dahl's (2015) study, the teaching strategies reported by teachers, showed that in addition to rhymes and songs, they often talked about English words in Norwegian (p. 6). These findings report that the Norwegian language is often used in the English classroom as a teaching strategy to ensure that every student understands the content.

As mentioned in chapter 3.1, the Commission of the European Union illuminated that language teaching should be effective in the primary schools in order to get the best results. In Charboneau's study, she comes up with ideas of effective language teaching because of the lack of time most teachers expressed throughout her questionnaire (as cited in Nyberg, 2017). She believes that there is a great potential in combining the textbooks with other English texts. Furthermore, she states that there is a connection between Norwegian and English, especially when it comes to reading, but there is no systematic cooperation between them: "Whether it is reading in Norwegian or English, it is the same skills that are practiced" (as cited in Nyberg, 2017, my translation). This cooperation will lead to a more effective teaching when teachers can use the same "tool" from one subject to another. Charboneau also suggests that this will open the doors to other parts of the syllabus for the students, for example, more language and language acquisition. Today, she claims that the English subject is reduced to a social science subject about English speaking countries (as cited in Nyberg, 2017), which, in her opinion, is not what should be the main focus of the English subject. Nation (2007), in his advice to teachers, has examples of how the teaching can be as effective as possible: "It should include the following four strands in equal portions: meaningful language input, opportunities for meaningful output, fluency development, and a deliberate focus on language" (as cited in Flognfeldt, 2018, p. 245). This quote leads to the importance of meaningful input when it comes to the young learners, which will be presented in the following chapter.

3.3 The lack and value of English input

The significance of meaningful language input, in this case English input, is generally agreed throughout the literature reviewed, especially when it comes to the young learners. If there is one thing that the English classroom should produce, it is language exposure of the target language. Results from the different studies, reports that the amount of input has a great impact on vocabulary and further learning. In chapter 3.2 we saw that the English classroom contained a lot of Norwegian, both as a strategy and as a classroom language. In addition, implicit

language learning was the best solution for the young learners. In this chapter, the key to implicit learning will be presented alongside the studies which explain why an English classroom should avoid Norwegian as the main working language.

Vulchanova asserts that “Norwegian children do not learn English during their first year at school, even with an hour of English lessons a week. Teachers need to speak English instead of Norwegian in their English lessons” (as cited in Sjørnsen, 2015, my translation). Here, Vulchanova points to the importance of English input in the classroom, as well as to its absence. Norwegian students in their first school year do not know enough English compared to what is expected of them, and Vulchanova believes that this is because of lack of English input with the young learners. In Drew’s study, he compared certain aspects of beginner learning of English. When it comes to the use of English, he stated: “The fact that almost two out of five of the teachers used mainly Norwegian in grades 1-4 (...) meant that many of the younger pupils were deprived of valuable target language input” (Drew, 2004, as cited in Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 7). Lund also draws particular attention to teachers’ use of the target language during lessons. She points out that the effect of maximal use of English can be utilized to a much greater extent, and used more consciously (Lund, 1997, as cited in Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 7). As seen in the “average lesson” (Table 2), just 4% of the lesson took place in English compared to the 12% where the classroom language was in Norwegian. These findings make it clear that exposure to the target language is missing in the classroom, even though it should be the main focus with the young learners in order for the language learning to be valuable for both students and teachers.

Language input, exposure to the target language is the key when it comes to implicit language learning, and young children learning languages do so based on implicit processes (Dahl, 2015, p. 4). Dahl (2015) then states that the classroom context may not be the best language-learning arena for the young learners because of the already established problem, the lack of English in Norwegian primary classrooms (p. 6). In Dahl & Vulchanova’s (2014) study, they asked whether acquisition in early foreign language classrooms can be significantly improved with only a small increase in the amount and density of exposure to English. Examples to achieve this are as simple as giving English a more central place in the classroom, like conducting classroom management in English and reading aloud to the students. Exposure to English could also be increased outside of an English lesson (Dahl & Vulchanova, 2014, p. 98). Their study investigated whether it is possible to provide naturalistic second language acquisition of

vocabulary for young learners in a Norwegian classroom. Their method was a bilingual approach to an otherwise normal Norwegian first-grade English classroom, to see if this would lead to an improved acquisition over the course of a year, compared to a standard largely native language-based, first grade class. One school was told to do nothing out of the ordinary and teach English to their first graders as they normally would, with Norwegian as the medium language of instruction. At the other school, teachers agreed to use English more extensively with the students during and outside English lessons (Dahl & Vulchanova, 2014, p. 99). After a year, the class which was told not to change their amount of input, the English teaching had no significant impact on receptive vocabulary. Further, the study showed that this group of first graders lacked any significant English vocabulary development after eight months at school, indicating that young learners do not get extensive amount of English input outside school in Norway. This means that teachers need to spend more time with the target language in the classroom (Dahl & Vulchanova, 2014, p. 103). The other class, where teachers were told to increase the exposure of English to their students, had results pointing toward a positive development. This group outperformed the other group both on words which are cognates in Norwegian and English, and on words which are not.

