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Toward sustainable and linguistically responsive support measures for recently arrived language learners

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ABSTRACT

The number of immigrant students in Finland is increasing; thus, this qualitative case study investigates ways of providing targeted support measures for recently arrived Finnish language learners (RAFLLs) in Finnish lower secondary education. Focusing on linguistic responsiveness, the teaching arrangements and support measures are examined not only from a teacher perspective but also from the perspectives of municipality- and national-level actors by utilizing ecological systems theory. The findings revealed two themes, sustainability and holistic linguistic responsiveness, that reflect the core issues of the current challenges related to organizing teaching and support measures for RAFLLs. Sustainable support measures should be developed on and between all ecosystemic levels. Furthermore, measures for supporting RAFLLs must be developed with an all-encompassing linguistically responsive approach (LRA). The development processes require a more coherent dialogue between the schools, the municipalities, and the national-level actors.

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Introduction

Increased migration is one of the main effects of globalization and has resulted in broader cultural and linguistic diversity in schools in many countries. The arrival of a relatively large number of refugees in Europe in 2015–2016 implicated the necessity of reforming educational measures to meet the needs of recently arrived immigrant students (Bunar and Juvonen 2021; Horgan et al. 2021). Currently, the crisis in Ukraine is creating a substantial number of refugees, challenging educational systems throughout Europe.

Education for children and youths is a human right (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2021); thus, education systems must take significant actions to meet the needs of recently arrived students (e.g. Horgan et al. 2021; Koehler and Schneider 2019), regardless of the reasons for migration. Furthermore, educational systems play a critical role as a point of contact between immigrants and their new home country; teachers and other education professionals contribute to the socialization of the newly arrived (Mickan et al. 2007), and peer support is of significant importance (Randell and Osman 2021). From an ecological perspective, the need for schools to develop into spaces where reciprocal learning between individuals and the environment should be acknowledged (Woods 2009).

The education systems of the different European countries have a variety of complex structures and rules, and organizing access to education for refugee children and youths has been executed

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primarily within the existing logic and idiosyncrasies of the respective systems (Koehler and Schneider 2019). There are several examples of educational solutions for responding to the different pedagogic and emotional needs of recently arrived students; however, supports in formal education may not always address the individual needs of immigrant students, which can be challenging to identify (Horgan et al. 2021), as these students come from various backgrounds, and their support needs are based on their life experiences (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2021; Koehler and Schneider 2019) and their linguistic and educational backgrounds (Rodríguez-Izquierdo and Darmody 2019). It is widely acknowledged that students from linguistically and culturally heterogeneous backgrounds often encounter linguistic barriers in educational settings in their new home countries (e.g. Borgna 2017; Smythe 2022).

In Europe, educational systems have responded to cultural and linguistic diversity (CLD) in many ways (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, González Falcon, and Goenechea Permisán 2020). The majority of EU countries (24 out of 27) offer language support classes for recently arrived students (Gitschthaler et al. 2021), who are generally expected to learn the new language and culture quickly (e.g. Hilt 2017). The duration of the language support classes (Koehler and Schneider 2019) and the pedagogical support measures vary from submersive ‘sink or swim’ approaches to pull-out language instruction and bilingual education (Erling, Gitschthaler, and Schwab 2022; Thorstensson Dávila 2012). In situations where recently arrived students have a limited educational history—meaning that both the education system and the language of schooling are new for the students and their families—additional support in the language of schooling can be especially advantageous (Gitschthaler et al. 2021; Thorstensson Dávila 2012).

In addition to the overarching educational systems, teachers’ beliefs and approaches related to diversity play an important role in teaching immigrant students (Heikkola et al. 2022; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, González Falcon, and Goenechea Permisán 2020). Taking students’ diverse cultural and educational backgrounds into account is important, and considering language-related issues is also necessary (Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2021; Vigren et al. 2022). Linguistically responsive teaching (LRT) builds on valuing cultural and linguistic diversity and seeing all languages as equally valuable and as resources for learning (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013). A linguistically responsive teacher understands the central role of language in all learning and knows how to implement pedagogies that support language learners (e.g. Heikkola et al. 2022). The aim of LRT is to advocate for multilingual students to be able to participate fully in schools and the wider society (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013). Indeed, mastering the language of schooling is one of the most important factors of good educational outcomes for students (Harju-Luukkainen and McElvany 2018), and language skills are crucial for social communication in the new home country (e.g. Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan 2021; Horgan et al. 2021). However, according to previous research, mainstream teachers possess limited knowledge about and competences for teaching subject content in a linguistically responsive manner (e.g. Alisaari et al. 2019; Lopez 2021).

This study focuses on educational arrangements and support measures for lower secondary-level students, aged 13–16, who recently moved to Finland and are learning the language of schooling (Finnish); they are referred to as *recently arrived Finnish language learners* (RAFLs; see also Harju-Autti et al. 2021). Thus, this study draws on a Vygotskian perspective, according to which language is perceived as a central tool for learning and development (Vygotsky 1978) and a primary resource for enacting social identity and displaying membership in social groups (Miller 2000). It is important to note that Estonian is practically the only language of the Finno-Ugric language family that resembles Finnish (Honko, Ahola, and Hirvelä 2021), which implies that the linguistic distance between Finnish and other languages is great (see also Nisbet et al. 2021).

In Finland, national funding covers 900–1000 h (approximately one academic year) of support for recently arrived students, after which, based on the principles of inclusivity (Finlex 2011), they participate in mainstream education (Finnish National Board of Education, henceforth FNBE 2015). Overall, the Finnish educational system relies on an inclusive orientation emphasizing pre-emptive support for all students’ learning and well-being (Ainscow 2020; Rajakaltio and Mäkinen

2014). This is based on the Education for All (EFA) approach (UNESCO 2017), which is a global commitment to providing quality basic education for all children, youths, and adults. In Finland, an inclusion-oriented three-tiered support model that offers a gradually strengthening support structure (general support, intensified support, and special-needs support) has been in force since 2011 (Finlex 2011).

