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A Qualitative Case Study of How Finnish Teachers Transform Grade 2 English Reading Subject into Students' Imaginative and Character-building Adventures

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Abstract

Finland's consistently high performance in international assessments such as PISA has drawn global attention to its early educational practices, particularly in literacy instruction. **Objective:** This study explores the role of teachers in English reading subject in lower-grade Finnish classrooms, emphasizing how literacy education extends beyond technical skill acquisition. **Novelty:** This integrated approach positions literacy as both a cognitive and socio-emotional enterprise, central to holistic learner development. **Methods:** Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews with a teacher, a parent, and a Grade 2 student, complemented by analysis of instructional materials. **Results:** Framed by Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), the findings demonstrate that Finnish teachers use English reading subject not only to develop academic skills such as fluency and comprehension but also to stimulate imagination and cultivate positive character values. **Conclusions:** While the small sample limits generalizability, the study offers critical insights for advancing literacy pedagogy and highlights directions for cross-cultural and longitudinal research.

Keywords: English Reading Subject, Finland, Interview, Teacher's Role.

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INTRODUCTION

The educational achievements of Finnish students have long attracted global interest, particularly their consistently strong performance in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Ahonen, 2021; Altaf et al., 2020; Araújo et al., 2021). In the most recent PISA assessment, Finnish students once again outperformed the OECD average in reading literacy, reinforcing the country's global reputation for excellence in education (Clausnitzer, 2024). The 2022 PISA results reaffirm Finland's reputation as a high-performing education system, though they also reveal a concerning downward trend in reading literacy. Finnish 15-year-olds scored an average of 490 points in reading, remaining above the OECD average of 476, yet marking a significant decline from previous cycles (OECD, 2023). This drop of 30 points since 2018 reflects broader challenges in student engagement, digital reading adaptation, and growing socioeconomic disparities. A particularly notable feature of Finland's performance is the persistent gender gap: girls scored 513, while boys lagged behind at 468, a gap of 45 points. Although this disparity has narrowed slightly, it still points out systemic issues in motivating male students in literacy-related domains.

In comparison, Estonia, often cited as a comparable Nordic educational system, outperformed Finland with a reading score of 511. Estonia's education system shares key features with Finland's—such as free school meals, comprehensive schooling, and high teacher autonomy—yet has managed to maintain or even improve its literacy outcomes. According to Sahlberg and Walker (2021), Estonia's emphasis on digital literacy integration, data-driven school improvement, and early intervention strategies may explain its resilience in the face of global educational disruptions.

Both countries prioritize equity and inclusion, but Estonia has shown greater agility in adapting to post-pandemic learning environments. While Finland continues to invest in holistic education and student well-being, the PISA 2022 results suggest a need to re-evaluate literacy instruction, especially in the context of digital reading and differentiated support for struggling readers.

Although Finland has seen a slight decline in recent PISA rankings, the overall data still indicate that its education system remains highly effective in cultivating both fundamental and higher-order reading competencies (Ahonen, 2021). As such, Finland continues to serve as a model for literacy education worldwide (Adiputri, 2021).

Finland's literacy success is not merely a product of individual student aptitude or isolated instructional strategies (Sahlberg, 2018). Instead, it is deeply rooted in a comprehensive national philosophy that regards literacy as a fundamental civic and cultural value (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). The 2022 revision of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education conceptualizes reading activities not just as isolated academic skills but as essential components of lifelong learning and democratic participation (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). This vision is realized through the cross-curricular integration of reading activities across all subjects and grade levels, ensuring that textual engagement is continuous, contextualized, and culturally resonant (Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2011).

Finland's educational philosophy emphasizes a holistic, student-centered approach to literacy that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning. This philosophy is deeply embedded in the 2022 National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, which frames

literacy not merely as reading and writing, but as multiliteracy—the ability to interpret, produce, and critically evaluate diverse forms of texts across media and contexts (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022). Multiliteracy is positioned as a transversal competence, meaning it is cultivated across all subjects and learning environments, fostering interdisciplinary thinking and lifelong learning skills. This positions teachers to adapt literacy instruction to accommodate the needs of diverse learners, often through phenomenon-based learning that connects literacy to real-world themes (Sahlberg & Walker, 2021), to encourage students to engage with texts in meaningful ways.

Herkman and Vainikka (2014) highlight that in Finland, reading is not merely an individual cognitive activity but a socially embedded practice that reflects and reinforces national identity. Similarly, recent research by Hiidenmaa et al. (2024) provides empirical evidence that Finland's reading culture represents a shared ethos that transcends conventional socio-demographic divisions such as gender, geography, and socioeconomic status. Within this cultural context, literacy serves not only as a tool for academic success but also as a marker of civic belonging and cultural participation.