Charboneau, in her study, found that there was a limitation when it came to the time allocated for the English subject in the first-grade classrooms. This affected the teachers and their teaching with the former opting for simple solutions (as cited in Nyberg, 2017). This can explain the lack of English input, with teachers being constrained because of the limited time allocated to the English subject, and therefore resort to lessons based on textbooks. Dahl & Vulchanova (2014) agree that there may be too little time allocated to the English subject. However, they find that the 20 or more hours out of the 138 hours of English teaching for grade first to fourth that school is spending in the first grade, do not have any measurable effect (p. 103).

In conclusion, Dahl & Vulchanova (2014) claim that there is nothing inherent in the classroom situation that prevents successful foreign language acquisition with young learners. Furthermore, their study indicated that language acquisition depends on the amount of input, and the exposure of the target language does not need to be unrealistically massive for the acquisition to take place (p. 104). A few years after Dahl & Vulchanova's study, one of Vulchanova's master students went back to the same class as they did their study in and retested the students' English competence. The class was now in fourth grade, but no longer had the same teacher, which meant that the English exposure came to a halt in second grade. Even so,

this class stood out from the other in an important area. Vulchanova reports that “There was no significant difference in vocabulary compared with other classes, so in that area they had lost their head start. But they had much better language understanding of English texts” (as cited in Sjursen, 2015, my translation). This means that the children enjoyed a lasting effect of the two first years with extra exposure to English (Sjursen, 2015).

Flognfeldt (2018) states that “The most important aim is to start learning words and expressions, not as lists, but as real elements in communication about things very young learners care about” (p. 244). Dahl also underlines that language knowledge is about more than just knowing words in isolation. The students also need to be able to create meaning in both sentences and texts (as cited in Sjursen, 2015). Further, she says that this is what the students then need to be exposed to. Textbooks and strategies are too focused on words, but language is so much more than that (as cited in Sjursen, 2015). In Dahl & Vulchanova’s study (2014), they went through the learning materials used and activities done in the class with no further development in English. When looking at the learning materials, the lack of improvement and vocabulary development was not astounding (Dahl, 2015, p. 6). The used textbook containing coloring tasks or “finding the pair”, and as for the teacher, he/she was encouraged to use only English for simple instructions and to repeat it multiple times. All of this indicates little natural language use of the type from which children learn best (Dahl, 2015, p. 6). Charboneau also put forwards that there has been an increased awareness about the communication aspects in language teaching in recent years (as cited in Nyberg, 2017). This is also seen in the subject renewal where one of the core elements that will be implemented in the classroom is communication. Dahl (2015) agrees with the significance of communication and adds that even knowing how to translate the English word into Norwegian does not mean that we know this word. There is more that comes with this, like knowing in what context to use it, or how to use it grammatically correct (p. 6). This is in accordance with what the NDET (2013) says about English and its purpose; it is necessary to have knowledge of how the language is used in different contexts. When communicating in English, the vocabulary should be easily available (Dahl, 2015, p. 6). They all illuminate the communication aspect of language teaching. Effective communication requires input of the real elements and not just learning vocabulary in isolation, which is what the early English classroom in Norway is missing.

Even highly important, findings from the chosen literature show an extreme lack of the valuable English input. Dahl (2015) states an important point, “We know that language input on a level

that the learner can understand, is the most important prerequisite for learning, regardless age” (p. 7, my translation). As Wode (1981) pointed out, “There is no learner on record who learned a language or even part of it without receiving some language input” (as cited in Dahl & Vulchanova, 2014, p. 98). It is important that the teacher speaks as much English as possible, but as Dahl (2015) suggests, it is an even a greater problem if the students hear small amounts of English during their first year than if they hear English with some mistakes (pp. 7-8). Speitz & Simonsen (2006) point to frequently mentioned success factors, and among these are the use of the target language which is the best way to learn any language (p. 25). This brings us to the next chapter, the teacher’s role and the important job that follows.