Despite the country's good educational reputation, Finland has been among the most unequal Western European countries for immigrant students (e.g. Borgna 2017). This can be seen in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, which show a large achievement gap between immigrant and native students in Finland (Harju-Luukkainen and McElvany 2018; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018). This may be partially explained by language gaps and the socioeconomic status of immigrant students' families (Ahonen 2021). Furthermore, about 14% of young people in Finland, regardless of their linguistic background, do not reach a sufficient level of literacy to be prepared for further studies and life as contributing members of society (Ahonen 2021). In a text-based society, this calls for further action (Sulkunen 2013): 'Language proficiency must be at the core of educational policies and integration processes in the destination countries, alongside diverse, coherent, intercultural education policy' (Rodríguez-Izquierdo and Darmody 2019, 52).

This study focused on gaining a holistic overview of the educational arrangements and support measures targeted at RAFLs. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1979, 1992/2005) of human development was used as a theoretical frame to gain a deeper understanding of the Finnish educational system as a multilayered entity in which educational arrangements are developed by actors at the classroom level into education policy making. The aim of this study was to understand the perspectives of educational experts (i.e. teachers, planners, and administrators) who work at different levels of the educational ecosystem to organize or implement RAFL support in order to highlight the need for developing linguistic support for students learning the language of schooling in their new home country. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the current issues concerning the teaching arrangements and support measures targeted at RAFLs in Finnish lower secondary education?
- (2) How should the support measures be further developed?

Toward linguistically responsive education

Developing LRT to meet the needs of language learners is a necessity (Lopez 2021; Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013). The framework of LRT (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013) addresses the academic needs of language learners: linguistically responsive teachers know how to *teach language* and how to *teach about the language* (Lopez 2021). Furthermore, the important role of language across a curriculum, not only in language classrooms but in connection to all subjects (Heikkola et al. 2022; Schleppegrell 2020), requires all teachers to carefully plan their lessons as a site for language learning (e.g. Schleppegrell 2020).

The LRT framework (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013) is an educational paradigm entailing a set of orientations and pedagogical skills that teachers need to effectively teach language learners despite any cultural and linguistic barriers (e.g. Lopez 2021). LRT is built on three orientations. First, it is built on sociolinguistic consciousness, with an awareness that language, culture, and identity are inseparable, and that language use and its sociopolitical dimensions are always interconnected with language education. Second, linguistic diversity must be appreciated and cultivated. Third, linguistically responsive teachers understand that language learners need educational opportunities and support to gain access to social and political capital (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013).

In addition to these orientations, linguistically responsive teachers must master different strategies for learning about the linguistic and academic backgrounds of language learners, as well as

the skills for applying key principles of second language learning in their teaching (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013). Moreover, a linguistically responsive teacher recognizes the language demands of learning new topics through a new language and masters a repertoire of ways to scaffold language learners with extralinguistic supports and well-formulated instructions (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013).

In recent years, the LRT framework has inspired many teachers, teacher educators, and researchers and has been used to analyze teachers' attitudes, beliefs (e.g. Alisaari et al. 2019; Vigren et al. 2022), and pedagogical practices (Heikkola et al. 2022; Lopez 2021). These studies have highlighted the crucial importance of developing both pre- and in-service teacher education in order to enhance linguistically responsive pedagogy. In the current study, the LRT framework (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013) was used as a reflective tool for mirroring the educational ecosystem from a linguistically responsive perspective.

The ecosystem framework

Ecological systems theory offers a useful framework for discussing the contingencies between individuals and their environments (e.g. Chu, Liu, and Fang 2021). The interconnections between and within ecosystems form a complex ecology; thus, an overall ecosystem is more than the sum of its parts (Moate et al. 2021). In this study, Bronfenbrenner's theory (1992/2005) was applied to examine Finnish basic education as a set of ecosystems, with a focus on linguistic support for RAFLs.

The education system can be perceived as a set of nested ecosystems (van Lier 2004), each of which has its own sets of artifacts and patterns of operations and relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; van Lier 2004). The *microsystem* is a developing person's most immediate environment and includes settings such as home, the classroom, and school. The *mesosystem* encompasses the interactions between two or more microsystems to which the developing member belongs. The *exosystem* comprises the linkages and processes occurring in two or more settings that directly influence the developing person's immediate environment; however, on the individual level, ways to influence these processes are limited. The macrosystem forms an overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems, representing the culture and subculture of the surrounding context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; van Lier 2004). Furthermore, the chronosystem, added later by Bronfenbrenner (1992/2005), represents changes to society and culture over time.

For this study, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992/2005) provides a useful theoretical framework for studying the contexts in which educational experts work. The focus was on examining the contexts of and contingencies between the different ecosystemic levels of the education system with regard to providing linguistic support for RAFLs (see Figure 1).

The microsystem represents teachers' immediate working contexts—classrooms with students and their linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The mesosystem comprises all collaboration that takes place among students, teachers, and other school professionals in educational communities. The exosystem refers to municipality-level administrative processes and decision-making. The national-level administrative views connected to steering documents, such as legislation (Finlex 2011) and the national core curriculum for basic education (FNBE, 2014), are positioned at the macrosystemic level. The growing number of RAFLs in Finland represents changes at the chronosystemic level. Although the importance of examining family relations and the life experiences of immigrant families within the ecosystem is indisputable, in this study, the focus was on the educational context only.