Significantly, Finland's performance in international assessments is linked to its focus on early literacy development, an area in which it has invested substantial policy and pedagogical resources. Research by Marjokorpi and Van Rijt (2024) reveal how early interventions—such as home reading activities, literacy programs in early education, and teacher-parent collaboration—lay the groundwork for sustained reading engagement. Other studies further affirm that these interventions are crucial foundations for academic success, particularly in reading-related outcomes (Marshall, 2019; Roberts et al., 2022; Smith, 2022). However, while these studies highlight the importance of early literacy instruction, some empirical evidence also reveals the complex nature of literacy acquisition, which is influenced not only by pedagogical strategies but also by the interplay of cultural norms, educational structures, and community support systems (Räsänen et al., 2016; Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018).

Despite decades of progress in literacy theory, a persistent divide remains between conceptual ideals and classroom realities. Literacy is now widely recognized as a sociocultural practice shaped by identity, power, and context (Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Gee, 2015). Yet, many education systems still favour technical, skills-based instruction—emphasizing decoding and comprehension over critical engagement and cultural relevance (Hodges et al., 2016).

This theoretical-practical disconnect is particularly evident in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, where standardized approaches often fail to address the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of learners. Notably, recent declines in PISA scores have been most pronounced among students from immigrant or multilingual backgrounds, highlighting the limitations of one-size-fits-all pedagogies in increasingly diverse educational contexts (OECD, 2024). This challenge is not unique to Finland; for instance in Austria, Weidl and Erling (2025) reveal how rigid curricula marginalize multilingual learners, advocating for culturally responsive teaching. Similarly, Akello and Timmerman (2018) highlight the challenges Ugandan schools face with mother-tongue instruction, citing inadequate resources and training, and urging participatory pedagogies. In the U.S., Janks (2013) champions critical literacy as a tool for student empowerment and resistance to dominant narratives.

The Netherlands also face a growing crisis of functional illiteracy. Despite high literacy rates, 20–25% of Europeans—including many Dutch youth and adults—struggle with basic

literacy skills, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups (Merry & Van Melik, 2024). Government initiatives like “Tel mee met Taal” aim to address this through community-based programs, though their long-term impact remains uncertain (OECD, 2025).

Literacy skills remain foundational to students’ academic success and broader social participation. When curricula emphasize not only technical proficiency—such as decoding and comprehension—but also critical thinking, empathy, and moral reasoning, literacy becomes a transformative tool for holistic development (Kiosses, 2019). Emerging research underlines the value of culturally responsive approaches that integrate students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds into literacy instruction. Such methods have been shown to enhance engagement and improve outcomes, particularly in diverse classrooms (Kusters, 2025).

As literacy continues to evolve as a multidimensional practice, its role in shaping identity, fostering inclusion, and empowering learners becomes increasingly vital. However, a significant gap persists between these expansive understandings of literacy and the standardized, skills-based approaches still dominant in many educational systems. Globally, critical literacy frameworks seek to bridge these gaps by embedding sociocultural and ideological analysis into reading practices, encouraging learners to interrogate texts and engage with diverse perspectives (Yoon, 2016). Also, rigid curricula and limited teacher autonomy often stifle creativity and character formation. In many multicultural classrooms, literature is reduced to static content rather than a living medium for ethical inquiry and self-expression (Durante, 2025).

In Indonesia, the issue is compounded by a curriculum that remains heavily oriented toward rote learning and academic achievement. Studies reveal that while moral values are embedded in the national education policy, they are rarely actualized in literacy instruction due to limited teacher training and resource constraints (Sholeh et al., 2025). Moreover, critical thinking and creative writing are often sidelined in favour of standardized reading tasks, resulting in low engagement and superficial comprehension (Syabila, 2021).

In Indonesian academic literature, the excellence of the Finnish education system was glorified primarily due to its consistently high performance on the PISA assessment (Absawati, 2020; Agustyaningrum & Himmi, 2022; Aryawan & Rai, 2024; Cahyani, 2023; Daheri et al., 2022; Darmawan, 2021; Daud, 2020; Hutagaluh, 2022; Ndaru, 2019; Putra et al., 2023; Safariningsih et al., 2022; Sundari & Sassi, 2024), that encouraged the idea of bringing some aspects and practices of the Finnish way into Indonesian educational system expecting that Indonesia will achieve the typical result in the students’ performance.

