

# 3

## Authority Versus Experience: Dialogues on Learner Beliefs

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### 1 Introduction

This chapter reports on a study of the beliefs young learners hold about language learning and how those beliefs can change over time. Young learners were interviewed over a period of more than a decade about their beliefs about how English is learnt, and excerpts from the longitudinal data gathered are here analysed from a dialogical viewpoint. The data are used to trace the development of the learners' beliefs in terms of Bakhtinian notions of voices and authority.

#### 1.1 Key concepts

The study adopts a *dialogical* approach to the study of beliefs (for more information about the history of and approaches to the study of beliefs, see Section 2.1 of Chapter 2). The dialogical framework is inspired by the dialogical philosophy of the so-called Bakhtin Circle (for example, Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Voloshinov, 1973), and it also draws on approaches to cognizing that seek to overcome the mind/body dichotomy, such as the ideas of systemic psychology (see, for example, Järvillehto, 1998) and distributed languaging (see, for example, Cowley, 2009). In a dialogical approach to learner beliefs, beliefs are conceptualized as shared: necessarily both social and individual. (For theoretical and practical concerns from a dialogical viewpoint in foreign language learning and teaching, see Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005).

Dialogism stems from the notion of dialogue, which is seen not only as an act of conversation between two people, but as an overall metaphilosophical principle of interaction, illuminating human existence. According to Bakhtin (1984), dialogical relationships are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech, relationships and manifestations of

human life: individuals are in continuous interaction with their social and physical environment. The people with whom individuals communicate and the contexts in which they do so determine what they can learn. It is through such dialogical relationships that individuals learn and appropriate language, viewpoints, attitudes, memories, and other personal knowledge. Individuals' beliefs, too, have a social origin: they emerge while the individual is interacting with the physical world or taking part in social practices, and often, as Bakhtin (1986) notes, they emerge through the words of others. Individuals rely not only on their personal experiences, but also on the recounted experiences of others. Beliefs are therefore rooted in social and cultural interactions. However, beliefs are never exclusively social. This is because each individual has a unique life history. No two individuals can share the exact same experiences, even if they share a culture and a social community. According to Dufva (1998), the belief reservoir of each individual is therefore unique, comprising the specific set of experiences of that particular person.

When individuals encounter ways of speaking and thinking, they encounter contextual, socially charged words – words that are used by people in real interaction to mean and to refer; not words that are merely listed, as if someone were reading them aloud from a dictionary. What individuals learn are not neutral words, but value-laden words. In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, words used in real-life interactions always contain and reflect *ideological* interpretations of what the world is like. It is important to note that while the English word 'ideology' tends to have a strong political association, the dialogical notion of ideology, according to Emerson (1981, p. 23), refers broadly to a socially determined idea system, something that simply *means*. Whenever people speak, they express intentions, evaluations, opinions, emotions – that is, meanings, ideologies.

Individuals can choose to accept or not to accept the viewpoints – and the ideological content of the viewpoints – with which they come into contact. In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, this ideological content can be dealt with in three ways. Individuals can, first, choose to appropriate content that they feel is *internally persuasive* and begin to use this as their own; second, ignore viewpoints they feel do not concern or interest them; or, third, find that they are faced with *authoritative* viewpoints, words that they must either accept and repeat as they are, or reject totally. Authoritative content reflects the words of authorities (for example, moral, political or religious authorities) and usually relies on a hierarchical difference in power: authoritative viewpoints can demand that the individual adopt them as they are. In contrast, the internally persuasive

content invites the individual to a dialogue: such content is open to negotiation and modification. When individuals talk about their beliefs, they are typically not just mechanically repeating others' words (though they can certainly choose to do so too); rather, they are recreating and recycling the content for their own purposes, and in so doing, returning the words and their ideologies back into the social sphere.

This idea of intention and worldview embedded in words is captured in Bakhtin's (1981) concept of *voice*. The various voices with which individuals come into contact result in a knowledge reservoir that is multivoiced, or *polyphonic*. Certain voices are privileged (see Wertsch, 1991) in the social community – they are more frequently repeated and more highly regarded – while others are marginalized or even silenced. This has consequences for the individuals' knowledge reservoirs, too: frequently repeated and therefore frequently heard viewpoints may for example be more easily verbalizable than marginalized viewpoints. Individuals themselves also privilege certain voices over others: their own voices are constantly evolving and changing as they take part in new interactions and gain new experiences (Dufva, 2003). New experiences make individuals reevaluate ideologies: do they still work, do they ring true to experience, or is a change needed? The process of development is pushed forward by dialogue with other people and the environment, and it is never complete.

## 1.2 Previous studies

This study focuses on the beliefs of language learners. The data are longitudinal, and most of the data were collected when the participants were children. Children have, thus far, been underrepresented in studies on foreign language learning and teaching. Most studies on learner beliefs, particularly in the more individualistic approaches, have focused on the beliefs of older learners, often university students and other adults. There has, however, been a recent surge in studies looking at children's experiences in multilingual contexts, and especially at immigrant children acquiring a second language (see, for example, Orellana, 2009; Paugh, 2012). The data reported on here were collected as part of a project that also produced results regarding the beliefs children hold about languages and language learning (see, for example, Alanen, Dufva, & Mäntylä, 2006, and Dufva & Alanen, 2005).

Also, while learner beliefs have been fairly widely studied since the 1980s, studies using a dialogical approach are rare (see Dufva, Lähtenmäki, & Isoherranen, 1996 for a dialogical study of adult language learners' beliefs). Dialogical notions have, however, been

applied in many closely related fields of study, such as agency (for example, Vitanova, 2005, 2010), multilingual identity (for example, Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko, 2006), and foreign language learning in the classroom (for example, Morgan & Cain, 2000).

## 2 Aims of the study

The data of this study were collected in connection with two projects. The first three sets of interview data were collected as part of the project, *Situated Metalinguistic Awareness and Foreign Language Learning*, funded by the Academy of Finland and with Riikka Alanen as Principal Investigator. The project was a longitudinal case study focusing on a group of young Finnish learners of English. The goal was to examine what the relationship between the learners' metalinguistic knowledge and their development of self-regulation was like in order to shed light on the interaction between metalinguistic awareness and foreign language learning in context. The first three sets of data were thus collected as part of a larger project that also had a wider focus. The last set of interview data was collected in connection with a science workshop, *Agency and Linguaging: Perspectives on Learning-in-the-World*, funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and headed by Hannele Dufva.

The aim of the study reported here was to study language learners' beliefs about the learning of English and examine how their beliefs (as well as their authored agency, see Chapter 4) developed over the years. Using interview data, the study examined both the content of the learners' beliefs and the voices they used to convey them. The specific research questions are:

1. What kinds of beliefs do the learners hold regarding how English is learnt?
2. What kinds of authoritative ideologies can be heard in the learners' beliefs?
3. How do the learners' voices change and develop over the years?
4. How do the learners' personal experiences and authoritative ideologies interact?

## 3 Data collection and analysis

### 3.1 Participants

The study is a longitudinal case study focusing on a group of Finnish learners of English. The study originally involved 15 elementary school<sup>1</sup>

children – seven boys and eight girls – who speak Finnish as their L1 and who started studying English as their first foreign language in Year 3 of lower comprehensive school. A foreign language is a compulsory school subject in Finland, and English is by far the most popular choice as the first foreign language. According to the statistics of the Finnish National Board of Education, in 2012, approximately 90 per cent of pupils chose English as their first foreign language.

The children were interviewed in Years 1, 3 and 5 (aged seven, nine, and eleven years, respectively). Initially the project had 22 participants, but over the years some participants moved away or changed schools. By Year 3, 18 of the original participants remained; by Year 5, 15. The data from Years 1–5 reported here come from those 15 learners who participated in the project for its whole duration. (For a comprehensive discussion of the results of the data from Years 1–5, see Aro, 2009, 2012.) Almost a decade later, when the participants were around 20 years old, a follow-up study was conducted. Contact was made with eight of the original participants, and an interview was arranged with four of them (three females and a male). These four interviews form the last batch of data (reported in Section 4.4 of this chapter).

The study is a case study, where the group of learners forms the case to be examined. The analysis does not, in other words, look at each participant individually, but examines how the expression of beliefs changes and develops over time in the group.

### 3.2 Methodology

Data collection began when the participants were in Year 1 at school. The *Situated Metalinguistic Awareness* project followed the group of children throughout the first six years of school and involved several researchers. The Year 1 interviews were conducted by other researchers (and for this reason, were not geared specifically for the purposes of this study), while the interviews in Years 3 and 5, as well as the last interviews that took place a decade later, were conducted by the present author. The first three rounds of interviews took place at the school during school hours with each participant interviewed individually. The interviews in Years 3 and 5 took place during English lessons, but in a separate room. The final interviews were conducted in public places such as cafés, at times chosen by the participants.