The Finnish context

This study was conducted in Finland, where the majority of the population with a Finnish background speaks Finnish as their first language (L1). Swedish, the other official national language, is spoken by a little over 5% of people with a Finnish background (Official Statistics of Finland

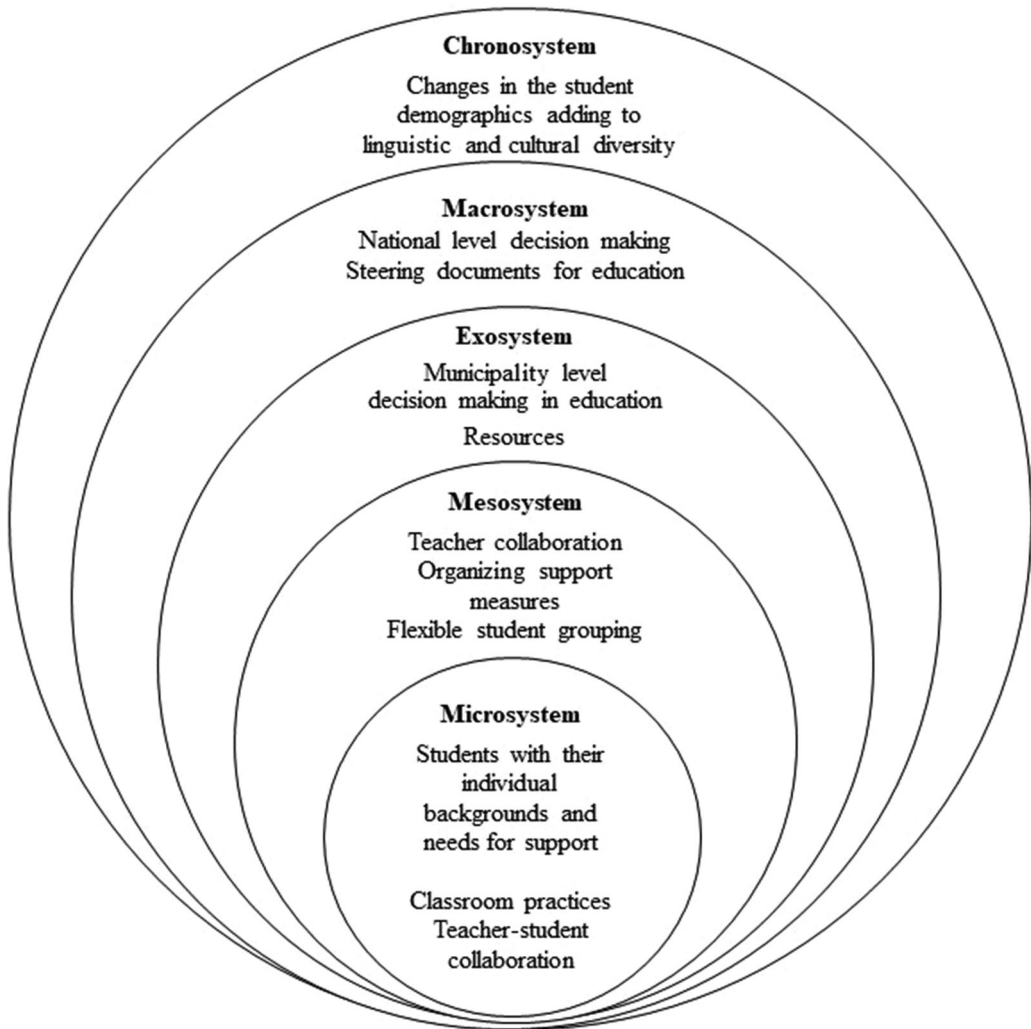


Figure 1. The ecosystemic levels of the education system (adapted from Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992/2005)

2021). In addition, the Sámi languages (North Sámi, Inari Sámi, and Skolt Sámi), Romani, and Finnish and Swedish sign languages have legislative rights in the Finnish constitution (e.g. Ministry of Justice 2022). The largest immigrant language groups are Russian, Estonian, Arabic, English, and Somali (Official Statistics of Finland 2019); altogether, over 200 languages are spoken in Finland (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020). In 1990, the number of inhabitants who spoke a language other than Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi as their L1 was 24,783 (0.5% of the population); at the end of 2020, this number had increased to 432,800 (7.8% of the population; Official Statistics of Finland 2021). This change in the chronosystem is also present in student demographics.

Considering the macrosystem, basic education throughout Finland includes grades 1–9 and is free for all age groups (Ahonen 2021). At the primary level (grades 1–6), most teaching is provided by a class teacher. In lower secondary education (grades 7–9), subjects are taught by subject-matter teachers who have majored in the subject they teach and minored in pedagogical studies. With regard to both class-teacher and subject-teacher education in Finland, courses related to CLD are limited and vary between universities (e.g. Szábo et al. 2021).

As a macro-level steering document, the national core curriculum (FNBE, 2014) values cultural and linguistic diversity and requires language-aware pedagogy: ‘In a language-aware school, each adult is a linguistic model and also teachers of the language typical of the subject they teach’ (29). The curriculum emphasizes that language-aware teaching is relevant and beneficial for all students, independent of their linguistic backgrounds (Alisaari 2020). The concept of teacher language awareness is commonly defined as ‘explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use’ (Association for Language Awareness 2022; Hu and Gao 2021). In this study, teachers’ language awareness was examined according to the principles of LRT (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013), including the orientations, skills, and knowledge within the framework.

