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## **Scaffolding learning through reflection: Finnish language students recycling, negotiating, and reinterpreting instructions in a portfolio assignment**

### **Highlights**

- Students need scaffolding to efficiently reflect on their language learning in the wild.
- Students in the study recycled, negotiated, and reinterpreted phrases from the reflection task instructions.
- The task could be developed to support students in reaching a deeper level of reflection.
- Nexus analysis is a useful approach for bridging research with instructional change.

## Abstract

Students' everyday life interactions in the wild are an important resource for their language learning, and reflection helps in utilizing the learning potential of these experiences. Students need scaffolding to benefit from reflection, and task design must support learners' agency. These requirements suggest a need to examine and develop such reflection tasks. This paper examines a portfolio task developed by the teacher-researcher to enhance students' learning in the wild as part of an U.S. university-level Finnish Studies program. Drawing on nexus analysis and using discourse analysis, the paper maps and analyzes how phrases from the instructions circulate to the subsequent reflections, and what the implications of this circulation are for the discourses created as well as for learning. The analysis reveals how the students recycle, negotiate, and reinterpret phrases from the original task, and how the task scaffolds the reflections. Pedagogical implications focus on how the task can be developed. The author advocates for the use of nexus analysis in teacher research to bridge research practice with task development and instructional change. As part of their training, pre-service teachers are recommended to collect and analyze student data to study the implications of the learning tasks they develop and use.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, discourses in place, language learning in the wild, nexus analysis, written reflection

## 1 Introduction

Recent studies on language learning emphasize the importance of strengthening the relationship between the language classroom and students' everyday life target language interactions in the wild through reflection (Clark et al. 2011; Eilola & Tapaninen 2022a; 2022b; Eskildsen et al. 2019; Lilja & Piirainen-Marsh 2019; Reinders et al. 2022; Wagner 2015): Students can bring in instances of their language use to the classroom to reflect upon, and then return to the wild with enhanced skills. According to the sociologist Graham Gibbs's (1988) classic reflection model, which builds on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, an experience, without reflection, does not lead to explicit learning. Crucially, students need scaffolding in the Vygotskian (1978) sense to be able to "to move through their zones of proximal development to a deeper level of reflection for learning through experience" (Coulson & Harvey 2013: 401). Several scholars, such as the psychologist Grossman (2009) and the education researchers Coulson and Harvey (2013), recommend scaffolding students with reflective writing prompts so that they can benefit from reflection.

This article investigates such a reflective classroom practice, a task called the Independent Use Portfolio (see Appendix 1), which was developed to create a stronger link between the wild and the classroom, scaffold students to reflect on their learning, and enhance student agency in the context of a university-level Finnish language program in the United States. The aim of the portfolio was that students could turn their experiences in the wild into learning moments. By requiring reflection, the task

was meant to make students' implicit learning in the wild more explicit, so they could explain and remember what they experienced and then apply that knowledge in the future (Gasparini 2004). In the portfolio (see Appendix 1), students of Finnish in four semesters between spring 2019 and fall 2020 were tasked with using the target language beyond the classroom and then reporting and reflecting on their activities. The portfolio entries consisted of two parts: a record (images, video, links) of what the students did, and the written reflections that this article focuses on (more in Section 4).

The article is part of a larger study I conducted as a teacher-researcher to investigate how U.S. learners of Finnish direct their learning in the wild. In this article, I will refer to research conducted by a teacher-researcher to examine their own teaching practices simply as teacher research. Following Gibbs (1988: 19–20), the term *reflection*, in this article, is defined as a process that involves the description, evaluation, and analysis of an experience and which leads to change in the form of an action plan for a future language use event.

Drawing on Scollon and Scollon's (2004) nexus analysis, a change-oriented research approach that studies "the ways in which ideas or objects are linked together" (Scollon & Scollon 2004: viii), as well as on discourse analysis (Gee 2014), the study set out to examine the concept of discourses in place, which Hult (2017: 96) defines as the "wider circulating discourses that are already present . . . when the action occurs" and which also shape our actions. Discourses in place can be understood conceptually to mean ideologies related to language learning, or in the case of this study, materially to mean the learning assignment that directs how students reflect on their learning in the wild. The article focuses on the portfolio instructions as an important discourse in place (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 163) that circulates through the students' reflections and impacts their learning.

In my study, I aimed to develop an enhanced reflective writing prompt that would scaffold students' learning through reflection and, at the same time, enhance their agency. Agency, in this study, means how an individual uses the environment's resources to succeed in navigating it (Biesta & Tedder 2007; Duff 2013; Emirbayer & Mische 1998). Agentive students can utilize reflection as a method of directing their learning.