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews (see, for example, Fontana & Frey, 2000). Semi-structured interviews allow for conversational yet focused interaction. An interview structure is created beforehand, and a plan is made of the themes and questions to

be covered. However, the questions are not strictly worded, and some of the questions are created during the interview, as the interaction unfolds. This results in a more flexible way of interviewing, and enables the interviewer to probe for more information when needed and discuss issues as they arise during the interaction. This framework ensures that the same themes are covered with each participant, but each interview is allowed to emerge as a unique dialogue.

All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and read through several times. Using content analysis (see, for example, Kvale, 1996), the interviews were then coded by theme, one of which was the theme addressed here as the first research question: how do the learners believe English is learnt? This theme was chosen as the thematic focus for the answers that were then subjected to a dialogically informed analysis focusing on voices (see Aro, 2009), in order to examine research questions two to four. The voices in the learners' answers were examined through several cues. The voice that could be heard in the answers could have been brought about by the content and formulation of what the learners said: they could have used a way of speaking that indexed a particular group of people or sphere of language use, or used characterizations that reflected the ideologies of a particular group. The learners may have used others' voices both overtly (by quoting) and more covertly (by echoing them or ventriloquating, that is, repeating them as is, for example). Learners may also have clearly marked some answers as their own, by specifically saying *in my opinion*, for example, or by justifying their answer by appealing to their personal experience. (Even beliefs that a learner had appropriated and marked as his or her own could, of course, still be consistent with so-called authoritative beliefs.) The changes in voicescapes were considered to reflect the development of the learners' voices as language learners, that is, the process of how the learners appropriated the various viewpoints around them and also used their own experiences to voice their beliefs.

#### 4 Findings

In this section, excerpts from the data are presented and analysed to see what the participants' beliefs are like and what kinds of voices can be heard in them. The four subsections correspond to the four rounds of interviews that were conducted, and the titles of the subsections indicate the time of each interview. The data are presented chronologically, from the earliest to the latest.

#### 4.1 Year 1

The first interviews covered a wide range of subjects related to language, from the children's reading and writing skills, their favourite books, and the dialects used by their relatives. The focus of these interviews was mostly on the L1, Finnish. However, foreign languages were touched upon with each participant, as foreign languages, and particularly English, did form a part of the participants' language environment in one way or another. There were few questions dealing specifically with how English is learnt; any discussion about foreign languages tended to deal with the issue on a more general level. As many of the children had older siblings who studied languages and parents who knew languages, and as many of the children had spent holidays abroad, they were certainly aware of foreign languages, including English. They also knew that language studies awaited them at some point in the future, but most of them felt that this was exactly where foreign languages belonged: the future. In their present lives, language studies did not concern them, and they were happy to simply indicate that they would deal with these studies when the time came. One of the boys, Aku, mentioned that he had friends who were bilingual – they spoke Finnish and German – so the interviewer asked him about his language learning plans:

MP: *So do you think it would be nice to learn a foreign language like those languages your friends speak, German or?*

Aku: *Don't know yet.*

MP: *Uh huh, which language do you think would be nice which one would you like to learn one day?*

Aku: *I don't know now either because I'm still little.*

MP: *No oiskos susta sitten kiva oppia jotain vierasta kieltä, vaikka niitä kieliä mitä ne sun kaverit puhuu, saksaa tai?*

Aku: *Eipä tiä vielä.*

MP: *Joo just, mikä sustois semmonen kiva kieli mitä sä haluisit sitte joskus oppia?*

Aku: *En nyttekään vielä tiä ku on vielä pieni.*

His bilingual social circle notwithstanding, Aku stated that he had not formed any opinions about whether he wanted to learn a foreign language: *don't know yet*. The interviewer then stated the question in another, more closed way, asking Aku to basically choose a language. Aku would not budge: he repeated his initial stance, *I don't know*, adding the adamant *now either*. In Aku's opinion, nothing had changed from

the previous question, and now he spelled out the reason too: he did not know yet, because he was *still little*. Language studies were not something that concerned him yet – it was not something for little kids to think about. A girl called Maija could even put a fairly definite time frame for when foreign languages would become topical: when asked when she would like to learn foreign languages, she said *when I'm an adult, at our mum's age, for example, about thirty-seven or thirty-six* ('aikuisena meidän esimerkiksi äitin ikäsenä, siinä kolkytseittemän kolkytkuus').

Many of the participants thus brushed off questions about foreign languages in the first-year interviews. However, the children who were already on board with the idea of learning a language did have a firm favourite when it came to languages: they wanted to learn English. One of those children was Sakari:

HD: *What do you think at school you'll start, in the third year sometime a foreign language so, which would you choose if you got to decide?*

Sakari: *English.*

HD: *English, why would you like to learn English?*

Sakari: *Erm. Because almost everyone speaks it, and it gets you everywhere.*

HD: *Mites sä aattelet että teillä koulussa alkaa, kolmannella luokkaa joskus vieras kieli niin, minkä sä valitsisit jos sä saisit ite päättää?*

Sakari: *Englannin.*

HD: *Englannin, miks sä haluaisit englantia oppia?*

Sakari: *Ömm. Siks ku, melkein kaikki puhuu ja sillä pääsee joka paikkaan.*

Not only could Sakari confidently declare that he wanted to study English, he could also provide a reason: *almost everyone speaks it, and it gets you everywhere*. His reason for wanting to study English did not come quite as quickly and assuredly as the choice of English, however. He started his answer by taking a little time to think (*erm.*) and the reason he then gave was somewhat vague (*everyone... everywhere*). It sounded as if Sakari had appropriated a belief about English being useful and widely spoken, and he verbalized the idea rather emphatically. He was, in other words, echoing the words of another. As we do not have data about all the interactions Sakari had taken part in during his lifetime before the interview, there is no way to track and find the source of the belief with any certainty. There is, however, reason to believe that the source

was close to home. After saying he wanted to learn English, Sakari then revealed he already knew some:

HD: Do you know any words [in English] or?

Sakari: Yeah.

HD: Right, where did you learn?

Sakari: Dad has taught me.

HD: Osaatsä jotain sanoja [englanniksi] vai?

Sakari: Osaan.

HD: Joo, mistä sä oot oppinu?

Sakari: Iskä on opettanu.

Sakari said that he knew some words of English because his *dad had taught* him. It also emerged during the interview that his father travelled abroad quite often for his work, so it may well be that Sakari's belief about the usefulness of English and his wish to study specifically English had been sparked by his father. Similar factors became evident also in the interviews of other children who said they wanted to study English. They had older siblings who were already studying English at school, so they wanted to study it too; they knew their parents spoke English, so they wanted to be able to speak it too.<sup>2</sup> There was, in other words, a wish to be like those nearest and dearest to the participants.

In Year 1, then, the participants held only vague and incipient beliefs about English learning. They certainly knew of English and the likelihood of having to study it in a few years' time, and some of them looked forward to it, while others metaphorically or physically shrugged their shoulders. English studies were considered to be a thing of the future, and the participants would deal with them when the time came. However, the participants' answers did already reflect certain ideologies. The very fact that the language of choice – for those who had made a choice – was English is very much in line with an authoritative societal belief in Finland: that it is important to learn English and that virtually everyone does so. Sakari may well have been using his father's words when he said that *almost everyone speaks* English, but the belief itself echoes a commonly known and accepted 'truth' of the sociocultural community in general. Even Aku's insistence that the interviewer should stop pestering him with questions about foreign languages revealed that he knew there was a time and a place for them: when you are no longer little. All such knowledge showed that the participants lived, spoke and learnt in a society where languages *were* widely studied. The participants' answers thus already reflected voices

and ideologies – some appropriated, others ignored (for now). Their own voices were still, mostly, the carefree voices of Year 1 pupils: few participants wanted to show ownership of the language learning ideologies of which they were aware and to which they referred.

#### 4.2 Year 3

In Year 3, at the ages of 9–10, the participants started to study English as their first foreign language at school. The interview questions focused on the children's thoughts about languages (Finnish and English in particular) and learning a language. Approximately half of the questions dealt with the English language and foreign language learning. When the interviews were conducted, the participants had been learning English at school for about three months. When asked to talk about their learning activities, many participants viewed English studies as a function of something very concrete and countable:

MA: *Do you already know how to speak and write English, what have you learnt here?*

Valtteri: *Well, we've er gone through a whole lot of pages and all that kind of stuff.*

MA: *Osaaksää jo paljo puhua ja kirjottaa englantia, mitä te ootte täs oppinu?*

Valtteri: *No, ollaan me niinku hirveesti niitä sivujaki menny eteenpäin ja kaikkee tällasta.*

Valtteri's description of what the class had learnt during the autumn was *we've er gone through a whole lot of pages*. Learning was seen in terms of the number of pages, rather than the content on the page: quantity rather than quality. Santeri echoed these sentiments when he answered the same question saying, *we've only had one test so far* ('meil on tullu nyt vasta yks koe') – perhaps wanting to communicate also that not much had happened yet (*only* one test). In the interviews, many participants described learning in terms of countable units: words, chapters in the textbook, pages, tests. These school-related objects were concrete manifestations of the learning that was taking place: they represented English learning.