At the exosystemic level, teaching arrangements targeted at immigrant students have been developed in recent years. Current structures include about one year (900 or 1000 h, depending on grade level) of preparatory education (henceforth prep-ed; FNBE, 2015; Koehler and Schneider 2019). The municipalities receive funding for organizing prep-ed, but they are not obliged to offer it. Prep-ed takes place either in separate classes or by integrating recently arrived students into mainstream basic education. After the year of prep-ed, immigrant students usually enter mainstream classes in basic education.

At the meso- and microsystemic levels, a curriculum of Finnish as a second language and literature (FSLL) is offered for studying Finnish. However, FSLL focuses on Finnish as a school subject; it is not a pedagogical support measure for learning the content—or language—of other subjects (FNBE, 2022). Furthermore, ways of organizing FSLL vary between municipalities (Owal Group 2022). Providing immigrant students with L1 classes and other support measures in their L1s is highly recommended in the macrolevel steering documents (e.g. FNBE, 2014). Models to support immigrant students after the year of prep-ed have been developed in different parts of the country as exosystemic-level solutions, but studies on these models are not available (Pyykkö 2017). However, the support measures targeted at RAFLs who are shifting from prep-ed to mainstream education are seen as inadequate by teachers (Owal Group 2022).

The focus of language education in Finland has mainly been on language, literature, subject-specific knowledge, and teaching foreign languages in monolingual settings (e.g. Salo 2009), not on teaching subject content for students who are simultaneously learning the language of schooling (e.g. Schleppegrell 2020). However, development projects in pre- and in-service teacher education are raising awareness, and programs are aiming to change teachers’ beliefs from seeing multilingualism as a problem to seeing it as a resource (Szábo et al. 2021) and an important feature of the curriculum and the school culture (e.g. Cummins 2021).

In an increasingly globalized world, the number of students simultaneously learning the language of schooling and subject content continues to grow (e.g. Schleppegrell 2020). However, teaching subjects such as biology or history with a content and language integrated (CLIL) approach in mainstream education has received relatively little attention, not only in Finland (e.g. Harju-Autti et al. 2021) but also in other countries (e.g. Erling, Gitschthaler, and Schwab 2022).

Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative case study, which is an in-depth empirical inquiry into a specific and complex phenomenon (the case) set within its real-world, authentic, and localized context with constructivist assumptions (Stake 1995). This methodology allows researchers to discuss the phenomenon from various viewpoints and build a dialogue between experiences and theoretical knowledge. This case study explored ways of supporting RAFLs in Finnish basic education after their year of prep-ed. With regard to the initiative for and background of this study, the first author’s experience as a teacher of linguistic support from 2014–2016 was used for developing the research design. The value- and bias-laden nature of this insider view (Boblin et al. 2013; Stake 1995) was acknowledged throughout the process.

Ethics

This study was conducted according to the ethical principles of research in Finland (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK 2019). Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were informed that taking part implied consent. Moreover, participants could withdraw from the process if they wanted to. The participants were given detailed information about the research, including information about their anonymity and the researchers' contact information. The data are stored in an online storage service with two-factor authentication to ensure that the data remain protected. After the publication of this article, the data will be destroyed. Due to the first author's experience as a linguistic support teacher and the prolonged period of time spent studying the phenomenon, the positionality of the first author was carefully reflected on throughout the research process.

Study participants and data collection

The participants in this study (N = 22) represented different levels of the education system in accordance with the aforementioned ecosystemic levels. Teachers (n = 13) represented the local (micro- and mesosystemic) levels. Administrators (n = 6) represented the regional (exosystemic) level. The local- and regional-level participants comprised eight different municipalities from different parts of the country. Participants from the National Agency for Education (n = 2) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (n = 2) represented the national (macrosystemic) level. The data were collected through Zoom interviews, email correspondence, and phone interviews. The participants were contacted by email via the first author's networks at the beginning of 2022. Purposive sampling was used to select the professional participants for this study. The participants were asked to reflect on the overall structures for providing pedagogical support for RAFLs after their year of prep-ed. They were asked to portray these support measures from a professional perspective and give their opinions on how the measures should be developed. The Basic Education Act (Finlex 2011), the national core curriculum for basic education (EDUFI, 2014), and the national core curriculum for preparatory education (EDUFI, 2015) were used as background data. Although the core curriculum for basic education (EDUFI, 2014) values and supports multilingualism and language awareness, recent studies (Alisaari 2020; Heikkola et al. 2022) have suggested that the macro-level policy documents do not align with municipality and school practices; there are tensions between the macro-level documents and the practices taking place at the inner ecosystemic levels. To complement the information gained from the policy documents, interviewing experts from the different ecosystemic levels provided insightful data and perspectives from and between different experts in the educational context (see Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992/2005).

Data analysis procedures

Directed content analysis and the initial coding developed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) were used for the analysis. Directed content analysis was used to identify and understand the systemic-level linguistic barriers that RAFLs face in Finnish lower secondary education. To code the data, the four levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1992/2005) were used.

