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Many languages, many modalities: Finnish Sign Language signers as learners of English

For a multilingual person, language learning is a process which requires and makes use of many varied characteristics that have developed in multilingual environments. This study deals with the learner beliefs of Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) signers who study at the university. The data for this study consist of student interviews and essays collected in connection with an English course at the Language Centre. In this article, we focus on discussing how the linguistic background and learner beliefs of FinSL signers form a basis for exploring features that affect their learning of English. Based on the socio-cultural framework, the learner beliefs these students have formed have been examined in order to better understand what kinds of elements are included in their linguistic identity. Their diverse linguistic backgrounds as minority language users in Finland and their active involvement in transnational communities have an effect on how they approach learning English.

Keywords: learner beliefs, English as a foreign language, Finnish Sign Language signers
Asiasanat: oppijoiden käsitykset, englanti vieraana kielenä, viittomakieliset.

1   Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide information on how FinSL signers see themselves as learners of English. In this article, we use the term FinSL signer to refer to people who participate in a signing environment and identify themselves with the Finnish Deaf community (see Tapio 2013 for a discussion on these terms). The focus here is on the learners' beliefs, which were studied by interviewing and examining the course work of three students, Laura, Riina and Noora (all pseudonyms), who took part in a Language Centre English course.

The relevance of studying learner beliefs lies in the fact that they may give significant information of the ways in which learners themselves conceptualise the dimensions influencing their learning process and its outcomes. This type of information can be beneficial for teachers working with multilingual yet minoritised pupils and students as well as researchers with multilingual and multimodal research interests. Our study on the views of FinSL signers learning English as a foreign language focuses on an area with only a few existing studies (see, however, Kelly 2009; Tapio 2013; Bajkó & Kontra 2008; Kellet Bidoli & Ochse 2008; Kontra & Csizér 2013). The members of the Finnish signing community have been recognised as having strong international networks, which can also be seen in their linguistic repertoires (Jokinen 2001; Luukkainen 2008; Tapio 2013; Tapio & Takkinen 2012). Recent research on language use and language learning in the visually oriented signing communities has also highlighted the multimodal nature of languaging (see e.g. Bagga-Gupta 2010; Tapio 2014). These studies have been of great importance to our study of learner beliefs of FinSL signers, since they take the so-called third position in research related to the deaf and signed languages, going beyond the so-called medical-technical and cultural-linguistic dichotomy in deafness research (Bagga-Gupta 2007).

The aforementioned studies and views of sign language signers reflect the way our perception of both language and learning have changed concerning multimodality, language boundaries and language ecologies (see the discussions in e.g. Dufva, Suni, Aro & Salo 2010; Kramsch 2002; van Lier 2004). The present article also brings something new beyond its immediate context, as the learner beliefs of the students interviewed show further evidence of the blurred lines between different modalities. Thus, the study has the potential to increase knowledge of the role of modality in foreign language learning and on methods of instruction, and as such it brings a contribution to a theoretical consideration of the question as well as to language education.

The data reported here are a part of a larger data set collected in connection with an English course XENH001 Academic Reading for students in the FinSL study programme. Various types of data were collected, consisting of video recordings of

classroom interaction, computer screen captures, field notes, student assignments, chat logs and interviews. In this article, interviews and student essays are used to examine learner beliefs.

The study of learner beliefs within second/foreign language learning research has become popular as researchers have acknowledged that learners' experiences, emotions, and positions towards the learning process have an impact on the outcomes and on their language proficiency. While earlier research tended to involve questionnaire studies and quantitative approach, now different theoretical backgrounds – such as sociocultural, dialogical, Deweyan or discursive – are drawn upon (see e.g. Kalaja & Barcelos 2003) and a variety of different means and methods – such as written narratives, interviews, and different visual tasks – are used for mapping learners' and teachers' views (see, e.g. Kalaja, Menezes & Barcelos 2008). In Kelly (2009), FinSL students' views were analysed by using their drawings as research data.