School practices found their way into the participants' answers in many ways. In the following, Matti ponders over the differences between English and maths:

MA: *So do you think studying English is different from, say, studying maths?*

- Matti: *Well yes, it is somehow different because one has to s...for example say to others in maths one gets to decide by oneself what the answer is. In English everything has to be sort of correct, like in maths too.*
- MA: No onks englannin opiskelu sun mielestä erilaista ku vaikka matikan opiskelu?
- Matti: No on se nii, jotenki erilaista ku, joutuu s- vaikka sanomaan toisille ja matikassa saa ite päättää mikä, mikä on vastaus. Englannissa pitää olla kaikki niinku oikee, niinku matikassaki.

Matti's answer reflects the role of the pupil in two ways. First, he states: *one has to say*. The idea of 'having to' was very prominent in the children's answers. Eeva, for example, described the homework given in the English class as follows: *usually one has to practise the words* ('yleensä pitää harjotella sanat'). Matti also noted that *everything has to be sort of correct*. For the pupils who *had to* do things, it was also important for these things to be *correct* – for pupils to appropriate what they were supposed to appropriate, to learn what was expected of them in the classroom. Voicing themselves as obedient pupils, the children were thus discreetly referring to the authority of the school: it got to tell pupils what they needed to do and how they needed to do it, and then evaluate if they were getting it right. One of the most extreme expressions of the pupil's status was Mervi's response: when asked how one learns English, she said, *well, teachers are there for teaching* ('no, opet on sitä varte et ne opettaa'). Her answer positioned pupils in a very passive role, as objects of the teacher's activities.

The participants were also asked what they did outside the classroom that helped them learn English. The children understood the question initially only in terms of homework; in order to find out about their English-language leisure activities, such as playing computer games or watching television, one needed to ask specifically that. Most participants did engage in such activities in their free time: They all watched English-language television programmes<sup>3</sup> and listened to music; some played computer games, and a few had even picked up a book or a comic in English. Some participants were cautiously optimistic that things like games and books might be helpful in learning English. Sakari, for example, told the interviewer that *all my PlayStation games are in English* ('mullon englanninkielisiä kaikki nuo PlayStation pelit') and said that he had learnt *a little* ('vähä') from them. Watching English-language television programmes, on the other hand, divided opinions: Emma,

for example, said she used them to learn English (see Section 4.2 of Chapter 4) whereas Sanna suspected that they would not be useful: *you can't really learn like that* ('ei sitä sillai oikeen pysty oppimaan').

All in all, activities involving English outside the context of the classroom and schoolwork were not readily associated with learning. Many participants, like Maria in the following excerpt, seemed to feel that leisure activities in English constituted using English rather than learning it:

MA: *Do you do anything else then at home with the English language do you for example read comics in English or listen to English-language music or?*

Maria: *I don't really understand all the words there yet.*

MA: Teeksää kotona jotai muuta sitte englannin kielen kans et lueksää jotai sarjakuvia englanniksi tai kuunteleksää englanninkielistä musiikkia tai?

Maria: Mä en oikein viel ymmärrä niitä kaikkia sanoja mitä siellä on.

When asked if she read comics in English or listened to music with English lyrics, Maria responded with *I don't really understand all the words there yet*. Her answer was neither a yes nor a no, but she appeared to assume that the question referred to her acquired skills (understanding English) as she said that she could not do it yet. This seemed to imply that activities such as reading comics or listening to music in English were something Maria would do if she already knew English – not something she would do to learn. Such a belief reflected the way in which school and lessons 'owned' learning: learning happened in the school context, and the language knowledge learnt there could then be put to use outside school.

In Year 3, the beliefs and voices of the participants reflected their status as a new learner in a new context. They were not only learning English, but also learning how to be an English learner. Part of being an English learner is sounding like one, so the participants were using the language learner's voice. As the school world had authority over the participants, it also decided what such a voice should sound like: what one should consider important and what less so. The surest way to sound like a language learner in the *correct* way was, of course, to echo the English learning model provided by the school, in other words, to ventriloquate discourses and practices of English lessons in one's answers. Therefore, the participants were voicing themselves, above all, as pupils: learners of English in the classroom. They referred to the institutional authority of the school and teachers and talked of the physical objects of English

lessons (homework, textbooks, exams, vocabulary tests). English learning, according to the participants, was something that happened at school and while doing homework. Most participants were ambivalent regarding the usefulness of outside-the-classroom activities for the learning of English. One might well learn a word or two when playing a computer game, but one's marks, and thereby the feeling of doing well or badly as an English learner, were dependent on knowing the words that were listed in the book and tested in an exam. This appeared to even lead to an idea of 'two Englishes': there was the English to be learnt at school, and there was the English to be used outside the school context (see Aro, 2001).

### 4.3 Year 5

The next round of interviews took place in Year 5, the third year of the participants' English studies. After more than two years of English lessons, the authoritative viewpoints of the school played an even larger role in the participants' beliefs about how to learn English. In the following excerpts, the participants were asked about the best way to learn English: if one wanted to learn English really well, what should one do?

*Emma: Read the words and practise how to write them.*

Emma: Lukee niitä sanoja ja harjotella kirjottamaan niitä.

*Sakari: Well one should go and study it at school.*

Sakari: No sitte kannattaa mennä opiskelemaan sitä kouluun.

Many participants felt, as Emma did, that the best way to learn English was to *read*. Emma specified what one should read – *the words* – and added that it would also be a good idea to *practise how to write them*. Eeva's answer to the same question was very concise: *you should read a lot* ('kannattaa lukee paljo'). Reading texts, memorizing vocabulary items and writing things down were, of course, some of the most frequent activities in the English classroom. Sakari, in the excerpt above, did not list activities, but simply answered by pointing to the place of learning, *one should go and study it at school*: the school is where learning happens. Such answers thus continued to reflect the authoritative effect of school practices, which had, for many participants, become synonymous with learning. If what one did in English lessons was read, memorize words and practise writing them, surely they were the best ways to learn – and as all this happened at school, what better place for English learning?

As in Year 3, the participants were also asked about their free-time activities involving English. Again, few participants brought up

extracurricular activities unless specifically asked about them. While all the participants were in contact with English outside the classroom in one way or another, their opinions regarding the usefulness of these activities for learning were, again, divided. Some were not particularly optimistic because they felt that learning required a deliberateness of action not present in something done just for fun.

MA: *Do you ever listen to the spoken English [on television programmes], or do you just read the subtitles?*

Eeva: *Well sometimes I listen sometimes but, mm, it might be useful in that you hear it, but you don't, er when you're watching it you don't think about English lessons or anything like that.*

MA: *Kuunteleksää ollenkaan sitä englanninkielistä puhetta vai lueksää vaan tekstejä?*

Eeva: *No joskus kuuntelen joskus mutta, mm, kyllä siitä ehkä silleen on hyötyä että niinku siitä kuulee mutta ei siinä kun niinku kattoo nii ei siinä tuu sillee ajateltua että, niinku jotai englannin tunteja tai silleen.*

Eeva, for example, was sceptical about the usefulness of English television programmes for learning English, because *when you're watching it you don't think about...English lessons*. This implied that in order to learn English from television programmes, one would need to actively think about English lessons – not learning as such, interestingly enough, but *lessons*. Learning English was thus associated with English lessons and with focusing consciously and deliberately on learning; this meant that leisure activities involving English did not qualify.

However, most participants were now more positive about the helpfulness of leisure activities. Jonne, for example, said that playing computer games had helped him learn English, declaring that *I know a lot more words...sometimes they ask a word and it can be that not everyone knows the word that I do* ('määh tiiän paljo enemmän sanoja...jos joskus kysytää sanaa nii voi olla että kaikki ei tiiä sitä sanaa ku määh'). Out-of-class activities thus could be helpful – but they had to meet certain criteria. Books, comics, and computer games were deemed more useful than television programmes or English-language music. In other words, activities involving reading were good, activities involving listening less so. Such beliefs appeared to echo the textbook-centred way of learning English at school: activities that most resembled schoolwork were deemed the most useful. Many of the children talked about the value of leisure activities in terms of learning words, and pointed out that one could consult a

dictionary in order to learn them. Some participants would have appreciated an even more school-like approach:

- Valtteri:* You could also learn for example if there at the back [of a novel or a comic] there was a vocabulary list where you could look them up, the words then you could learn the words at the same time too.
- Valtteri:* Siitä kans oppis vaikka jos siellä takana ois joku sanasto mistä vois sitte kattoo niitä, sanoja nii sit siitäki oppis samalla niitä sanoja.

Valtteri said that reading novels and comics in English would be useful for the learning of English if the publications came with a *vocabulary list*, a list of English words and their Finnish equivalents – like the ones they had in their English textbooks at school. That way, learning could happen in the same familiar way as it did in the classroom, and through material objects reminiscent of school objects.