The dataset comprises 53 pages of transcripts (12-point font, 1.5 line spacing) of the participants' thoughts on the overall educational structures and the needs for developing support measures for RAFLs. Although the participants were actors at different ecosystemic levels in basic education (after Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992/2005), the data were analyzed as an entity. The analysis process entailed four phases. After a close reading of the transcribed data, the analysis units were formed: the analysis units for organizing the data were an extensive, meaningful description or a brief notional statement. Units were first allocated according to Bronfenbrenner's systemic levels (1992/2005). It is worth noting that the units were analyzed without consideration for participants'

Table 1. An overview of the analysis unit examples and issue topics related to the emerged themes

Unit Examples	Issue Topics	Theme
'In the National Core Curriculum, the immigrant students are mentioned but there is nothing about how to organize teaching for them.' (MLP3)	Need for more coherent steering	Sustainability
'It is difficult to plan the support structures because the resources for providing support vary annually.' (TR3)	Need for resources enabling continuity	
'The lower secondary school structures form a challenge. There is no time for planning.' (TR1)	Collaboration between actors in planning	
'I believe that if the intensified support is organized in small groups, it is more beneficial.' (TR9)	Organizing grassroots practices	Linguistic responsiveness
'Language-aware pedagogy' is practically non-existent.' (MLP1)	Need for language-aware pedagogy (FNBE, 2014)	
'A specific teacher of linguistic support is an important actor in the support structures.' (TR6)	Importance of dedicated teachers for linguistic support	
'The older the students are, the more important it is to offer linguistic support also in small groups.' (MLP6)	Support measures in small flexible groups	
'Co-teaching in the students' L1s has to be developed on the national level.' (MLP2)	Support in the students' L1s	
'Principals have to be dedicated to developing pedagogy for RAFLs.' (TR1)	Need for pedagogical leadership	
'After the prep-ed, the students are learning Finnish and studying in Finnish at the same time.' (TR6)	RAFLs' needs for linguistic support	

positioning in the ecosystem. Units with similar meanings were assembled under emerging issue topics (Table 1). Next, the relationships between the issue topics and the ecosystemic levels were discussed to gain a holistic overview of the complexities of CLD in lower secondary education. Finally, two main themes emerged: sustainability and linguistic responsiveness. The first three steps of the analysis were conducted by the first author. For researcher triangulation, the fourth step of the analysis, critical reflection on the dialogue of the topics and themes, was conducted jointly.

To present the participants' role in this study, direct quotations have been used. Participants' roles are indicated as TR for teacher, MLR for municipality-level representative, and NaLR for national-level representative.

Findings

The actors at all ecosystemic levels seemed to be aware of the current situation and the importance of developing teaching arrangements and support measures to better meet RAFLs' needs. Regardless of their positioning within the ecosystem, the participants' remarks concerned all the ecosystemic levels. This indicates a shared frustration concerning the lack of dialogue between the different levels. The findings indicate that, to some extent, a multilayered dialogue between and across the different ecosystemic levels does exist, but the power dynamics are imbalanced: the actors at the micro and meso levels have less power to mandate change than those at the exo- and macro-systemic levels.

The national level steering documents enable adapting the system to align with a linguistically responsive approach (LRA), but the municipalities and schools make their own interpretations, which may not align with an LRA. The participants in this study—specialists in this topic—see the importance of an LRA throughout the ecosystemic levels of lower secondary education.

Sustainable support for RAFLs

The need for more coherent steering. The participants mentioned the need for more coherent steering at the macro level, referring to Finnish educational legislation, the regulations set by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the national core curriculum created by the Finnish

National Agency for Education. While these inclusion-oriented steering documents enable the provision of sustainable support and emphasize early intervention for problems related to all students' learning, schooling, and well-being 'directly as the need arises' (Finlex 2011), there are no solid guidelines specifically addressing support for CLD in basic education:

From the national perspective, it seems that pedagogical practices differ a lot, and the teachers have to adjust their own solutions for teaching and organizing support as well as for evaluating RAFLs without any guidelines from the national level. (TR11)

Moreover, although the aim of the national three-tier support model (Finlex 2011) is a case-by-case approach targeting support that is best for the student, there is no guarantee that the support will actually be executed. Furthermore, the three-tiered support model should address both learning difficulties and language proficiency, as indicated by a national-level participant:

It is important to take language competencies into consideration when the three-tier support model is used. (NaLR2)

Currently, language proficiency and needs for linguistic support are not explicitly addressed in the three-tiered support model in the macro-level steering documents; thus, language-related questions are often overlooked. Consequently, 'challenges arise when differences between learning difficulties and developing language skills are not recognized' (NaLR4).

Based on the findings of this study, the core issue from the RAFLs' perspective seems to lie within the discrepancies between the macro-level steering documents and the actual time that is needed for learning a new language. At the micro level, RAFLs can still be considered language learners (e.g. Schleppegrell 2020) after the 900 or 1000 h of funded prep-ed (FNBE, 2015). On the one hand, the limited period of separate prep-ed is in line with the principles of inclusive education, emphasizing each student's right to participate in mainstream education (Erling, Gitschthaler, and Schwab 2022). On the other hand, the short-term prep-ed is not sufficient for students who would benefit from linguistic (and possibly other types of) support for a longer period of time. The educational structures rely on the one year of prep-ed: the macro level steering does not acknowledge the need for additional linguistic support at the micro level after that year.

Inclusive education and cultural and linguistic diversity are national-level issues, but the responsibility of planning and implementing teaching arrangements is up to the municipalities. The current system should be fixed, but the means to address these issues are limited. (NaLR3)

The need for more coherent steering was mentioned by many participants. In Finland, teachers have strong autonomy, and it is highly appreciated (e.g. Soini, Pyhältö, and Pietarinen 2021). However, strong teacher autonomy may cause challenges in collaboration when renewing pedagogical solutions.

The participants mentioned challenges related to the decentralized basic education system in Finland because the municipalities form their own practices for supporting RAFLs. At the exosystemic level, municipalities create their curricula based on the national core curriculum (FNBE, 2014). Support measures for RAFLs are funded according to municipality-level policymaking and are organized according to the understanding of and resources available to each municipality's school administration. This leads to a significant lack of continuous support structures, as noted by a national-level participant:

After the prep-ed, the student is pushed to mainstream education, often without adequate support. (NaLR2)

Although the national steering documents encourage organizing prep-ed, teaching Finnish as a school subject, and teaching students' L1s, the municipalities are not given specific guidelines for organizing the teaching arrangements. The need for sustainable support mechanisms after the year of prep-ed has only recently gained attention (see Harju-Autti et al. 2021; Owl Group 2022).