However, there is a notable lack of literature in Indonesia addressing topics related to the achievement of Finland’s PISA scores. For instance, themes such as the underlying factors contributing to the consistently high reading scores of Finnish students, strategies for strengthening literacy, and the efforts undertaken by the Finnish government or educational institutions to cultivate a reading culture remain largely unexplored.

This study is guided by the research question: *What roles do teachers play in English reading instruction among lower grade students in Finnish classrooms?* It addresses a critical gap in existing literature by presenting concrete examples of pedagogical practices in Grade 2 English reading instruction in Finland. Through interviews with teachers, parents, and students, as well as textbook analysis, the study captures authentic classroom dynamics and problematizes the complex role teachers play in shaping literacy outcomes.

By examining these first-hand accounts, the research deepens our understanding of teacher agency in literacy education—particularly how Finnish teachers actively use storybooks as pedagogical tools to fulfill multiple instructional roles. Teachers are shown to facilitate dialogic reading, dramatization, and reflective writing, not only to develop language proficiency but also to nurture students' cognitive growth, creativity, and character formation. These practices exemplify how teachers mediate between curriculum goals and student needs, positioning storybooks as vehicles for holistic literacy development.

Importantly, the study offers culturally adaptable insights for other contexts—particularly Indonesia—where literacy education remains largely focused on technical skills. By illustrating how teachers serve as central agents in literature-based pedagogy, the research contributes both to theoretical discourse on literacy and to practical strategies for reimagining inclusive, humanistic education.

METHODS

Given the complexity of literacy pedagogy and the contextual factors shaping English reading subject in Finland, a qualitative research approach is well-suited to this investigation. Qualitative methods are particularly effective in exploring the depth of personal experiences and uncovering the comprehensive practices that underpin effective literacy teaching (Bearman, 2019; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Ward & Delamont, 2020). Within this paradigm, the case study approach was chosen for its ability to provide a focused examination of a bounded system—in this case, a Grade 2 English reading classroom in Finland. This method allows for the collection of rich, context-specific data that is often inaccessible through large-scale quantitative studies (Stake, 2013; Volmar & Eisenhardt, 2020; Yazan, 2015).

The case study design offers several advantages. It facilitates an in-depth understanding of the teacher's role by capturing first-hand accounts from multiple stakeholders—teachers, parents, and students—and by analyzing the instructional materials used in practice (Annamalah, 2024; Yazan, 2015). This triangulation enhances the credibility of the findings and allows for a holistic portrayal of pedagogical dynamics (Denzin, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, the approach is flexible and responsive to the lived realities of participants, making it ideal for exploring culturally embedded educational practices (Volmar & Eisenhardt, 2020; Yin, 2018).

However, the case study method also presents limitations. Its findings are inherently context-bound and may not be generalizable to broader populations (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Lee & Saunders, 2017). Additionally, the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis requires careful attention to researcher bias and reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Despite these constraints, the case study approach remains a powerful tool for generating deep insights into literacy instruction, particularly in educational systems like Finland's, where pedagogical practices are shaped by autonomy, trust, and holistic values (Niemi, 2018; Sahlberg, 2015).

To recruit participants, one of the researchers sent an email a teacher responsible for the English reading subject in Grade 1 at an international school in Finland, inquiring whether she would be available for an interview on the topic under study. Approximately two months later, she informed us that, due to time constraints and certain commitments, she was unable to

participate. Recognizing the scheduling challenge, the researcher requested that she forward our invitation to her colleagues who might be available instead.

Two months thereafter, the teacher notified us that a Grade 2 teacher had agreed to take part in the study and advised us to proceed with further arrangements. The researchers subsequently engaged in detailed communications to finalize the practicalities related to data collection. It was agreed that the interview would be conducted at a public library, as proposed by the teacher, and focused on prompting detailed descriptions of instructional strategies, classroom routines, and the methods employed to foster reading habits.