All in all, the authoritative position of the school, already evident in Year 3 data, had continued to grow. The learners' views of how to learn English appeared to be strongly influenced by authoritative voices circulating frequently in the school world. Beliefs such as 'you must read a lot' and 'memorizing words is important' could well be verbalized by teachers (and perhaps by parents and other influential people, too), but they were certainly reinforced by the practices of the school: by the 'beliefs in motion', as it were. When talking about how to learn, the participants' voices more and more attuned to the authoritative voice of the school institution. They were very 'fluent' at sounding like English learners in the classroom. However, they were also beginning to slightly adjust their voicescapes in the light of their out-of-school activities. Many now had experiences that indicated that learning did not need to happen only within the confines of a classroom.

Interestingly, while the participants' learner voice was still to a great extent a ventriloquated one, in Year 5 they had begun to develop a voice as an English *user*. They used every opportunity offered by the interview to recount their experiences of using English outside the school context, for example by talking to locals during a holiday abroad, or helping a foreign tourist find his way in their hometown. While their beliefs about English learning had been dominated by the institutional authority, the participants were beginning to come more into their own outside the institution as users of English (for more information on the learner/user dichotomy, see Aro, 2012).

#### 4.4 Young adults

Almost a decade later, four participants were interviewed once more. At the time of the interviews, the participants were around 20 years old, and either studying towards their future professions or working. In the interviews, they were asked not only about their current activities involving English, but also about their language learning histories and their experiences with learning and using English. The data set thus provides a retrospective view of the participants' English learning careers, starting from their childhood and continuing up to the present day.

Looking back on their years as English learners, the participants were all happy with the English teaching they had received at school. According to them, teaching at school had been very thorough, in the sense that it had focused a lot on details of the language: vocabulary, grammar rules, exceptions to the rules, sentence construction. Even those who did not personally care for things like grammar rules and vocabulary tests (for an example, see Emma's excerpt in Section 4.4 of Chapter 4) said it was a good thing that such details were taught. The participants felt these 'building blocks' of language were very useful, or even necessary, for one's ability to put the language to use. Similarly, all the participants said that they would have appreciated getting more practice in speaking English: *always more of those conversation exercises* ('aina vaan enemmän niitä keskusteluharjoituksia'), as Helen put it. In retrospect, they did feel that the teaching had been fairly focused on the written language. When now asked what they thought the best way to learn English was, they were, again, in agreement: as Emma put it, the best way to learn would be *to just go and use it* ('ihan vaan että menee ja käyttää sitä'), in other words, to go abroad and speak it with, preferably, native speakers.

The last interviews also held some surprises: new information emerged that had not come out in the interviews before. In the following, Emma tells of her childhood:

*Emma: I was also in an English playschool when I was little, so through that I learnt all sorts of things, like songs in English that I would then always sing by myself.*

*Emma: Mää kävin pienenä englanninkielisessä leikkikoulussa niin sitte sen kautta mä opin kaikkee niinku, eri lauluja englanniksi nii sit mää niitä aina lallattelin yksikseni.*

Interestingly, the first time Emma mentioned the fact that she had attended an English playschool as a child and *learnt all sorts of things*

was only in the last interview, when she was 21 years old. Even though many of the questions posed in the interviews in Years 1 and 3 had offered plenty of opportunity to mention it, Emma never did. For some reason, the English playschool did not seem relevant to Emma when she was asked about the English language in her life – in the Year 1 interview, she mentioned that she had an *English tape* and *a book too* in English, but made no mention of the playschool even when specifically asked about her experiences with foreign languages. For one reason or another, the playschool never qualified as an English learning experience before. Perhaps Emma had already in Year 1 appropriated a stricter idea of what learning entailed, and playing and singing songs did not fit her belief; a tape to listen to and a book to read were more like the objects of learning one would find in a classroom. However, now that Emma had grown up and found her own voice, she could incorporate more elements into her own narrative and her own ideology of her English learning history. It now included the bits that were, earlier, seen to be at odds with the views she was ‘supposed’ to be echoing and ventriloquating.

There had been changes, as one would expect: the participants had grown into young adults, and through their experiences, formed their own ideologies – informed by the ideologies they had encountered as well as by their personal experiences. The institutional authority of the school was now a thing of the past. It is a pity that no data are available for the intervening years, but the following excerpt from Mervi’s interview sheds some light on the process of change:

*Mervi: In lower comprehensive school it was like, you had to do well because you had just started school and been there for such a short while, if you didn’t do well or pass exams, it would have been more devastating...in upper comprehensive school...it was up to you, in lower comprehensive school the teacher monitored you and made sure pupils had done their homework and everything but in upper comprehensive school...there was nothing the teachers could do if you didn’t do your homework ((laughs)) or study those things, they didn’t have the same kind of authority perhaps.*

**Mervi:** Ala-asteella oli semmone, että piti pärjätä kuitenkin ku oli alottanu koulun ja ollu koulussa vasta nii vähä aikaa, jos ei pärjääkää tai saa kaikkea läpi nii sitte, olis ollu vähä rajumpaa...yläasteella...se oli itestä kiinni, ala-asteella opettaja vahti perään ja huolehti että oppilaat on tehny läksyjä ja muuta mutta yläasteella...ei opettajat voinu mitää jos sä

et tehny läksyjä ((naurahtaa)) tai opetellu niitä asioita, ei ollu semmosta auktoriteettia ehkä samalla tavalla.

As Mervi explains, young pupils felt the need to be good pupils, *to do well* and *pass exams*, and failure at that point would have been *devastating*. Therefore, the teacher was still an important authority figure: it was the teacher who evaluated how well one was doing as a pupil and as a language learner. Upon entering upper comprehensive school and their teenage years, some pupils probably began to experiment with breaking rules and crossing boundaries – and if they were not interested in studying, *there was nothing the teachers could do*, as teachers no longer held *the same kind of authority* as they had had in lower comprehensive school. With more freedom came also more responsibility: now *it was up to you*.

Coming into one's own and finding one's own voice as a language learner and user meant that the former authority of the school and teachers had now become just a part of one's knowledge reservoir and life history. The way English had been taught could now also be evaluated against one's own preferences and strengths as a learner, because they were no longer taken as authoritative practices that should not be questioned. The participants now knew their strengths and weaknesses as language learners, and were all confident of their ability to learn more English and to use English, whether in their studies or while taking holidays abroad.

There was still an element of the learner/user distinction in the participants' beliefs. While they believed that one could now learn English by just going and using it in interaction (and that this was, indeed, the best way to learn), they also indicated that there should first be something there *to put* to use – such as vocabulary items and grammar rules. This implies that the participants' beliefs about how English is learnt were also level dependent: in order to get started, the good old, authoritative, school-like instruction might still be the best bet. It was, after all, the way they had learnt. After the basics had been covered, one could start going the way of authentic interaction.

The participants no longer voiced themselves as pupils or as English learners in a classroom, nor did they ventriloquate the authoritative beliefs of the school. However, they did now have a new authority: cultural truths privileged in Finland. The number one criticism levied against language instruction in schools is definitely the one that the participants brought up, too: too little conversation, not enough focus on oral skills. It is a common refrain in Finland in letters to the editor

and chats over a cup of coffee alike: we Finns are not taught to speak foreign languages. The second cultural slogan that the participants used went right to the heart of the question being discussed in this chapter: learners' beliefs about how English is learnt. In Finland, the correct answer by an educated adult to this question is: 'by going to the target country and speaking it there'. Possibly because Finns tend to worry so much about their (in)ability to communicate orally in foreign languages, the learning method that is generally deemed the most effective addresses that precise question. In sum: whereas the participants sounded before like Finnish-pupils-learning-English, they now sounded like Finnish adults. This is not to say that the participants' beliefs are not their own, too. As stated earlier, it is entirely possible for an individual's experiences to conform with a view that could be considered authoritative – or, indeed, for authoritative views to become authoritative precisely because many individuals feel they reflect real-life experiences.

## 5 Discussion

The data showed how the school's authoritative ideologies influenced the beliefs of the participants when they were at school, sometimes apparently even to the exclusion of any others. As the school context offered a model for how to learn English, many participants took it as *the* model for learning English. English lessons and homework had an exclusive claim to be English learning to the extent that out-of-class activities were considered less useful for learning, or even not learning at all. The participants' personal experiences were thus viewed *through* the authority of the school: they saw themselves as learning only in the school context. The school held a lot of authority in the eyes of the participants when they were young. This is not surprising because, as Pérez Gómez (1998, as cited in Hirano, 2009) notes, school years, and especially the early ones, are the most active period of meaning construction in people's lives. It is when most people lay the foundation of, for example, how they see themselves as learners. The school thus plays a powerful role in the construction of meanings by providing a rich web of expectations, conceptualizations, and ideologies for learners to appropriate (Pérez Gómez, 1998, as cited in Hirano, 2009). It was not surprising that the voicescapes of the participants' beliefs in Years 1–5 reflected their status as, first and foremost, pupils.

However, over time the authoritative role of the school diminished. The participants' experiences both in and out of the school context

drove them to reevaluate and reconceptualize their beliefs about English learning: old authorities lost their status, and new ones were taken on. They now voiced themselves as young Finnish adults with English skills, with the beliefs to match: according to the participants, Finns are not taught to speak foreign languages, so one should go abroad to an English-speaking country and speak. The authority of the school was part of the participants' history: recognized, but no longer revered. This shows that authority is not a stable characteristic of an ideology, nor a given. Being able to have authority also requires that individuals accept something *as* an authority.