The need for resources enabling sustainability. Organizing support requires resources that are often dependent on temporary funding. The teaching positions that depend on municipality decisions are not permanent. This is a challenge not only for long-term planning and teacher

collaboration, but also for building meaningful and sustainable pedagogical relationships with RAFLs. Changes in teaching staff members can be harmful:

The worst case is when, in autumn, the teachers are not the same ones we met at the end of the prep-ed together with the RAFL. (TR8)

The participants emphasized that teaching arrangements and support measures for RAFLs are planned at the municipality level. However, without specific guidance, every school is responsible for inventing its own ways of addressing RAFLs' needs, as pointed out by a teacher participant:

We have had relatively good resources for supporting RAFLs, but the lack of clear structures forms an obstacle to planning ahead. It is difficult to plan the support structures because the resources for providing support vary annually. (TR3)

Collaboration between actors in planning. A mesosystemic notion, the participants emphasized the importance of collaborative long-term planning as a means for building sustainable support measures for RAFLs. This is in line with the findings of Walton et al. (2022), who promoted the importance of collaborative learning communities in responding to educational challenges. A lack of planning time was considered one of the main problems, especially by the teacher and administrative participants. As indicated by a municipality-level participant, 'Teachers need more time for collaborative planning' (MLP3). Furthermore, collaborative pedagogical actions require time for both planning and implementation; however, 'The lower secondary school structures form a challenge. There's no time for planning' (TR1).

Organizing grassroots practices. The exosystemic municipality-level decisions related to support for RAFLs include prep-ed arrangements, teacher resources, and teacher qualification requirements, as well as resources for FSL and L1 instruction. This leads to a variety of solutions in the microsystem. The importance of flexible teaching groups was emphasized by the participants:

I believe that if intensified support is organized in small groups, it is more beneficial. I assume that it is more challenging to provide adequate support for RAFLs who study in mainstream classes. (TR9)

Indeed, it is vital to offer RAFLs adequate but flexible support measures for language development within the school context (e.g. Harju-Autti et al. 2021).

To achieve sustainability, there must be a shared vision among stakeholders operating within and between the ecosystemic levels when developing support measures targeted at RAFLs. Furthermore, in line with the findings of Soini, Pyhältö, and Pietarinen (2021), the developmental processes concerning curriculum reform—in this case, curriculum-wide language awareness—require negotiation and interplay between actors at all ecosystemic levels. At the micro- and mesosystemic levels, the schools are dependent on exo-level municipality resources, but they are also responsible for providing RAFLs with adequate support, as required by the macro-level policies.

Holistic linguistic responsiveness

According to the participants, the macro-level legislation should be updated to consider RAFLs' needs for linguistic support. Currently, the legislation (decree 1777/2009; Finlex, 2009) does not address language proficiency issues in relation to support measures or school subjects other than Finnish/Swedish as a second language and the teaching of students' L1s (Finlex 2011). This requires macro- and exo-level attention, as pointed out by a national-level participant:

The support after prep-ed should be organized within mainstream education, not as separate groups. However, if funding for this is provided to the municipalities, we should be able to rely on the education providers to target the resources for RAFL support. There are examples of FSL resources that are not used for what they are meant for. We need a flexible form of additional support that reaches those who need it. (NaLR1)

The need for language-aware pedagogy. Although 'language-aware pedagogy' (FNBE, 2014) is required from all basic education teachers, proficiency in the language of schooling has not been

a core issue in the macro-level planning and implementation of pedagogical support. According to the national core curriculum (FNBE, 2014), the consideration of students' linguistic and educational backgrounds should be addressed in the local curricula—thus at the exosystemic level—which are then further implemented at the meso and micro levels. Based on our findings, municipalities that have many years of experience organizing teaching for immigrant students have developed numerous effective meso- and micro-level practices for supporting RAFLs in basic education. However, as pointed out by a national-level participant (NaLR1), municipalities with no previous experience teaching RAFLs are currently receiving immigrant families with school-aged children due to refugees coming from Ukraine. Thus, it would be significant for exosystemic municipality-level decisions to be based on adequate knowledge of LRAs in every municipality.

Regardless of the participants' systemic positioning, the structure of lower secondary education was considered challenging. In lower secondary education, non-language-related subjects are taught by subject teachers whose educational backgrounds frequently do not include content related to language education. Thus, LRT (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013) may seem irrelevant to teachers who have not participated in pre- or in-service courses covering linguistic topics.

There are teachers who pay tremendous attention to linguistic support, and there are teachers who are of the opinion that language-aware pedagogy is not their duty, or they just don't know how to implement language-aware pedagogy for RAFLs. (MLR3)

Implementing language-aware pedagogy in the lower secondary context requires CLIL, as indicated by a municipality-level participant (MLP1). However, CLIL is not used to explicitly teach the language of the surrounding society (e.g. Harju-Autti et al. 2021).