The teacher who participated in this study is a Finnish classroom teacher with a Master's degree in education and approximately 15 years of teaching experience in basic education. Over the course of her career, she has taught Grades 2, 3, and 4, with the most extensive experience in Grade 2, having taught at that level for seven years. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who met the criteria of being qualified Finnish teachers with direct experience teaching reading in lower primary grades. Due to the nature of qualitative research and the ethical imperative to respect voluntary participation (Iseselo & Tarimo, 2024), the sample was limited to a single teacher—the only one who consented to participate. Recruiting participants in Finland posed challenges, as teachers are not obligated to engage in research and often exercise discretion in such matters. While the limited sample size may constrain generalizability and potential bias (Mumford et al., 2021), the depth and richness of the data obtained from this experienced teacher provide valuable insights into literacy instruction in the Finnish context. The interview with this teacher lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Upon concluding our interview with the teacher, we requested that she could encourage parents to take part in our study. Although she did not offer a definitive commitment, she assured us that she would make every effort to persuade them. Three weeks later, the teacher provided contact details for two parents who had expressed willingness to be interviewed and advised us to follow up regarding their availability for the detailed procedures. In the end, however, the researchers were able to conduct only a 25-minute interview with one parent, Tiina, which yielded valuable insights into the home support for reading. Tiina is a mother of four children, three of whom are currently attending Finnish basic education. The parent, who works as a software engineer, has extensive experience supporting her children's reading development at home and has actively fostered reading habits through daily routines and shared literacy activities. Originally from an Eastern European country, Tiina moved to Finland 15 years ago and has since become deeply engaged with the local educational context. Notably, Tiina was the only parent who agreed to participate in the study, offering a unique and personal perspective on home-based literacy support from a multicultural background.

In addition, with the parent's consent, the researchers extended the interview to include a student, Tuomas (8-year-old), thereby obtaining additional perspectives on the student's engagement and personal experiences with English reading lessons. Although the primary focus of the study was the teacher's role, the supplementary insights from the parent and student contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the subject.

Furthermore, in addition to these interviews, the study incorporated a critical analysis of the textbooks employed in the English reading subject, *The Lost Teddy* and *the Litter Queen*, (see Figure 1) given by the teacher. Those two storybooks were selected and provided by the

teacher as part of the regular instructional materials used during literacy lessons. The researcher did not influence or determine the choice of texts, nor did they have the authority to request alternative materials.

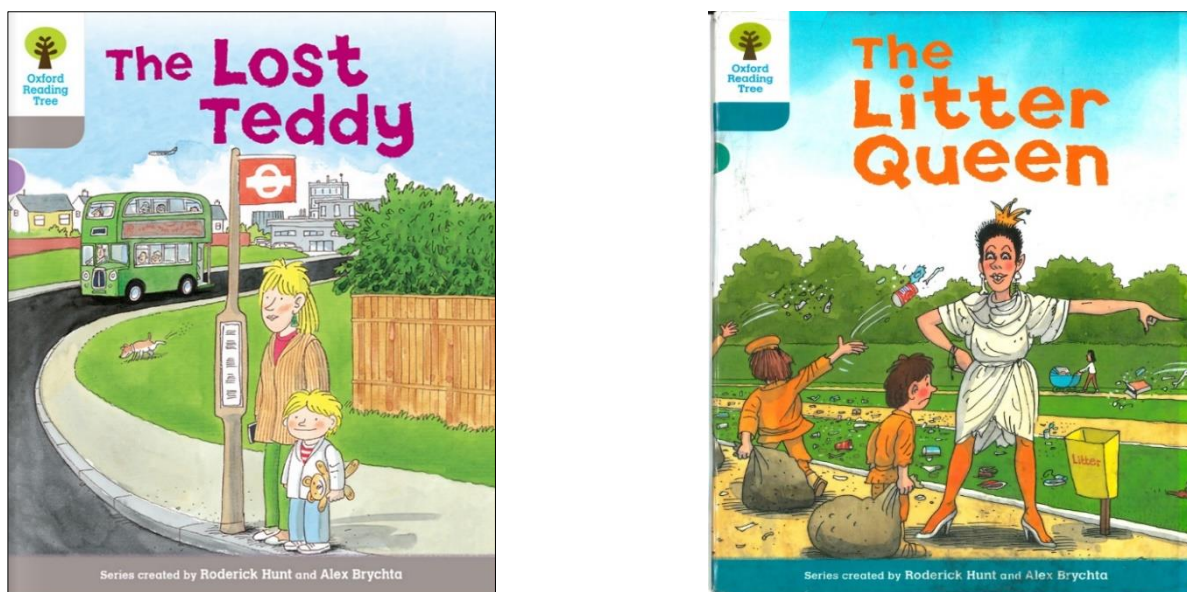


Figure 1. Cover of some story books used in English reading class

This textual analysis aimed to explain how the curricular materials align with pedagogical practices and support the development of effective reading habits. Although the teacher had previously provided a verbal explanation of the subject's learning procedures, the books offered concrete insights into the content and structure of literacy instruction, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the interplay between teaching materials and classroom practices.