The study also shed light on how ideologies need not be verbalized in order to have an impact on learner beliefs. The philosophy of the Bakhtin circle emphasized that ideology is not inner and hidden. Medvedev (1978, p. 8) argued that ideology 'in fact unfolds externally, for the eye, the ear, the hand' and is 'in the world, in sound, in gesture, in the combination of masses, lines, colors, living bodies'. In the classroom, ideology is made external and visible in actions. Certain beliefs are thus not verbalized as much as lived out: if, for example, the English textbook has a central role in the classroom (see Pitkänen-Huhta, 2003), constantly used and referred to, learners verbalize this experience in their interviews. Learners not only repeat the words of authority, but also the actions of authority; they speak not only the words of others, but also the actions of others, as they themselves have experienced them.

Learner beliefs about language learning are of interest to researchers because they appear to influence language learning (see, for example, Bandura, 1986; McDonough, 1995; Navarro & Thornton, 2011). It makes sense for individuals to do the kinds of things they believe are useful and effective in order to learn. The findings presented here do not, of course, show if the participants' beliefs had an effect on their English learning, because there is a very limited amount of information regarding how well the participants did in their studies, or how proficiently they used English. Still, their beliefs clearly influenced the way in which they conceptualized and evaluated their actions. In Years 3 and 5, the participants appeared to evaluate the usefulness of their English activities by comparing them to what the school valued, perhaps considering if something would get them points in an exam and thereby a good mark. There was little evidence that – in the context of the interviews, at least – the participants thought of learning in terms of, say, getting better at playing English-language computer games. However, it is highly unlikely that a young English learner in Finland would actually only learn English through school lessons and textbooks. More than

a decade ago, at the beginning of the study, the media were saturated with English-language content; nowadays, with the omnipresence of the internet as well as with the increasingly multilingual and multicultural nature of the country, managing to avoid constant exposure to English is even less likely in Finland than it was when the first three data sets were collected.

As English lessons are something all pupils have in common, and as lessons provide a context in which pupils can compare their success in English with that of others, the school context will probably still hold a certain authority for pupils, and this, of course, holds true for other languages as well. It is therefore important for teachers to be aware of the impact that lesson activities, marking systems, and teaching biases may have on their pupils, and to work towards a shared understanding of language and learning as cross-contextual activities. The walls of the classroom need not constitute a barrier, separating the language inside from the language outside.

## 6 Summary of the study

The study reported in Chapter 3 is summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Summary of the study

<b>Chapter 3</b> Study 1 by Aro	
Key issue(s) addressed	Development of <b>beliefs about the learning of English</b> over a period of 14 years
Theoretical starting points (regarding the main issue addressed)	Contextual approach; dialogical
Participants	From children to young adults (N = 15/4)
Data collection	Interviews in School Years 1, 3, 5, and at the age of 21 years
Data analysis (incl. units of analysis)	Content analysis: voices and ideologies
Main findings	The school's authoritative ideologies strongly influenced the beliefs of the participants when they were at school; as young adults, the learners began to show greater reliance on their own experiences – as well as on new authorities such as the national culture.

# 4

## In Action and Inaction: English Learners Authoring Their Agency

*Mari Aro*

### 1 Introduction

This chapter introduces Emma and Helen, two Finnish learners of English. They belong to the group of learners discussed in Chapter 3, *Authority versus experience: dialogues on learner beliefs*. This chapter will look at how these two participants expressed their agency as language learners in interviews over the course of more than a decade. Before presenting the data and the findings, I will first discuss the key concept of agency and describe my dialogically informed approach to it.

#### 1.1 Key concepts

According to van Lier (2008), successful language learning depends crucially on the activity and initiative of the learner. No amount of teaching or language material will magically turn into a learner's language knowledge unless the learner him- or herself also makes some effort to learn. What the learner does in order to learn is captured in the notion of *agency*. The learner can be seen as an agent who initiates, takes part in, and carries out actions.

As discussed in Section 2.2 of Chapter 2, agency has been increasingly seen as a contextual phenomenon, and this has led in turn to a shift of focus in research: from the learner to the learning system. The main body of research on agency in language learning has taken a socioculturally informed stance. Sociocultural views of agency examine how an individual makes use of cultural resources, gains power in a community, masters a means of mediation such as a new language, and so on. Through this focus, we get a bird's-eye view of the individual acting within the system. Sociocultural approaches are, in other words, biased towards systems and observable activities. However, as Sullivan and

McCarthy (2004) note, this also means that sociocultural approaches are less suited to the study of the affective and emotional aspects of the agent's experience.

The study reported here adopts a Bakhtinian, *dialogical* view of agency. According to Morson (1991, p. 217): 'for Bakhtin it is ultimately people who choose, create and take responsibility', that is, act agentively. A dialogically informed view of agency thus places a responsive individual at the centre of the concept (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). Agency is, for the agent, an embodied, felt experience: agents are, as Thibault (2011) notes, real persons engaged in real interactions that involve various emotions, values and conceptualizations. It is the individual who chooses to act (or not to act), who experiences the actions and their consequences, and who then makes further choices to act, based on his or her experiences. According to Sullivan and McCarthy (2004), a dialogically informed stance therefore suggests that the sociocultural view of agency needs to be enriched with individual sensibility: felt, lived experience.

A focus on the individual does not mean, however, that agency is seen as a property of the individual within the dialogical framework. The dialogical approach rests on an underlying philosophy of dialogue as an overall metaphilosophical principle of interaction that governs human existence. According to Bakhtin (1984), life is by its very nature dialogical, because dialogical relationships permeate all human speech, relationships and manifestations of human life. An individual participates in dialogue with his or her environment by perceiving, sensing, experiencing, contributing, speaking, acting, 'with his whole body and deeds' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293), all through his or her life. An agent is inextricably linked to his or her environment and especially to the inevitable presence of Others (Bakhtin, 1990). The self/other relation is crucial to everything we do. It is through others we learn words (both in our native tongue and in second/foreign languages) and gain knowledge. We rely on cooperation from others to get things done: if we want to learn a language, for example, we usually seek out a teacher or a guide of some kind in order to accomplish that. We also constantly receive feedback (verbal, extra-verbal, even concrete, such as a diploma) from others regarding our actions, and may decide to modify our future actions based on that feedback. All human agents and their actions are thoroughly interdependent. Dufva and Aro (2014) thus maintain that agency is a dialogical and relational phenomenon that needs to be examined both as *subjectively experienced* and as *collectively emergent*.

The collectively emergent aspect of agency means that an individual's agency cannot be stable and unchanging. Certain contexts and people enable actions; others may constrain them. On the one hand, agency is thus exposed to variation: it may vary across situations and also change over time (a change in our agency is, indeed, what most learning intends to accomplish; we want to be able to do more or better). On the other hand, agency cannot be genuinely understood without considering the continuity that is involved. Individuals do have a history that has endowed them with experiences on which they base their ideas and beliefs about worthy goals and appropriate actions. Individuals do not think of their life histories as a random sequence of discrete events: they see actions and their consequences, causes and effects, lessons learnt, and victories achieved. They are building an ongoing narrative (see Bruner, 1986) or, in dialogical terms, they constantly *author* their life story and their role in it. These stories also include elements that are repeated over time and that may be seen, by the author, as constants (the effects of one's gender, nationality, or basic temperament could serve as examples).

According to Sullivan and McCarthy (2004), a dialogical view on agency is thus seen as rooted in an individual's response to the Other. Individuals are continuously authoring themselves in dialogue with others, because they are constantly influenced by others' actions and discourses. When talking about their agency, individuals are also appropriating others' words and ideologies and sorting out and orchestrating these various voices (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) in order to make their self knowable to others. (For more information on the notions of voices and appropriation, see Section 1.1 of Chapter 3.)

## 1.2 Previous studies

As discussed in Chapter 2, the dialogical viewpoint on agency has grown from an interest in how individuals experience their agency. The socio-cultural approaches – arguably the most popular frameworks for studying agency over the past few decades – were felt to emphasize observable activities over personal experiences. To add the individual's felt and embodied sense of agency into the notion of agency, some researchers turned to Bakhtin's ideas (see, for example, Hicks, 2000; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). There are an increasing number of empirical studies in the field of SLA that look at agency from a dialogical point of view. For example Vitanova's (2005, 2010) study builds on Bakhtin's philosophy of language and the self, and examines issues of gender, culture, and agency in the everyday discursive practices of immigrants as they

acquire an L2. Miller (2014) uses both Vygotskian and Bakhtinian ideas in her study of adult immigrants learning English, where she examines how the participants co-construct their theories of agency in relation to language learning and language use. Young learners' agency has not, as yet, been extensively studied within the dialogical framework (see, however, Dufva & Aro, 2014).