3.4 Teacher Education

The studies reviewed in chapter 3.3, report that the exposure to the target language was missing and just with minimal exposure, students clearly benefited from it. All the literature then points to the important role of the English language teacher, which goes back to what the teacher education involves. In this section, the implications of Teacher Education will be presented.

Lund (1997) has some concrete suggestions for actions towards teachers; “English teachers need schooling in what one can say and do in the primary English classroom and raise awareness of how important natural English input is” (as cited in Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 7, my translation). This quote refers to the teachers’ education and the “fact” that they need information and practice on what to say and how to do different activities while giving their students natural English input. Instruction and explicit knowledge play a role in language acquisition, specifically in compensating for the limited time and opportunity in the language classroom (Dahl & Vulchanova, 2014, p. 99). It is clear that teachers need to know how to make their time valuable when teaching languages, and knowledge about how to instruct the young learners.

Flognfeldt (2018) makes it clear that “In Norway, with English mandatory from year one, teachers simply have to face the challenge of facilitating early L2/L3 acquisition” (p. 244). It is important that teacher students actually learn how to teach languages to the young learners and in order to make the early start as valuable as possible. Like Dahl states, teacher students are learning both the English language, literature and culture in only 30 student points, which limits how much one can learn about language acquisition (as cited in Sjørusen, 2015). She believes

that this should be a priority alongside with the other topics as well. Drew also expresses his worries that many teachers nowadays do not have enough knowledge of the English subject (as cited in Speitz & Simonsen, 2006, p. 8).

When teachers use English in the classroom, they need to be confident and put away the worries of making mistakes. Dahl (2015) says that teachers need to be confident in their own English to actually manage to use it in the classroom (p. 8). In order to do so, teachers need to have knowledge about their teaching subject. In a world where English is used extensively in the media, it is directed towards elder children and adults who can read subtitles, while shows and TV programs for children increasingly are being dubbed to Norwegian (Dahl, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, it is extremely important to make sure that the young children are exposed to English in the classroom, but Dahl (2015) suggests that teachers who lack confidence, are afraid to make mistakes and do not speak English fluently, will have a hard time giving the wanting amount of English input to their students (p. 7). This might explain why so many of the English lessons are taught in Norwegian, because teachers are uncertain of their own English skills (Dahl, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, Dahl declares that the English subject should become obligatory for all student teachers, which it is not today (as cited in Sjursen, 2015). She further affirms that teaching English in the lower grades, to beginner learners, does not require a lot of student points, which she finds a bizarre idea compared to the sixty student points needed to teach English in middle school (as cited in Sjursen, 2015).

4. STUDY LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this review has been to examine why an early start is important for beginner learners of English, and how teachers take advantage of this in an early elementary classroom in Norway. Due to the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied for scrutinizing the literature, the review has a number of limitations.

First, this review is not exhaustive because it has only focused on teaching levels in the primary classroom. All research done in the English classroom from grade five and up, including middle school and high school were excluded. In addition, this review only focused on the Norwegian classroom, leaving out research done in other countries with beginner learners of English.

Second, since there was a scarcity of research on my chosen topic and the target country, there might be findings and conclusions that could have been different in other classrooms if only they were included. The findings reported in the chosen studies cannot be generalized to other age groups, classes, or countries. Similar limitations follow from the inclusion of “only” six different literature. I also included a study from 1997 which is not the most recent. In the 22 years that has passed since this study, a lot may have happened in the English classroom with the young learners. Its findings, however, did not differ substantially from those of the more recent ones. That is one of the reasons for including it. Another reason is that 1997 was the years in which English was implemented in the first grade.

Lastly, I included all sorts of publications. This can lead to certain articles or reports that just summarized or referred to the main points of research-based studies. With these articles, I did not read the whole research myself, which can lead to other interpretation towards results and findings than those I have presented here. In addition, including these types of articles meant that some may not have been peer-reviewed.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a limited number of studies in the field of beginner learners of English in the Norwegian classrooms, and thus crucial to enlighten this field of study. This study has reviewed six different literature by focusing on the importance of an early start with English, and how teachers take advantage of this in an early elementary classroom in Norway. Four categories were identified and presented throughout the analysis: *early start, teaching styles, the lack and value of English input and Teacher Education*. These categories, at a broad range, highlight the reasons for reducing the starting age of English language learning and what actually happens in an early elementary classroom in Norway. They also illuminated the kind of teaching strategies used, the valuable or viable strategies that should be used, and what teachers need to focus on when teaching at this level. Summing up and put together, the review provides some answers to my research question: *Why is an early start important for beginner learners of English, and how do teachers take advantage of this in an early elementary classroom in Norway?*