All interviews were audio-recorded, with their consent, transcribed verbatim, and then subjected to rigorous analysis. To organize and analyse the qualitative data, ATLAS software was utilized. ATLAS enabled efficient coding, categorization, and retrieval of data segments, thus enhancing the systematic identification of themes. The use of this qualitative analysis software allowed for the effective management of textual data, ensuring that both explicit and subtle distinctions in participants' narratives were captured.

The analysis followed a thematic method (Braun et al., 2019). Initially, all transcripts and textbook materials were read and re-read to become familiar with the content. Open coding was then performed using ATLAS, whereby relevant segments pertaining to teaching practices, classroom routines, and reading engagement were highlighted and annotated. This initial coding stage was iterative, allowing emergent themes to be captured and further refined.

Then, codes were systematically organized into broader themes through a hybrid inductive-deductive approach. This approach combined emergent insights from the data with established theoretical frameworks in the researched topic (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Fife & Gossner, 2024). To comprehensively examine the role of teachers in English reading subject in Finnish lower grades, the researchers use Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) as theoretical framework, originally conceptualized by Shulman (1987), which emphasizes that effective teaching requires a unique consolidation of deep content knowledge and specialized

pedagogical skill—a combination that enables teachers to present content in ways that are both comprehensible and engaging for learners. In the context of English reading subject, PCK directs attention to how teachers select, adapt, and deliver content to meet the developmental needs of young readers.

To support triangulation, the author 1 consulted his daughter, who was in Grade 8 at the time of the study. She reported that she had participated in the same subject area (literacy) during the same period, although with different storybooks. Her account affirmed that the instructional procedures—such as reading routines, classroom discussions, and comprehension activities—were consistent with those documented in the study.

For ethical considerations, the names of all interviewees in this study have been replaced with pseudonyms. Accordingly, the names Niina (teacher), Tiina (parent), and Tuomas are fictitious, not real names. The participants were informed of this measure prior to the commencement of the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed three key roles played by teachers in English reading subject among lower grade students in Finnish classrooms: 1) Facilitating the development of reading skills and comprehension; 2) Stimulating children's imagination through reading activities; and 3) Fostering positive character and values in the classroom. These themes emerged through a close analysis interviews and instructional materials, reflecting a holistic approach to literacy education in the Finnish context.

Facilitating the development of reading skill and comprehension

The teacher's approach to English reading subject in Finnish lower-grade classrooms emphasizes practice-based learning, oral fluency, and scaffolded comprehension. As a pedagogical strategy, the focus is placed on active engagement rather than perfection. In an interview, the teacher explained:

In class, I had the students read the book out loud so they could work on saying the words clearly—even if they made mistakes, especially if English is not their mother language. It wasn't about getting it perfect; it was all about practicing (Niina, the teacher)

This approach reflects a growth mindset, where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning and improvement (Dweck, 2016). By prioritizing oral reading and repetition, the teacher reduces performance anxiety and fosters a supportive learning environment—particularly important for students learning English as a second language.

After reading sessions, students are asked to summarize the story, allowing the teacher to assess comprehension. For example, in *The Lost Teddy*, the second page includes a guide for post-reading activities such as asking, “Why was Kipper unhappy at bedtime?” (see Figure 2). These activities encourage students to reflect on narrative structure, character motivation, and vocabulary usage.

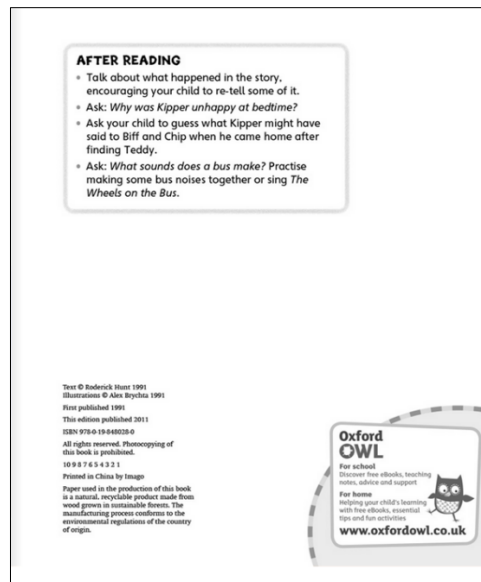


Figure 2. Guide in the Lost Teddy after the reading completed

Retelling and responding to questions not only reinforce comprehension but also improve spoken fluency and confidence. As Vretudaki (2022) notes, such activities are particularly beneficial for second-language learners, as they provide meaningful opportunities to practice spoken English while deepening narrative understanding. Discussing specific events and details also helps students expand their vocabulary and grasp the contextual use of new words.