## 2 Aims of the study

The study discussed in this chapter was presented in detail in Section 2 of Chapter 3. The same data set is used, but whereas Chapter 3 focused on the learners' beliefs, the aim here is to examine their agency. It is assumed that the learners' goal is to learn English,<sup>1</sup> and that they exercise their agency and choose and initiate their activities accordingly. Agency is viewed here from a dialogically informed perspective: the focus is on how the participants talk about their agency, not on externally observed actions or results (although the participants' success, as measured by their English grades, will be briefly mentioned by way of context). Agency thus refers here to how the participants describe their learning activities in the interviews and also to how they report feeling about their activities. The aim is to examine how the participants feel and embody agency at various stages of their learning trajectories, and address how different factors, such as the participants' underlying beliefs, school success, and the values of the school authority, appear to enable and/or constrain their agentive actions as language learners.

## 3 Data collection and analysis

### 3.1 Methodology

The data analysed here were collected over a period of 14 years using semi-structured interviews. The two participants were interviewed on four occasions: first, when they were 7 years old (Year 1 pupils), then at 10 and 12 years of age (Years 3 and 5) and finally at 21 years of age. The participants started to study English as their first foreign language in Year 3 and continued to study it throughout their compulsory schooling.

The interview data were subjected to a dialogically informed content analysis, focusing on how the participants expressed their agency and described those activities that they felt were related to their English language learning. During any interview, the participants were talking about themselves as agents in a double context: firstly, in the context that they were describing (here, the learning of English), and secondly,

in the interview context itself. They were not voicing themselves only as “me as a language learner”, but also as “me-as-a-language-learner-as-an-interviewee”. It is thus not only the Others and the contexts of the learning situation that have an effect on how they express agency, but also the Other and the context of the interview situation.

### 3.2 Participants

In this chapter, the focus is on two participants, Emma<sup>2</sup> and Helen. Emma was usually a lively and talkative interviewee, while Helen tended to be more solemn and matter-of-fact. After comprehensive school, they both continued their studies in senior high school (sixth form). At the time of the latest interview, both girls were studying towards their future professions, Emma at vocational school and Helen at university.

The two girls were chosen for this study because they had very different experiences of English learning at school: Helen excelled in her studies, while Emma tended to struggle. It was hypothesized that this would also affect how they talked about their sense of agency. The excerpts discussed here illustrate how the two participants talked about themselves and their actions as learners and users of English, first as young children looking forward to future studies, then as learners of English at school, and finally as young adults, looking at their language learning paths from a more mature perspective. We shall see how they authored their agency: what kinds of activities they said they engaged in, how they described those activities in relation to learning, and how they presented themselves as agents of their English learning. We will also examine what appeared to enable and constrain their agency.

## 4 Findings

In this section, I will present excerpts from the data and analyse what these excerpts tell us about the participants’ agency authoring. The four subsections correspond to the four rounds of interviews that were conducted, and the titles of the subsections indicate the age of the participants at the time of each interview.

### 4.1 At the age of 7

At the time of the first interview, the participants were 7 years old and in their first year of compulsory schooling. As stated earlier (see Section 3 of Chapter 3), the first-year interviews concentrated more on the children’s immediate linguistic environment: the new linguistic practices encountered at school; learning to read and write; the various dialects the

children's relatives might use; the children's favourite fairytales and jokes. Most children did know that they would begin to study a foreign language in the third year; both Emma and Helen certainly did, and had their answers ready when asked which language they would choose to study:

MP: *Do you already know which language you would like to learn?*

Emma: *Well English.*

MP: *Tiiätkö sä jo mitä kieltä sä haluaisit ruveta oppimaan?*

Emma: *No englantia.*

Helen: *I'd take English it is needed in so many countries.*

HD: *Mm, one can get by with it /quite well/.*

Helen: */In America/.*

HD: *Yeah, do you want to visit America one day?*

Helen: *Yeah, my big sister was there this summer.*

Helen: *Mää ottasin englannin sitä tarvitaan niin monessa maassa.*

HD: *Mm, sillä pärjää /aika hyvin/*

Helen: */Amerikassa/*

HD: *Joo, haluatko käyä Amerikassa joskus?*

Helen: *Joo, mun isosisko oli kesällä.*

English was the foreign language of choice for both Emma and Helen. Emma mentioned that it would be good to learn because *my dad and mom already know it, and Niilo too; he's my older brother* – her motivation seemed to thus stem from the idea that she was currently the odd one out in her family as she had not yet learnt English. Helen, on the other hand, had a more general motivation: English was *needed in so many countries*, and certainly *in America*. Helen thus appealed to the status of English as a lingua franca, but her motivation, too, seemed to originate within the family unit. Her answer suggested that she knew this because of her sister, who had spent the summer in the U.S. While agency as an English learner was still a thing of the future for Emma and Helen, they had both already appropriated the idea that they *would* be English learners, and seemed quite enthusiastic about it.

Interestingly, while Emma appeared to be looking forward to becoming an English learner, she also seemed sure that learning English would not come easily to her.

MP: *Do you think that le- you will learn foreign languages easily?*

Emma: *Nope.*

MP: *Luuletko että op-, sä opit helposti vieraita kieliä?*

Emma: *E.*

Emma's *nope* was delivered quickly and assuredly. When the interviewer asked why this was and wondered if Emma's older brother – who was in Year 4 – had influenced her opinion, she denied it: *no, he hasn't said anything* ('ei se oo sanonu mitään'). It thus remains a mystery why Emma had such a firm belief that her future endeavours as an agent of English were not going to be easy. Helen was not asked to speculate whether she would do well in English, but she generally spoke very confidently about her success at school: she told the interviewer, *I know how to read, I learnt to read when I was four, and I'm the second best at writing and the second best at reading* ('mä osaan lukee, neljävuotiaana opin lukemaan ja toiseks parhaiten kirjottaa ja toisiks parhaiten lukee').

#### 4.2 At the age of 9

The third-year interviews were conducted in late autumn; at the time the participants had been studying English at school for about three months. At the beginning of the interview, they were asked about their initial reactions to and experiences with the new subject. Both Helen and Emma were rather unclear as to whether they found English easy or difficult: Helen said that *it varies a little* ('vähä vaihtelee'), while Emma said, *it's like fairly easy but still not like very easy* ('on se aika niinku helppo mut ei sillee kovi helppo'). Both girls were ambivalent about the ease of learning English, but they faced their challenges in different areas of language study. For Emma, it was writing:

(after Emma's observation about the differences between how a word is written and how it is pronounced in English)

MA: Which do you find more difficult to remember, how a word is said or how it's written?

Emma: How it's written, that's always so easy to forget.

MA: Kumpi sun mielestä on vaikeempi muistaa, että miten se sana sanotaan vai miten se kirjoitetaan?

Emma: Miten se kirjoitetaan ne aina pääsee unohtumaa.

Helen, on the other hand, struggled with speaking:

MA: Well, what has been difficult about [English]?

Helen: Well, the talking. I'm not very good at that.

MA: No mikäs [englannissa] ois ollut vaikeeta?.

Helen: No, ne puhumiset. Niissä mä en oo kovin hyvä.

Emma struggled with the written word, Helen with the spoken one. When asked about what they did in class and with their homework in order to learn, both girls gave fairly standard schoolwork descriptions, mentioning exercises, pictures, texts, words, practising. This is understandable: they were learning how to be an English learner in the classroom and appropriating the activities and terminology expected of them by the authority of the school as an institution. As already seen in Chapter 3, English lessons had begun to provide the model for the kinds of agentive actions that would result in learning.

The participants were also asked about the English-related things they did outside the school world: did they listen to English-language music, watch movies, or play computer games, for example? Both Helen and Emma had stories about activities outside the classroom that could well be seen as conducive to language learning. Emma, in fact, volunteered her active attempt to learn some English whilst watching television. She was asked if she could already understand (a less active, receptive activity) some of the English in the English-language television programmes she liked watching, and she replied:

*Emma: Well, usually when I watch TV programmes in English then I've learnt English from them, a lot, yeah then I always look at every word when I watch taped English [programmes], there I always, when I listen to the last word then I look at the last word in the subtitles and then like, kind of learn how to pronounce it.<sup>3</sup>*

*Emma: No, yleensä ku mä katon englanninkielisiä teeveeohjelmia nii sieltä mä oon oppinu englantii, kauheesti nii sitte joka sanoissa mä katon aina ku mä katon nauhotetuilta englantilaisilta ni, sitte aina mä siitä, ku mä kuuntelen sen viimesen sanan niin mä sieltä tekstistä katon sen viimesen sanan niin mä sitte niinku tavallaan opettelen lausumaan sitä.*

Emma's self-regulated learning activity made good use of something she would do anyway: watch television. While her method (matching the last words of the English speech with the Finnish subtitles) is not fool-proof because of the structural differences between English and Finnish, it was still a creative and clever idea, and showed great initiative. Here Emma was authoring herself as an agentive learner who perceived opportunities for learning and acted on them.