Although there were similar reasons for an early start of English language learning, there were contrasting views as well. The already established knowledge; children are in a unique position

when it comes to language learning. Thus, the teacher needs to make the best possible use of their young age and the traits that makes learning a new language easier for them than for more mature learners. Learning a new language has benefits from a cultural point of view as well. It makes students aware of and respect other cultures as well as one's own. Children starting at school are often curious of new subjects, including English, and therefore highly receptive of new knowledge and a group easier to teach. They often show no sign of fear or embarrassment in the process of learning whereas the more mature learners have a tendency to display personal characteristics that may prevent further learning. On the other hand, mature learners have more experience when it comes to what kind of strategy that works best in different situations as well as general life experience that entails a better understanding of why the English language is important to learn. With both advantages and disadvantages with each age, there are no studies presented in this review that concluded that an early start with English gave the learner any disadvantages.

A key finding in this review concerns the deficiency of English input that exists in the early elementary classroom in Norway. The studies presented in this review show that the strategy most common in the early primary classroom was instant translation to Norwegian, to ensure that all students understood what was said. They also showed that the textbooks used did not include any hints of natural language input. This means that presenting natural language input in the English classroom is extremely important when Norwegian children do not receive much of it outside of school, and that by using Norwegian instead of English meant that the young learners are deprived of valuable input. In addition, young learners have the unique ability of implicit learning which requires naturalistic input. Dahl & Vulchanova (2014) provided us with a study showing that the amount of language exposure did not have to be unrealistically massive in order for it to be beneficial for the young learners. By increasing the use of the target language and extending it outside of the English classroom, made a positive impact on students' learning, which makes it manageable for all teachers to achieve. Living in a world where English is widely used for communication between people from different countries or cultures, the students need to be exposed to that instead of only learning the correct translation of a specific word. This is also reflected in the curriculums over the years, in statements that the English subject should focus on the communication aspect. As for the implications for the teachers' education, it is generally agreed that teachers need more schooling in the importance of input and exposure for the young learners.

From the studies presented it seems clear that the desired strategy used with young learners in a second language classroom is in accordance with the aspects from the sociocultural theory presented in chapter 1.2. The sociocultural theory focuses on participation and social and meaningful interaction. Even though this is the strategy teachers should be striving to implement, this is not what they practice. The research reported and reviewed in this essay has emphasized the importance of strategies based on communicative language teaching where students are exposed to comprehensible input. What happens in practice, on the other hand, is more similar to the grammar-translation method where teachers use instant translation in order to teach English to the younger students. It can also seem like teachers use the TPR approach. Researchers have noticed that within the English primary classroom in Norway, it is the teacher that do most of the talking and their students are silent, which can be connected to their “silent period”. For the TPR to be successful, teachers need to produce language and ask their learners to perform related actions, so they know their students have understood the input. From various studies, this is the missing part of this method. Instead of using the target language to make sure students have understood, an instant translation is chosen. Even though there is no evidence of an exclusive reliance on behavioristic or sociocultural theory, it seems that teachers nowadays are more drawn to certain aspects of the behavioristic theory such as repetition and imitation instead of more social interaction between younger students and teachers in the target language.

To sum up, there are plenty of good reasons for an early start with English in Norway, but in order to make the early start worthwhile, there is more to it than that. Based on the literature reviewed here, teachers in the primary English classroom in Norway seem not to consider the learning benefits associated with young learners. This leads to question whether an early start is really beneficial for the learners. In order for it to be beneficial, teachers have to use more of the target language and base their instruction on implicit learning processes.

Further research should focus on the beginner learners of English in the primary classroom in Norway to examine whether the findings presented in this review are valid for other early primary classrooms. This would benefit the development of future curriculums by adding to our understanding of what works and what does not work in the beginner training of English. In addition, it would be interesting to see if there will be an increased attention towards English language input when the subject renewal takes place. As we have seen from the chosen studies in this literature review, English language teaching with young learners have a long way to go in order to make the best possible use of the students young age. Further research should also

look into the effects of the English input on young learners in the long run. Will the benefits of English input last over time, say through high school and beyond?

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