This strategy aligns with Ustun and Eryilmaz (2018), who argue that the quality of teachers and teacher education are crucial factors in achieving high literacy scores in Finland. The teacher's emphasis on practice over perfection contributes to building confidence and fluency, creating a classroom culture where students feel safe to make mistakes and learn collaboratively.

Comparatively, literacy instruction in other Nordic countries such as Sweden and Norway also emphasize dialogic teaching and student autonomy. Hofslundsengen et al. (2020) found that shared reading and literature circles foster oral language development and comprehension in early education. In contrast, studies from Asian contexts often highlight more structured, teacher-centered approaches. For example, Jhingran (2019) notes that in South Asian classrooms, reading subject tends to rely heavily on rote memorization and written assessments, which may limit opportunities for creative and communicative literacy development.

The Finnish teacher's strategy also demonstrates strong Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (Star, 2023; Tallman, 2023), blending linguistic expertise with age-appropriate instructional techniques. They use of oral reading, guided questioning, and vocabulary scaffolding reflects a deep understanding of how children acquire language through interaction and contextual engagement.

This approach is further supported by Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). By providing scaffolded support just beyond the students' current capabilities, the teacher enables cognitive and linguistic growth. The collaborative nature of post-reading discussions fosters peer interaction

and shared meaning-making, reinforcing the idea that literacy is a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978).

Stimulating students' imagination

In Finnish classrooms, literacy instruction is not strictly aimed at decoding text or mastering vocabulary. Rather, it becomes a launchpad for imaginative exploration and personal growth. The teacher's strategy of beginning the English reading class by inviting students to interpret the book cover and predict the story exemplifies a pedagogical approach that values free thinking and creative autonomy. The teacher narrated:

Teacher: I usually start the class by showing the cover to the kids. I pointed out the title and picture then asked what the story might be about. let their thinking run free.

Researcher: what did they say?

Teacher: Sometimes they shared funny or weird thoughts. That was OK. The goal wasn't about being right or wrong, but about how well they turn a visual image into something unique in their minds.

This method transforms the classroom into a space where students are encouraged to think divergently, a hallmark of creative cognition. As Fan and Cai (2022) argue environments that support open-ended dialogue and imaginative risk-taking significantly enhance student creativity. Such practices reflect broader Nordic educational values, where literacy is deeply intertwined with holistic development. In Finland, literature-based practices (LBP) are designed not only to build linguistic competence but also to foster empathy, ethical reasoning, and self-expression (Kivijärvi-Lehvonon et al., 2025). This contrasts with more test-driven models in parts of Asia, where literacy instruction often emphasizes accuracy and comprehension over creative engagement (Le & Nguyen, 2024).

The teacher's use of *The Lost Teddy*, particularly the guide's suggestion to "discuss what might happen next before turning each page" (as seen in the figure 3), demonstrates how structured prompts can scaffold imaginative thinking.

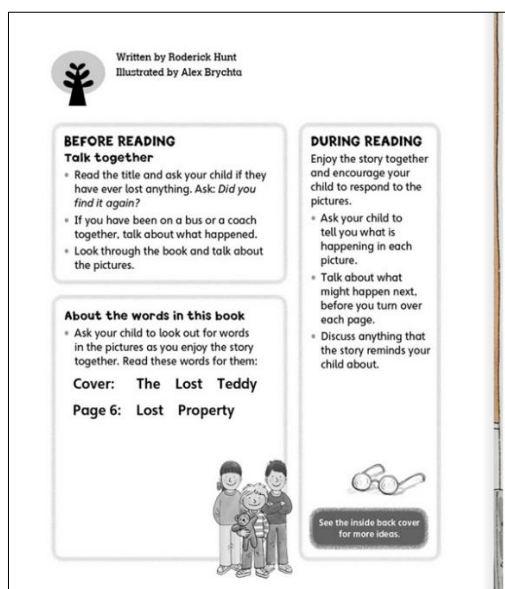


Figure 3. Guide in the *Lost Teddy* before and during the reading class

This technique aligns with Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) theory, which emphasizes the teacher's ability to transform subject matter into teachable moments that resonate with learners' cognitive and emotional development (Magnusson et al., 2002). Research has also shown that such creative teaching practices significantly enhance student engagement. Chen and Yuan (2021) found that when teachers draw on their own imaginative capacities as part of their pedagogical approach, it leads to a richer, more immersive learning environment. Their study indicates that creative teaching methods are directly linked to improvements in student creative thinking and overall engagement in the classroom.