Helen took some initiative to learn English too, albeit in a different modality:

MA: *What do you do then when you see a word in the game that you don't know?*

Helen: *I ask my dad, or check it in the dictionary. Once I read a long stretch with the help of a dictionary what's that word, and then I looked it up in the book.*

MA: *Mitäs sää sitte teet ku tulee semmonen ihan vieras sana siinä pelissä eteen?*

Helen: *Kysyn isältä, tai katon sanakirjasta. Yhen kerran mää niinku luin pitkät pätkät sanakirjan avulla mikäs sana tuo on, ja mää sitte katoin kirjasta.*

Helen preferred the written word: she liked playing English-language computer games, which mainly relied on words on the screen. If she was confronted with a word she did not understand, she could ask her father for an explanation, or use a dictionary. Using a dictionary made her a more independent agent as a language user – less dependent on the help of someone else who was physically present – and she consulted the dictionary a lot. She also dreamed of being able to read her favourite books in English. The latest Harry Potter book had just been released, and Helen hated having to wait for the translation to come out: *the new Harry Potter book is now out only in English, if only I knew how to read that, in English* ('nyt on Harry Potter vaa nelonen on englanniks nii sitte ku osais lukee sen, englanninkielisenä'), she sighed.

The two girls, at this early stage, had thus already identified certain strengths and weaknesses in themselves as learners of English. Emma's and Helen's strong and active agency was exhibited in different modalities: Helen tended to pick up a book, whereas Emma seemed to be more comfortable with an aural or a multimodal approach. They both came across as active and fairly enthusiastic English learners, even if they were beginning to discover that their path to a knowledge of English might not be free from difficulties. They seemed to react to their challenges in slightly different ways, however. Whereas Helen calmly observed that speaking was not her forte and talked about English lessons and learning in neutral terms, Emma appeared slightly more frustrated, mentioning her problems with writing several times and answering many of the questions by saying *I don't know*. During the interview, Emma even recounted a nightmare she had had: she was surrounded by English speakers who kept asking her questions that she could not answer, and

when she escaped to the safety of her own home, she discovered that it, too, had been taken over by English speakers. It is safe to assume such a dream did not reflect a feeling of being in control, of being a truly confident agent in the world of English.

### 4.3 At the age of 11

In Year 5 – two years after the participants had started their English studies – there was a noticeable change in how Emma acted in the interview. She had typically been a fairly talkative and open participant, but in the fifth-year interview her answers were very brief, minimal even. She was also not feeling very warm or positive towards English as a school subject:

- MA: *So why are you studying English?*  
 Emma: *I dunno.*  
 MA: *Mm-hm, are you good at English?*  
 Emma: *Not in my opinion.*  
 MA: *No minkäs takia sää opiskelet englantia?*  
 Emma: *Emmää tiiä.*  
 MA: *Mm-hm, ooksää hyvä englannissa?*  
 Emma: *En omasta mielestäni.*

Emma declared she did not know why she was studying English (other than the fact that it was an obligatory school subject, presumably), and felt that she was not good at it. It is interesting that Emma qualified her answer by adding *in my opinion*. It suggests that she was not doing as well as she *herself* would like to be doing and it is also a reflection of what she believed to be “good”. Indeed, the marks she received in English were not bad, albeit not brilliant either: she tended to be a fairly strong student, getting if not A’s then anyway B’s and C’s for her work. In terms of marks, Emma could well have said that she was doing fine. Part of the reason for her answer may of course have been the wording of the question, which was phrased as an either/or choice (good: yes or no?). Expressing little motivation and disappointment in her success, Emma now came across as a learner with little interest in her agency as an English learner.

Helen, however, had maintained an upbeat attitude:

- MA: *So, why are you studying English?*  
 Helen: *Well, I want to learn it so that it’s easier when I’m more grown up.*  
 (...)

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- MA: *Are you good at English?*  
 Helen: *I am pretty good.*  
 MA: No, minkäs takia sää opiskelet englantia?  
 Helen: No, mää haluun oppia sitä, että on helpompaa sitte isompana. (...)  
 MA: Ooksää hyvä englannissa?  
 Helen: Oon mää aika hyvä.

She still said that she was motivated by the future opportunities that English would provide her with (*so that it's easier when I'm more grown up*), and felt that she was *pretty good* at English; high praise to give oneself in a country where modesty has traditionally been considered a key virtue. Helen was, indeed, doing very well in English at school. She had a steady stream of B's and A's under her belt, and with this institutional encouragement it was no wonder she continued to have confidence in herself and in her agency as an English learner and to look forward to future benefits.

When the girls were asked to describe what they did in order to learn English, their answers were strikingly similar:

- Emma: *Well, at school, I do exercises, and then at home, I read the words and learn how to write them.*  
 Emma: No koulussa mää teen tehtäviä ja kotona, sitte mää luen niitä sanoja, ja opettelen kirjottamaan ne.  
 Helen: *Well, during English lessons we do exercises in the book and write new things down in our exercise books and then at home I read them, the things written down and do all sorts of things that were taught in class.*  
 Helen: No, englannin tunneilla siellä tehdään työkirjatehtäviä ja kirjoitetaan vihkoon uusia asioita ja, kotona mää sitte luen niitä, kirjoitettuja ja, teen kaikenlaista mitä tunnilla on opetettu.

Both Emma and Helen described typical classroom activities – doing exercises and writing things down – which was followed by more writing and reading at home. They thus echoed the institutionally sanctioned activities of the school world, the authoritative view of how to learn. Neither of the girls volunteered any information about what they might do with English in any other context than school and homework. When specifically asked about their outside-the-classroom English activities they said, as could be expected, that they watched English TV programmes,

listened to pop music, played computer and console games, and even spent time on English websites. Helen still trusted her dictionary (*I try to find out what that means, and look it up in the dictionary*, 'tutkin että mitä tuo tarkoittaa ja katon sanakirjasta') and mused that in order to learn from pop music lyrics, one needed to be active and look up the meaning of the words (because *if you just listen then it won't help*, 'jos sitä vaan kuuntelee nii ei se sitte auta'). Emma, on the other hand, granted that English-language computer games might be helpful for learning (*if it's all in English you can practise the words*, 'jos joku peli on kokonaan englanninkielinen nii sit voi harjotella niitä sanoja', although *I usually just play*, 'mää vaan yleensä pelaan'), but most of her answers regarding movies, television programmes, books and music were simply a monosyllabic *no* or a slightly longer but even more uninformative *dunno*. The activities that the girls most closely associated with the learning of English were those offered by their school, and the out-of-school activities that the girls considered useful for learning were very similar to school activities: consciously paying attention to written words, looking words up, practising words. Their authored agency was heavily influenced by the authority of the school.

#### 4.4 At the age of 21

The last interviews were conducted when the participants were 21. It had been eight years since the Year 5 interviews, and the girls had grown into young women. They were now studying for their future professions: Emma was in training to become a playgroup supervisor, and Helen was studying biomedicine at university. In the interviews they discussed their experiences as learners and users of English, both in retrospect and at the time of the interviews. Not only had they learnt English over the years, but they had also learnt about themselves as learners and users of English.

When we last heard from Emma, she was a fifth-year pupil who sounded somewhat defeated: she did not feel she was doing well in English at school and even appeared to have lost some hope in her activities outside the classroom. However, as a 20-year-old woman, she had gained confidence in her experiences and knew what really worked for her in language learning and what did not:

*MA: What's been the best way for you to learn English, what kinds of activities?*

*Emma: When I listen to music or if I watch really a lot of television or movies where they always catch my ear, and I also often ... watch*

*them using the English subtitles, in those situations I learn the best... Maybe more in my free time ((laughs)) because it's easier for me to learn by ear, to listen to it rather than to think about where this and that and the next thing go and how to make an indirect and stuff like that... I just can't concentrate at all on things like, here's where the subject goes and here's the, ((laughs)) I get all confused.*

MA: Miten itse olet englantia oppinut parhaiten, millaisissa aktiviteeteissa?

Emma: Sillon ku kuuntelee musiikkii tai sitte jos kattoo tosi paljo vaikka telkkaria tai elokuvia missä niitä jää aina kuunteleen niitä ja määki katon... usein englanninkielisillä teksteillä, nii sellaisissa tilanteissa opin parhaiten... Ehkä enemmän vapaa-ajalla ((nauraa)) ku sillee menee enemmän korvakulloon mulla paremmin, kuunnella sitä ku sit että mieltä että mihin tulee se ja se ja se ja miten tehään epäsuorat ja tollaset... Mä en jaksa keskittyä yhtään niihin niinku että, tohon tulee subjekti ja tohon tulee, ((nauraa)) menee ihan sekasi.

She also had definite notions about the best way to learn:

MA: *What in your opinion is the best way to learn English?*

Emma: *Well to just go and use it, like of course you get all the basics at school, but the best way to learn is to use it yourself and when you hear it, at least for me it's worked better than just flipping through pages of books ((laughs)).*

MA: Mikä sun mielestä on paras tapa oppia englantia?