The importance of dedicated teachers for linguistic support. In Finland, all teachers are expected to support all students (FNBE, 2014), including RAFLs. However, according to the participants, the implementation of support for RAFLs at the microsystemic grassroots level needs further attention. As stated by one respondent, 'If supporting RAFLs is labeled as a 'duty for all', it easily becomes a responsibility of nobody' (TR3). Consequently, in schools with a specific teacher resource for linguistic support, the responsibility of supporting RAFLs is shared among subject (including FSLL) teachers, special education teachers, and teachers of linguistic support at the mesosystemic level. This was considered useful by the participants:

The support measures work well when there are teachers who are actually assigned to do that. (TR1)

Support measures in small, flexible groups. The importance of collegial collaboration at the mesosystemic level was also brought up from the perspective of linguistic responsiveness. In particular, the participants highlighted the significance of designated professionals working as teachers of linguistic support. It is an exosystemic phenomenon that such teachers have different titles in different municipalities; however, their duties seem to be relatively similar in the different meso and micro-systems: supporting RAFLs in learning subject content and the language of schooling and becoming included in the school culture. Thus, when building meaningful and sustainable pedagogical relationships based on an LRA, the structures of lower secondary education should provide flexible opportunities at the meso level for arranging support for RAFLs:

Co-teaching is often implemented so that there is a teacher of linguistic support—a teacher of Finnish—who takes RAFLs into a separate class where they can get more personalized support. We have also noticed that this arrangement has encouraged RAFLs to be braver in speaking and asking questions. (TR13)

The arrangement of small, flexible groups within mainstream education to help students practice their language skills has been shown to be beneficial (Harju-Autti et al. 2021). However, this requires exo- and macro-level decisions that consider the needs for teachers, time, and classroom space to be made.

Supporting students' L1s. The importance of L1 support for RAFLs was recognized by the participants of this study. At the national level in Finland, the accessibility and availability of L1 instruction are problematic, varying between municipalities and even schools:

The schools don't understand the importance of providing support in the students' L1s. (MLP1)

Some municipalities organize L1 instruction and support in many languages, but there are many municipalities where L1 instruction is not organized at all, either because there are not enough students per language or because there are no teachers available. Therefore, L1 support for RAFLs depends on the municipality in which they live, which leads to unequal support measures. According to LRT (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013), valuing students' first languages as a tool for learning new content is crucial, not only for learning purposes but also for supporting multilingual learners' identities (e.g. Cummins 2021).

Pedagogical leadership. As pointed out by a teacher participant (TR9), continuous teacher collaboration is needed to build sustainable support mechanisms for RAFLs:

It is very important to understand that to create linguistically responsive support measures, teacher collaboration, student knowledge, and intensive planning are needed. All of this should be supported by the principals. (TR9)

In addition to teacher collaboration, the significance of pedagogical leadership from principals in creating a linguistically responsive school culture was also highlighted.

RAFLs' needs for linguistic support. It was recognized by the participants that, independent of immigrant students' other possible support needs, inadequate language skills can pose a challenge in all learning (see also Schleppegrell 2020). For many students, one year in prep-ed is not enough to learn sufficient Finnish for studying in general basic education, as pointed out by a teacher participant:

After the transition from prep-ed to mainstream basic education, the students need support for studying subject-specific content in the new language. (TR5)

All the participants, independent of their systemic level, emphasized the importance of meeting RAFLs' individual needs concerning their academic, social, and linguistic development. The findings suggest that building a linguistically responsive school culture should not be seen as merely the teachers' responsibility, although students' opportunities to develop their language proficiency are determined by educators' skills and knowledge (e.g. Cummins 2021; Schleppegrell 2020; Smythe 2022). It is vital to acknowledge that the challenges of implementing LRT (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013) are dependent on the LRA of all the levels of the educational ecosystem, from the national level to the municipalities and the school settings.

Discussion

This study examined the current issues concerning support measures targeted at RAFLs in Finnish lower secondary education. The theory-driven analysis was based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1992/2005). The findings offer insights to better understand the complex nature of and needs for developing support measures for language learners in new home countries.

This study indicates that the desire to develop sustainable teaching arrangements and support measures to better meet RAFLs' needs is strong. However, due to changes at the chronosystemic level, a growing number of RAFLs at the microsystemic level has left the actors at the meso-, exo-, and macrolevels unable to respond adequately. The prevailing structures seem to align with the sink-or-swim approach (see Thorstenson Dávila, 2012). To some extent, the sink-or-swim approach can be considered a narrow view of inclusive education (Schwab, Sharma, and Loreman 2018). In the school context, teachers are the most important actors with regard to providing students with the support they need for learning. However, to learn, students need support from more experienced others (Vygotsky 1962). The sink-or-swim approach (Thorstenson Dávila 2012) can

lead to students falling behind in the educational system and negatively impact their future ambitions and career choices (e.g. Borgna 2017).

With regard to inclusive pedagogy (Mäkinen and Mäkinen 2011), the notion of inclusion should not be viewed solely as a question of student placement (e.g. Göransson and Nilholm 2014). Instead, schools should be learning communities that offer flexible environments where all students have an equal right to belong to mainstream classrooms with their peers but are also given opportunities to participate in intensified individual or group-based support activities (see also Smythe 2022).

The participants' responses were deeply connected to an LRA: the importance of language proficiency in becoming an active member of a new home country was acknowledged, and the challenges of learning a new language were recognized. Furthermore, the importance of valuing students' L1s was emphasized. However, previous studies on linguistic diversity in the Finnish education system (e.g. Alisaari et al. 2019; Harju-Autti et al. 2021) have suggested that the linguistic barriers that RAFLs encounter at school are not sufficiently recognized. The findings of the current study corroborate this insight. Indeed, while the need for linguistic support is acknowledged by the people who specialize in these topics, the actions to provide it are formed, according to the macrosystemic-level national steering documents, in local communities, thus on the exosystemic level, where an all-encompassing LRA has yet to be developed. Furthermore, support measures vary not only between municipalities at the exosystemic level, but also between schools at the meso- and microsystemic level, mainly because language-aware pedagogy (FNBE, 2014) is understood in different ways. Some teachers use a variety of sophisticated pedagogical strategies (see Cummins 2021) together with the principles of LRT, whereas others are reluctant to adopt the idea of language-aware pedagogy. This creates inequality in the linguistic support that RAFLs receive in mainstream lower secondary education classes.