Moreover, the structured use of instructional guides, as seen in *The Lost Teddy*, reinforces the importance of clear, guided interaction within the reading process. Burroughs et al. (2019) emphasize in their review that teacher-facilitated discussions, especially those that invite open-ended responses, are critical in promoting higher-order thinking skills and overall academic success. This approach not only improves comprehension but also encourages students to consider multiple outcomes and engage in reflective, forward-thinking analysis.

Teacher also observed students' imaginative response in the end of the class to position themselves in the story. The prompt from the teacher as follows:

In the end of the session, I asked students what they would do if they became certain figures in the story, or perhaps if they experienced the same thing like it was in the story.

The questioning strategy employed by the teacher, asking students what they would do if they became a character in the story or experienced the events firsthand, creates a powerful invitation for imaginative engagement. By positioning themselves as integral components of the story, they begin to explore alternative perspectives, exercise empathy, and reflect on personal values, which reinforces not only their creative thinking but also their capacity for self-reflection.

From a pedagogical standpoint, such a strategy aligns closely with the principles of socio-constructivism, where learning is seen as an active, situated process in which knowledge is constructed through social interaction and personal experience (Vygotsky, 1978). When students imagine themselves as key figures within a narrative, they effectively bridge the gap between abstract text and lived experience.

This imaginative role-taking fosters what Dziedziewicz and Karwowski (2015) propose a model that comprises vividness, originality, and transformative ability as central components of creative visual imagination. By asking students to envision themselves as characters or witnesses to the events, the teacher's question fosters an environment where these components can be actively developed. Previous studies indicating that reading imaginative literature helps students develop empathy and self-reflection (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Nikolajeva, 2014). By engaging with different characters, students learn to think creatively and visualize new possibilities, fostering a mindset open to new ideas and innovative solutions (Baker, 2025; Green & Dill, 2013; Stanovich, 2009).

Importantly, the teacher's role here is not merely to deliver content but to actively shape a dialogic space where students engage with literature to explore identity, morality, and creativity. Through intentional use of storybooks and reflective practices, teachers guide students beyond technical reading skills toward deeper meaning-making. In this way, literacy

becomes a medium for personal growth and social transformation, empowering learners to understand themselves and participate thoughtfully in the world around them (Biesta, 2015).

Fostering positive character and values

Data indicate that positive attributes and values are the centre of teachers' focus on their reading practices. This study showed that teacher used the subject to instil the positive values and character to children, such as discipline and self-regulated skill. The teacher described:

Reading isn't just a one-time activity in class—it should become a regular habit at home too. That's why I encourage the students to take their books home and aim to finish them within a few days or a week. It's matter of building discipline in them.

The data from both parent and student reveal the positive impact of incorporating consistent reading practices as part of the curriculum, which, in turn, strengthens self-discipline at home. Tina, a parent, explained:

I always ensure that my son completes his homework reading before he starts playing any games. He understands that he isn't allowed to play until his homework is finished.

This approach reflects a commitment to prioritizing responsibilities over leisure, reinforcing the idea that reading is a valued activity. By setting clear expectations, the parent help teacher to cultivates a culture of discipline that extends beyond the classroom. Similarly, Tuomas, a second-grade student, shared his personal journey:

Sometimes I forgot to read the book. Then my mom reminded me to do it, again and again until I finished it. Now I love reading (Tuomas).

Tuomas's narrative reveals a gradual transformation in his behaviour. The repeated reminders eventually nurtured not only a routine but also a genuine love for reading. This change emphasizes how sustained practice, and structure can lead to lasting positive habits and character development, reflecting the integration of positive values.

It is evident that through reading subject teacher has built discipline and fostered qualities such as perseverance, commitment, and self-regulation on the students. These attributes are essential not only for academic success but also for lifelong learning and personal growth. Research on habit formation and character development supports this approach. Studies on self-discipline have shown that repeated, consistent practices, like regular reading, help individuals develop resilience and a growth mindset (Duckworth, 2018).

This habit-building process shows the idea that education is not solely about acquiring academic skills but also about nurturing character. When students regularly engage in reading outside the classroom, they learn to establish routines, monitor their progress, and celebrate small achievements. These behaviours contribute to the internalization of positive values such as responsibility, resilience, and self-motivation. Such outcomes are central to the principles of positive education, which emphasizes the holistic development of learners (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021; Kidd & Castano, 2013).