Emma: No iha vaan että menee ja käyttää sitä, että niinku totta kai niinku kaikki perusteet saa koulusta mutta parhaite oppii ku sitä sitte lähtee käyttää ja ku sitä kuulee, ainaki mulla itellä on toiminu nii paremmin ku että vaan plärrää kirjoja ((naurahtaa))

Emma explained that she felt that it was easier for her to *learn by ear* and *when you hear it* rather than concentrate on *flipping through pages of books* focusing on grammar and syntax rules. Her answer implied that English lessons at school had indeed focused on the book and on *how to make an indirect<sup>4</sup> and stuff like that*, which is why she felt she had learnt more in her free time. She did not dismiss school learning entirely, however. When Emma said that the best way to learn English would be to *just go*

and use it, she did imply that some sort of basic knowledge of English was useful, so that there would be something to put to use, and *of course you get all the basics at school*.

Helen had also developed her own personal theory of how to go about learning English. First of all, having talent helped:

MA: *Were you a good language learner, were languages your thing?*

Helen: *Yeah they were, I had a head for them so they all just stuck, all the grammar rules without cramming too hard.*

MA: *Olitsää niinku niin sanotusti hyvä kieltenopiskelija, olik kieleet sun juttu?*

Helen: *Joo kyl ne, mulla oli semmone pää et ne tarttu kyl iha, kielioppisäännöt sillee kauheesti pänttäämättä.*

Secondly, she knew which learning methods worked for her:

Helen: *Yeah well I've been a bit of a reader in everything, and I learn better when I read and write myself.*

Helen: *Joo no mä oon joka asiassa ollu vähä semmonen lukijatyyppi ja, opin paremmin lukemalla ja kirjottamalla ite.*

Thirdly, she could analyse what worked in terms of the teaching of English at school:

Helen: *The good thing [about the English teaching at school] was that those who were interested in the language were given the opportunity to really learn, and well, at least for me personally, it suits me fine that, that like, everything is taught down to the very last detail, and that it's then up to each person to take responsibility for how much they practise these things.*

Helen: *Hyvää [englannin kouluopetuksessa] oli se, et, niinku tavallaa annettiin mahdollisuus niille jotka on kiinnostunu siitä kielestä nii annettiin niille se mahdollisuus oppia oikeesti, ja no mulle ainaki henkilökohtasest sopii semmonen ihan hyvin että, että niinku, opetetaan kaikki aika pikkutarkkaan ja että, niinku, siinon itellä sitte vastuu siitä et, kuinka paljo, treenaa niitä juttuja.*

Helen was, as always, a confident agent in her English learning. She partly attributed her success to her inborn talent, *I had a head for [languages]*, but she also implied that work was needed in order to learn: *it's then*

up to each person to take responsibility for how much they practise (thanks to her talent, she herself did not need to *cram too hard*). She also reiterated her preference for the written word: *I learn better when I read and write myself*. Helen appeared quite happy with how English had been taught at school and explained *how everything is taught down to the very last detail* which, in her opinion, gave pupils the opportunity to get the most out of the teaching, *to really learn* – and *personally, it suits me fine*. (All those details that Helen appreciated were probably exactly the ones that Emma *just can't concentrate on at all!*)

Both Emma and Helen appeared to have now found a comfortable way of seeing and authoring their English agency. Both of them had travelled abroad and found, to their joy, that they could understand and make themselves understood in English. Emma also used English to communicate with a foreign exchange student who was doing the practical training at the same kindergarten as she, while Helen's studies at the university depended largely on English texts, books, and lectures. English had become a regular part of the young women's daily lives: they felt that they knew enough to learn more if need be, and they also knew what would be the best and most natural way for them to go about the learning. They knew what worked and what did not work for them in learning English, and knew how to use their strengths as agents. They were also more comfortable exercising agency over the learning process: choosing which resources to use, which words to appropriate, and in which contexts to do all this.

## 5 Discussion

Looking back at how Emma and Helen talked of their English learning experiences from the age of 7 to the age of 21, it is interesting how little actually changed over the years. Helen relied on her reading and writing skills from the start; Emma knew early on that English-language television programmes worked better for her than English textbooks. Helen was confident she would do well at school in general; Emma, for some reason, expressed doubts about her English learning success as early as the first year. While this may sound like a case of self-fulfilling prophecies, the reason could be far simpler. Research has shown that Finnish schools are still very book-centred places (see Luukka et al., 2008), and English teaching tends to focus on two things: the textbook and the exercise book (see Pitkänen-Huhta, 2003). As Helen loved written language, and enjoyed writing things down on paper and looking things up in dictionaries, she was in her element in English lessons – and probably

at school in general. Emma, however, knew that things worked better for her “by ear,” and she probably realized early on, already in her first year at school, that the school world wanted her to use her eyes rather than her ears. The problem was that the way she would instinctively have preferred to learn English was not a way that was used much in the classroom. Instead, she was asked to rely on skills she tended to struggle with: learning from the pages of a book. The book-centric world of English teaching did not play to Emma’s strengths as a learner.

Such differences had obvious consequences for the girls’ agency. As agency is a relational construct, evaluations of the learner’s environment have a strong impact on how a learner’s agency is, and can be, actualized and how it is experienced. Helen found her strengths in reading and writing valued and rewarded, and felt quite successful in the classroom. Emma, on the other hand, found that the written word – so prized by the school in books, vocabulary lists and tests – was not her strong suit, and consequently, she felt she was not doing well. This certainly does not mean that Emma was not agentive, as shown for example by her proactive idea of using television programmes for learning. But as the authoritative practices of the school were so very different from Emma’s natural tendencies, in Year 5 she decided to author her agency to match what was expected and valued at school. She echoed the authoritative views, *I read the words and learn how to write them*, and downplayed her own agentive actions outside the classroom: *I just play*. Helen could more comfortably rely on her original idea of agency throughout her school years, as she found it coincided nicely with what the school environment expected of her.

When learner agency is under discussion, it seems that what is talked about is not whether learners are active or agentive as such, but whether they are active and agentive *in the right way* given the environment. When good language learners are the nominal issue, what is in fact being talked about are diligent pupils. It is certainly not just any kind of agentivity that learners are expected to have, as any teacher with a particularly energetic, boisterous and talkative pupil in their class will testify. Instead, a very specific repertoire of activities tends to be encouraged, and it is engaging in and succeeding in this specific repertoire of activities that then defines a good, agentive language learner. Consequently, if English teaching mainly rewards pupils who are good at memorizing vocabulary items and spelling them correctly, then those pupils who are interested in and good at these aspects of a language will feel that they are good and doing well: their agency is encouraged. Those who struggle with memorizing vocabulary items and the correct spelling (but

who might be very good at, say, fearlessly engaging in conversation in English) may begin to think that what they are not good at is *English itself* – even though this would be true only in a limited sense in the very limited world of the *English class*. It may be difficult to maintain an active attitude, to be a true agent of one's learning, if one feels that one's actions and initiatives are not noticed or appreciated.

Agency is felt, experienced, and even initiated by the individual, but it also emerges collectively: human activity hinges on other humans. Therefore, rather than focusing on the agency of learners somehow in the abstract, we need to look at the entire system where learning takes place. We need to analyse, and even question, the values, beliefs and assumptions on which the practices of that system are based. What are learners asked to do, encouraged to do, discouraged from doing? What is valued and rewarded, what perhaps overlooked – both verbally and through practices? Learners can never be particularly “free agents” when they are doing their learning in an institutional setting, because the activities and skills that are valued and that will get them those good grades have been decided beforehand by someone else. It is therefore important to make sure that the learning activities that are encouraged and supported are multimodal, versatile and diverse – just like the languaging activities that are to be learnt.

The study reported in this chapter looked at data from two participants from the age of 7 to the age of 21. The data thus cover a long period of time and catch certain key points in the participants' foreign language development. We get a glimpse of their ideas about English before they begin to study it; at the beginning of their language learning journey; a few years into their learning; and finally, we hear the viewpoints of young adults with 10 years' experience of formal English learning. While the time covered is extensive, the study is, of course, very much a case study in that it looks at the reported experiences of only two individuals. It is obvious that no generalizations can be made based on the experiences of two learners: Emma's agency does not capture the agency of all learners who prefer to learn by ear, and Helen does not represent all learners who love books and reading. However, the study does illustrate issues that influence agency regardless of who and where the agents are and what languages they are studying. Individual agents are surrounded by other people and value systems, authorities and institutions. Even a language learner studying a new language alone in the privacy of his or her own home is necessarily interacting with some sort of language material produced by another and will put his or her new language skills into use with others, learning more in the process.

It is in the unique combination of people, environments, languages, values and evaluations that an individual's agency emerges, and is felt and experienced.

## 6 Summary of the study

The study reported in Chapter 4 is summarized in Table 4.1.

*Table 4.1* Summary of the study

	<b>Chapter 4</b> Study 2 by Aro
Key issue(s) addressed	Development of <b>agency</b> over a period of 14 years
Theoretical starting points (regarding the main issue addressed)	Dialogical
Participants	From children to young adults (N = 2)
Data collection	Interviews in School Years 1, 3, 5, and at the age of 21 years
Data analysis (incl. units of analysis)	Content analysis: agency
Main findings	During their school years, the learners' sense of agency was influenced by how well their preferred learning methods coincided with teaching methods. As young adults, they had learnt how to accept and use their own strengths as learners