The findings also suggest that developing the education system according to and toward a holistic LRA is a lengthy process that should involve all ecosystemic levels, with an emphasis on a strong dialogue. The Finnish basic education system and its teaching arrangements, subjects, and structures were originally built and developed on monolingual ideologies. In addition, Finnish teacher education programs follow the principles of the basic education system by educating class teachers, subject teachers, and special education teachers separately, and courses covering CLD in teacher education are still limited (Szábo et al. 2021). Therefore, acknowledging changes at the chronosystemic level, it is crucial that teacher education is developed to provide teacher-students with adequate knowledge of linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy (see also Vignen et al. 2022).

The findings support the notion that, at the macro level, the national steering documents for Finnish basic education do not form obstacles to providing support for RAFLs. However, much of the local, exo-level decision-making does not include an LRA; for example, there is a paucity of specific knowledge regarding linguistic demands and needs for linguistic support. One crucial factor is, of course, money. Many steps toward culturally and linguistically responsive teaching have been taken at the macro level, such as pre- and in-service teacher projects funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Agency for Education. However, with project-based funding, continuity is not secured. Questions related to language proficiency should be included in all policy-making processes (e.g. Rodríguez-Izquierdo and Darmody 2019), requiring a holistic LRA from all actors on all ecosystemic levels. This could reduce the current tensions and further strengthen the dialogue between the levels.

As pointed out by the participants, subject-specific terminology is a language of its own (see also Schleppegrell 2020). In LRT, identifying the particular language demands of each discipline is vital (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013). Therefore, language-aware pedagogy is needed in all teaching—and from all teachers—independent of students' linguistic backgrounds (FNBE, 2014). However, RAFLs form a category of their own: learning the language of the surrounding community as the language of schooling at the same time as learning subject-specific content in the new language is demanding (Cummins 2021; Schleppegrell 2020). Everyone is a language learner throughout their

lifetime, but on some occasions, targeted linguistic support is crucial (e.g. Koehler and Schneider 2019). To implement targeted linguistic support on the micro level following the principles of LRT (Lucas and Villegas 2011, 2013), coherent meso-, exo- and macro-level planning is required: it is necessary to build sustainable support measures based on sociolinguistic consciousness and an appreciation of linguistic diversity, as well as identification of language demands related to learning new topics through a new language.

The findings of this study indicate that the notion of inclusive education is interpreted in many ways. Our understanding of inclusive education is based on the EFA approach (UNESCO 2017). Thus, to develop inclusive practices that take linguistic diversity into consideration, finding new approaches for including recently arrived students in the education system is required (see also Erling, Gitschthaler, and Schwab 2022). Due to educational segregation (e.g. Hilt 2017; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, González Falcon, and Goenechea Permisán 2020), discussing the existing school structures is essential. It is noteworthy that, contrary to common belief, inclusive education is not equivalent to placing all students in the same classroom for every lesson. Instead, inclusion is about providing students with the support they need through various means (e.g. Schwab, Sharma, and Loreman 2018). To learn the language of schooling in a new home country, students should have the time and space to practice their language skills across the curriculum with dedicated teachers who, in line with LRT, are able to support students in building connections with their L1s, the language of schooling, and the subject content (e.g. Schleppegrell 2020).

Currently at the macro level, the government-funded Right to Learn development program aims to identify effective measures to strengthen support for learning and special needs and improve literacy in Finland (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019). Considering municipalities' autonomy at the exosystemic level, macrosystemic national-level improvements are challenging to implement at the meso- and microsystemic levels. Furthermore, the importance of school-level leadership has been emphasized by Soini, Pyhältö, and Pietarinen (2021), who found that school communities that learned from reforms were able to utilize the reforms as fuel for sustainable school development. However, as the number of RAFLs continues to grow, the needed support measures require macrosystemic, national-level attention. Evidence has shown the necessity of developing support measures for RAFLs (e.g. Kirjavainen and Pulkkinen 2017; Owl Group 2022), but concrete macrosystemic national-level actions, such as developing teachers' qualification requirements, are needed. This study indicates that the expertise of linguistic support teachers is beneficial for organizing support for RAFLs. This solution, however, has not yet been backed by any official guidelines in Finland. Subsequently, developing linguistic support requires national-level attention and adequate resources from exo- and macro-level decision-makers. Reaching sufficient academic proficiency in a new language takes several years (e.g. Schleppegrell 2020); thus, specific attention should be paid to supporting RAFLs, with a focus on inclusive practices (e.g. Erling, Gitschthaler, and Schwab 2022).

Sustainable support measures need to be developed with consideration for all ecosystemic levels. Although this study has limitations related to generalizability as a result of the small sample in the context of a single country, it provides relevant insights for developing teaching practices in linguistically diverse contexts. Moreover, the validity of this study is strengthened by researcher triangulation. Cultural and linguistic diversity have expanded throughout Finland, but local-level decision-making at the exosystemic level, which is often based on short-term project funding, does not guarantee equal support for RAFLs in Finnish basic education. Therefore, actions at the meso-, exo-, and macrosystemic levels should be further developed dialogically with an LRA to meet RAFLs' needs. Although teachers are responsible for implementing LRT in the classrooms (e.g. Zhang-Wu 2017), at the micro level, an LRA has to be adopted at all levels to find sustainable and pedagogically meaningful solutions that meet the needs of language learners around the world. Further research is needed to examine the role of school leadership in developing the overall school culture with an LRA.

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