This approach reflects strong Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) where teacher demonstrates an ability to transform reading content into opportunities for character education—an example of what Magnusson, Krajcik, and Borko (2002) describe as the integration of instructional strategies with student understanding. By embedding moral reflection into reading tasks, the teacher connects literacy with ethical reasoning.

Comparative studies in Nordic education support this integration of literacy and values. Tirri (2011) found that Finnish teachers often adopt holistic pedagogies that address students' emotional, moral, and social development alongside cognitive goals. Similarly, Lavonen & Salmela-Aro (2022) argue that Finnish curricula are designed to promote twenty-first century competencies—including responsibility and empathy—through interdisciplinary learning and teacher autonomy. In contrast, literacy instruction in many Asian contexts tends to emphasize performance and content mastery. Rusydiyah et al. (2023) note that while countries like Singapore and Malaysia have made strides in literacy policy, character education is often treated as a separate domain, not embedded within subject instruction.

In addition, the teacher's use of narrative reflection further reinforces this integration. By prompting students to evaluate characters' actions and consider alternative choices, the teacher encourages ethical reasoning and empathy:

I asked the students to talk about different actions or characters from the story. I wanted to know if they thought these actions were good or not. When they said something was good, I asked what they would do in that situation; if it wasn't positive, I also suggested they think about what they could do instead.

Through this subject, teachers used positive values in the stories to strengthen students' characters. Teachers have utilized these stories to identify positive values and bring those traits in the students. Through the narratives, students are exposed to moral lessons and ethical dilemmas, which help them develop certain traits such as a sense of empathy, kindness, resilience or other positive character represented in the story. This method is consistent with another study which find that high-quality students' literature can effectively teach character traits such as honesty, respect, and responsibility (Almerico, 2014; Ramadhani et al., 2024).

By seeing these values in action through the characters' experiences, students learn to apply them in their own lives, ensuring they grow as compassionate and morally grounded individuals (Bayraktar, 2021; Saripudin et al., 2021). It also indicates that in the Finnish context, curricula function as more than instructional guides—they are instruments that embody and transmit societal values, shaping not only what students learn but also how they think, relate to others, and engage with the world. This broader purpose positions education as a cultural and ethical endeavor, not merely a technical one. As Ropo & Yrjänäinen (2024) has argued, curricula serve as selective traditions through which dominant cultural narratives and educational priorities are reproduced. Literacy, in this context, becomes a medium through which social cohesion and cultural continuity are both expressed and implemented (Lähdemäki, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Finnish teachers conceptualize and implement their roles in English reading subject, revealing three interconnected dimensions: facilitating reading skills and comprehension, stimulating imagination, and fostering positive character and values. These findings illustrate a holistic model of literacy instruction in which linguistic, cognitive, creative, and ethical dimensions are interwoven rather than treated as discrete domains. By emphasizing practice over perfection, encouraging divergent thinking, and embedding moral reflection into everyday reading practices, Finnish teachers position literacy as both an academic skill and a vehicle for personal growth and social development.

The findings offer several actionable recommendations for practitioners and policymakers. First, PCK-based teacher training should be prioritized to strengthen teachers' ability to integrate oral fluency, comprehension strategies, and creative pedagogy into literacy instruction. Second, integrating creative literature into the curriculum can provide a foundation for imaginative engagement, empathy-building, and ethical reasoning. Structured prompts that encourage prediction, visualization, and perspective-taking can stimulate students' creativity while reinforcing comprehension. Third, schools and policymakers should support effective home-school communication strategies that involve parents as active partners in children's literacy development. Encouraging daily reading routines at home, reinforced by teacher-parent dialogue, helps cultivate discipline, perseverance, and a love for reading.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of a holistic literacy teaching model that extends beyond traditional frameworks of reading subject. It demonstrates how teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) operates at the intersection of linguistic scaffolding, imaginative exploration, and value formation. This model emphasizes the socio-constructivist premise that literacy is socially mediated and developmentally situated, while also highlighting the transformative role of literature in shaping identity, empathy, and moral reasoning.

One limitation of the study is its reliance on a narrow sample. This restricted scope limits the diversity of perspectives and contexts and thus constrains the generalizability of the findings across the broader landscape of literacy practices in Finnish schools. Although the insights from this study provide a valuable understanding, they do not fully capture the comprehensive nature of literacy instruction across Finland.

Future research could extend these findings through longitudinal studies that trace how teachers' approaches to literacy instruction evolve over time and how they influence students' long-term reading habits, creativity, and character development. Additionally, comparative studies across different national contexts would be valuable in examining how cultural, curricular, and policy frameworks shape teachers' literacy practices, enriching global debates on effective literacy instruction.

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