2   Data and methods

2.1   The context: data sets from an academic reading course

Our analysis in this article focuses on students' beliefs. The wider context, however, is a more extensive data set that was collected during a 40-hour compulsory English course XENH001 Academic Reading (3 credits), arranged at the University of Jyväskylä Language Centre in spring 2014 by Riitta Kelly. Elina Tapio was present at most of the classes, observing them, making field notes, and taking screen shots and screen videos. She also designed and arranged the video-recording of the sessions. Here, the data set will be used as a reference for deepening our understanding of the issues investigated in this study.

The original group consisted of six students. Their course work included essays, chat discussions and presentations. After the course, three students, all in their early twenties, who were considered to use FinSL as their mother tongue (following the definition of Jokinen 2000, see also Tapio 2013: 26–34) were chosen as research participants of the present study and interviewed. The three students were interviewed individually in October and November 2014, some eight months after the course. The interviews were planned and carried out by Riitta Kelly. To tune the students to the topics discussed, they were asked to bring along a hand-drawn image of themselves as learners of English. The interviews took about 30 minutes each.

The three students were interviewed with the help of a FinSL interpreter, who was present during the whole interview. The interview questions were presented

in Finnish and simultaneously translated into FinSL, and the students' answers were simultaneously translated into Finnish. The interviews were video recorded with four cameras, capturing both the signing and the speech of the three participants in the situation. The students were captured from two different angles to get a better view of their signing. This enabled us to go back to what the student had originally signed in her answer. In this way, in the analysis we are not relying on the interpretation, but have an access to the original language used in the interviews.

In this article, we will focus on the student interviews and the language profile essays by the three students. Riitta Kelly watched the video interviews and took notes in Finnish based on the sign language interpreters' translations in Finnish. The notes quoted in this article were written down verbatim based on the Finnish translation, and Elina Tapio checked and confirmed that the English translations matched what the students had said in FinSL. In this article, the numbers after the students' names in direct quotations refer to the starting point of the quotation (minutes and seconds) on the interview tape. Hannele Dufva analysed the language profile essays, which were given to students as homework to be written in English.

2.2   Focus on students' beliefs: interviews and essays

To find out how the students see themselves as learners of English, the students were interviewed. The interviews were qualitative research interviews (Kvale 1996), dealing with the following themes: 1) how the students saw their mother tongue(s), 2) whether they saw themselves as monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, 3) whether they thought it was easy for them to learn foreign languages, 4) what they thought about learning English and its importance, 5) how they saw the position of their environment towards learning English, 6) how they saw English in their everyday lives, 7) what kinds of things were easy/difficult in English, 8) what kinds of similarities and differences they saw in learning English or a new sign language, and 9) how they saw their language identity. The themes and the interview questions in our study were loosely based on the themes used by Csizér & Kormos (2009) to study Hungarian university studies as learners of English.

As part of their homework, the students were asked to write an essay in English about themselves as language learners. In the essay, they were asked to describe the languages they use, their views towards studying languages and their strengths and weaknesses as language learners. Further, they were asked to reflect upon how they could improve their language skills, what kinds of strategies they could use more and what their goals in the course were. All the materials that the students produced are used with their permission, and their identities have been hidden.

Here, the participants' narratives – both what they said in the interview and what they wrote in their essays – are regarded as situated in the sense that they are constructed according to the constraints and affordances of the here-and-now situation. However, they are also continuous in the sense that they are an articulation of subjective learning experiences where the person's voice can be heard (for a dialogical analysis of learner beliefs, see e.g. Dufva 2003). Thus, the data are considered to be neither a mirror image of real life incidents and facts nor a mere discursive construct.

Here, the data are first understood as a reflection of the "internal dialogue" in which the interviewees look back and conceptualise the complicated meshwork of their own learning trajectory and narrate themselves as learners. However, the data also bear marks from the "external dialogue" and the task at hand – such as the teacher's guidelines for the essay or the interviewers' questions and responses in the interviews. In both senses, personal viewpoints merge with social discourses (see e.g. Pietikäinen & Dufva 2006).

Drawing on the ideas developed by Engeström (2006, 2007), we aim at analysing the learners' personal backgrounds in terms of **mycorrhizae**, a meshwork of encounters, experiences, emotions and stances. While this meshwork has its effects on how people choose to describe their learning process and themselves as learners, the relation is not that of simple causality, but results from a complicated network of factors, reaching beyond the individuals to their communities and society at large, to its institutions and language policies. This approach resembles mediated discourse analysis and its practical research procedure, nexus analysis, in its interest in examining the relationships between small-scale actions and broader political-cultural structures (Scollon & Scollon 2004).

Therefore, in analysing the data, we use qualitative content analysis (see e.g. Mayring 2000) of the written narratives and interview transcripts to see how the interviewer's questions were met and to distinguish the themes that kept surfacing or were marked as significant. However, the analysis and the interpretation of the interview data is also necessarily shaped by our theoretical outlook on multi-voiced learner beliefs (Dufva 2003) and our familiarity of the issues involved in FinSL signers' interaction (Tapio 2013, 2014) and in FinSL signers' learning of English (Kelly 2009). Further, we also use the classroom data described above for gaining a better understanding of the beliefs presented in the students' interviews.

3 Students' learner beliefs about language learning and languages

3.1 The voices of others in the students' environments

In Finnish schools, the study of the first foreign language – most often English – starts on the third grade. In special schools, which one of the research participants had attended, it is possible to delay the start of learning foreign languages for individual reasons, in accordance with the individual study plan made for each pupil. Based on what the students told, the families of the three students interviewed held different views on learning foreign languages at school. The first student interviewed, Laura, started learning English on the fifth grade. This choice was made by her school, and Laura felt that perhaps her family relied on the teachers knowing what was best for their child, and for this reason did not challenge the school's view.

> The English language normally starts on the third grade, but with me it only started on the fifth, because there was a kind of a special situation in our class, when the teacher thought that no, no, no you can't, first you need to develop Finnish, properly, and, like, get it better. If you start learning English now, learning Finnish will be messed up. I thought it was a bad mistake and it was wrong that it happened [--]. (Laura: 14:48)

Laura says that she found English difficult and complicated, and that she felt frustrated by this. However, she also attended International Children's Camps and Youth Camps where her own attitude towards using English changed into a positive one.

Riina remembers her family being very supportive of her language learning. She had siblings who were in language immersion classes, and her parents knew foreign languages. They did not enrol Riina to an immersion class, but she recalls that they supported her learning English and other foreign languages enthusiastically. At 17, she was sent to a student exchange programme, and went to the USA, which she feels was crucial in improving her English skills.

Noora comes from a different kind of background. In Noora's family, the parents did not know any English. They considered learning English important but could not help her with it, and felt it might be difficult for her. Noora reported that they only hoped she would manage it.

When Noora wanted to learn more foreign languages besides English on the fifth grade, her parents felt that she did not need to study any more languages. According to Noora, they had said to her that it was enough already. She had tried to convince them by referring to hearing people who study many languages. However, they thought that FinSL, Finnish and English were enough for her to master.

In the above examples, we hear different voices. There are those of the interviewees' parents, teachers or peers, for example, and they are all part of the person's learning trajectory and the sets of beliefs that are embedded. Moreover, we can also distinguish authoritative and institutional views that have been typical of deaf education or language education in more general.

3.2   Multimodal resources in action

Both in the essays and in the interviews, a variety of views about languages, and more specifically, learning languages was expressed. Interestingly, when the research participants spoke of languages in terms of school subjects, they often had somewhat negative views. One participant, for example, wrote that when she was at school, she said she *did not like [English] at all* whereas now, after having visited an English-speaking country, she *loves* English. The out-of-school experiences had connected our research participants to a variety of languages, spoken and signed, and these experiences often also seemed to have boosted their self-confidence as a learner.

Also modality-specific issues were mentioned when talking about learning languages. For example, in comparing learning English and learning foreign sign languages, Laura said that in her opinion growing up with the visual mode since childhood makes it easier for her to understand visual languages. She also said that she finds it harder to have to learn spoken languages because it needs to be done through writing, and it is therefore slower. She also mentioned that when she sees a long stretch of text, it is hard for her to know where to start:

> [--] if there is a terribly long stretch of text then [--] where do you start and what do you pick up from there and, it's a whole different type of text when it's written than when it is signed. (Laura 27:17)

When it comes to learning foreign sign languages, Laura felt that knowledge of the relevant spoken language helps her to identify mouthings and allows her to pick up signs. (There are two different types of mouth movements when signing: mouth gestures, idiomatic gestures that are part of a sign language morpheme, and mouthings, i.e. mouth movements derived from a spoken language.)

Riina pointed out that new sign languages are learned through communication and interaction, not by reading. She compared, for example, learning German and learning German Sign Language and believed that she would learn German Sign Language faster.

> In sign language there are some kinds of characteristics [--] which make it easier to learn [--] in written language there are so many, like, own rules and then again in sign languages there are, like, similar rules so you don't need to learn the different rules so much, just signs. (Riina 28:38)

So, Riina also expressed a view that rules in signed languages are more similar to each other than rules in spoken languages, and that means that you do not need to learn so many rules but can focus on learning the words (i.e. signs) and their meanings. Similarly to Laura, Riina described how knowing English helps her to learn new signs of a foreign sign language such as American Sign Language (ASL) or British Sign Language because recognising the mouth movements produced simultaneously to manually articulated signs gives her access to the meaning of the sign. Also, knowing FinSL gives her tools to infer the meaning of signs that are new to her:

> [--] and if for example when you are in England or in America then both of these help, that you know FinSL and English. Meaning that if somebody fingerspells a word in English, you'll understand it, or if it's in English in the mouthing, then you can conclude like, of the handshape of the relevant sign what it means [--]. (Riina 30:01)

To Riina, it was clear that having a varied language background both in spoken and signed languages supports learning new languages.

Noora found big differences in learning English and learning signed languages, and gave an in-depth reflection of how she feels learning English is radically different from learning a new sign language. Interestingly, she explained the difficulty of learning English words by the long tradition of this particular language. She mentioned that not knowing the history or the etymology of English words makes them harder for her to learn. In her opinion, English words have to be studied hard, by heart, which is very different from learning the signs of another sign language. She saw learning new signs to take place in situations where the link between the sign, culture and the meaning is more transparent due to the visual form of the sign.

Thus, when speaking about language learning, the conceptualisations expressed by the students, both in essays and in interviews, are multi-voiced. The commonly expressed view about learning English at school seems to connect learning with literacy and written materials. The idea that "languages are learned by reading" and even that "speaking is learned by reading" can also be found all over Finnish children's opinions, as argued by Aro (2009). In comparison, the experiences gained from learning other sign languages and from learning English in an international context tell a different story, one that highlights interaction and fun.

However, when we compare the data at hand to earlier findings (Kelly 2009), it seems we can detect traces of an on-going change both in the linguistic environment of the students and possibly also in their beliefs about language and learning. Kelly (2009) found in her analysis of FinSL learner portraits that the four students of an earlier group focused on one major item in each image: motivation, informal learning, learning English as a challenge or the teaching of English. However, the learner images of the three students in the present study are different in that each of them shows a variety of modalities as well as formal and informal ways of learning: you can see e-mail, the Internet, social media, television, university lectures and international connections. The students of this study seem to look at things from a global perspective where different media are in use and where different registers are needed.

3.3   Many languages, modalities and voices: fluid identities

In the interview, the students were asked to reflect upon their language identity and how they defined the role of different languages in it. Laura said that she had thought about the question of identity already before coming to study at the university. However, she said that her university studies had had an effect in her thinking so that she had come to see that you do not need to be perfect at a language before the language can be part of your language identity. What is important is the ability to communicate in the language in question as well as getting a good feeling about it. Laura also felt that her language identity could change, as she saw it being dependent on the time and situation. Currently she lives in Finland, and FinSL and Finnish are her most important languages, but if she moved to another country, she could possibly identify with the language of that country: *In principle, I could identify with many languages* (Laura 33:10). So, multilingualism is in an important role here. Metaphorically, she saw language identity as an umbrella, so that in some places the different parts are attached but in other places they do not touch each other.

Riina also saw her language identity as fluid, dependent on the situation and the surroundings. She mentioned FinSL as her mother tongue and also Finnish as a language she identifies with, and then continued:

> [--] other languages like English, International Signing, ASL [--] they're a little bit different, you identify a little with all of them. (Riina 30:53)

Riina said that she uses English every day and therefore identifies with it. She also said that during and after her exchange period, she identified with ASL. In her view, her language identity included the feeling: which language she feels that she is identifying with. Such a feeling has to do with which language she has used all her life, language

use situations, language skills, and the environment. She also saw language identity as a multi-layered and situational concept:

> Overall in life, things are separate, on top of each other, overlapping and who knows in what kind of connections with each other [--]. The same thing here. [--] Depends on the situation and the point of view a little. (Riina 33:54)

Noora saw herself as a global citizen and said that her language identity is many-sided and growing all the time:

> My language identity is very varied and it's actually growing all the time. It is very many-sided [--] like a global citizen. [--] I'm proud to have many languages. (Noora 24:55)

Noora would be interested in moving to a foreign country and learning the language there, and in repeating that experience. She emphasised the connection between language and culture and was interested in learning both. None of these students saw their language identity as something static or constant, but rather as something depending on the situation, environment and the time.

Here, we also find again how new voices – either explicitly or implicitly – have found their ways into how students talk as influenced by the courses they have taken during their university studies (for example courses on FinSL linguistics or language identities) or the books they have studied. We also see how these new perspectives mix with the views acquired earlier on. In the students' multi-voiced articulations, highly traditional views of languages and language learning thus mix with contemporary views of language that highlight its heteroglossic and situated nature.

4   Discussion

In our opinion, the metaphor of mycorrhizae seems to be descriptive of the web of influences that characterises language learning, since the factors that underlie the beliefs of each learner, their learner identity and, ultimately, their performance are complex. The views of our research participants were multi-voiced, showing traces from various encounters and echoing various discourses, each potentially having a different impact on their agency and their feelings about themselves as learners. Their experiences of language learning at school mingle with their more recent experiences in their international networks, and the views of FinSL and other sign languages, popular in their childhood, may now be reflected against the knowledge gained during their

studies at university. Overall, the students viewed themselves as having multilingual, situated identities.

When we explore how our findings relate to the research on (Finnish) language learners' beliefs in general, and further, to the research conducted on FinSL learners, some interesting observations can be made. First of all, when it comes to traditional dichotomies, what was already visible in studies by Luukkainen (2008) and Tapio (2013) can also be seen here: clear dichotomies between the deaf and the hearing, and between signed and spoken languages seem to be disappearing. Second, it seems that the position of English is changing. While the pupils in, for example, Tapio's (2013) study regarded English as a school subject (cf. also Dufva & Alanen 2005), in this study its position as a global lingua franca was in the forefront. Third, it seems that when compared with some earlier studies (e.g. Kalaja, Alanen & Dufva 2008) where participants have identified literacy-based materials at school as their main learning opportunities, now various informal contexts and a variety of media are also recognised as helpful for language learning.

The present study investigating three students is thus an example of how experiences from informal and international contexts seem to offer alternative views on learning languages. From this viewpoint, using and learning English is no longer only writing or reading English, nor does it happen at school only. Similarly, using and learning other signed languages are not disconnected from using and learning spoken languages.

This awareness of the multimodal nature of language learning and language use that we find in the voices of these students is in accordance with earlier findings concerning multimodal resources employed by FinSL signers when using English (Tapio 2013). However, the three students interviewed in this study are remarkably aware and analytical when discussing the role of, for example, English language emerging in mouthing when learning foreign sign languages. Also, compared to earlier research (Tapio 2013: 135–137), the views or discourses that see deaf FinSL signers as having limited resources for learning English due to the lack of auditive input for learning are absent in the interviews analysed here. On the contrary, the interviews bring forth examples of multimodal resources for learning English, as opposed to a lack of resources.

When it comes to learning sign languages and English, students mostly saw English as a linear language and felt that learning foreign sign languages was supported by mouthing. An interesting point arising in this context was International Signing, which is defined in the situations it is used; it is always negotiated and depends on the participants. That is why it is also always different, and in situations where English is involved, it seems to be linked into "thinking in English when doing IS" (see also Tapio 2013: 140–142).

Although this study has its limitations, in particular the small sample, it seems to us that the FinSL signers of today live in a world where the boundaries of languages are becoming fuzzy and where the presence of everyday multilingualism seems to contest monolingual ideologies (see also Dufva et al. 2010). Different modalities enable FinSL signers to use and learn English in varied ways. Further, the research participants seem to be highly aware of such resources for language learning. The question is whether or not such resources are recognised and actively used in formal education.

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