Several studies that focus on reflection in language learning emphasize the importance of scaffolding in the form of structured prompts in facilitating students' reflective writing (e.g. Coulson & Harvey 2013; Crane 2016; Dressler et al. 2018; Grossman 2009), and some have tested and analyzed the implications of a reflection task for the quality of the resulting reflections. Correia and Bleicher (2008) studied students' use of certain phrases in making connections in their reflections. Dressler et al. (2018) constructed a cross-cultural reflective model and tested it out in their own research group to develop an enhanced task. In a previous sub-study focusing on the Independent Use Portfolio, Räsänen and Kivik (2023) analyzed how the use of the portfolio as an assessment task impacted the students' target language interactions and what kind of learning the students reported in those situations. The

task was found to push students to reach out to new or existing target language contacts, and to do learning through reflection (Räsänen & Kivik 2023).

However, these studies do not pay specific attention to how phrases from the instructions circulate to the reflections and consequently impact students' learning through reflection. According to Hult (2010), different discourses are interconnected in actions, and some studies focusing on language policy (see e.g. Källkvist & Hult 2016) map how discourses circulate from policy documents to the interactional level. Drawing on Scollon and Scollon's (2004) nexus analysis and using discourse analysis (Gee 2014), this article maps and analyzes how phrases from the instructions circulate to the student reflections (see also Hult 2010; Källkvist & Hult 2016) and what the implications of this circulation are. The aim is to offer suggestions for ways to develop the task in the future. I also aimed to show how nexus analysis can be used to inform instructional change. The following research questions guided the analysis:

1. How do phrases from the Independent Use Portfolio instructions circulate to the reflections?
2. What are the implications of this circulation...
  - » ...for the created discourses?
  - » ...for learning?

## 2 Mapping discourses through nexus analysis

At the core of nexus analysis is social action (Scollon & Scollon 2004), which in this article was the students' reflections on their language learning in the wild. Nexus analysis is perceived as useful by educational linguists in the attempt to develop instructional practices (Hult 2017; Scollon & Scollon 2004) because it aims for change, and due to its capability to capture the complexity of human action by zooming in on the relevant discourses that circulate through the social action (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 87). Nexus analysis has also previously been used to study language pedagogical questions (see the review by Kuure, Riekkö & Tumelius 2018), and it can be used to track the connections between action and more macro-level discourses, such as how institutional language policies are negotiated at the interaction level (Hult 2017; Källkvist & Hult 2016). Nexus analysis operates with both small 'd' and capital 'D' discourses, as defined by Gee (1989). Small 'd' discourses mean discourses at the interaction level, whereas capital 'D' Discourses refer to the elements that form a social identity, such as values and beliefs (Gee 1989).

In nexus analysis, three different types of discourse cycles are mapped: historical body, interaction order, and discourses in place. In this article, historical body means the embodied life histories, preferences, and prior expectations emerging from the students' reflections (see also Räsänen 2024). Interaction order refers to the social order, hierar-

chies, and arrangements enabled by the reflection task, such as perceived hierarchies between the student and other speakers of the target language (see also Räsänen 2021).

Discourses in place are discourses that impact actions in a given situation, and they can be understood to have concrete and physical but also abstract and conceptual dimensions, such as language ideologies (Scollon & Scollon 2004). This article focuses on one important material discourse in place that circulates through the social action of the language learners' reflections on their learning in the wild: the instructions for the Independent Use Portfolio.

### 3 Scaffolding written reflection to learn from experiences

Reflection is key to learning from experience (Gibbs 1988), and several studies emphasize the importance of structured prompts to scaffold students' reflective writing (e.g. Coulson & Harvey 2013; Crane 2016; Dressler et al. 2018; Grossman 2009). As Coulson and Harvey (2013) state, based on their review of existing reflection studies, simply tasking students to keep a reflective journal about their experiences is not enough, because they need scaffolding to benefit from reflection. When students receive sufficient scaffolding before an experience, they do not need as much of it during or after (Coulson & Harvey 2013).

Dressler et al. (2018) and Crane (2016) emphasize the importance of scaffolding students to write in detail and concretely about their experiences. In other words, with proper scaffolding, students can be encouraged to avoid producing general or vaguely explained reflections that do not benefit their learning. Students must receive scaffolding in providing evidence for their conclusions because they might not be automatically apt to do so (Grossman 2009), and they often overestimate the depth of their reflection (Corrales & Erwin 2020).

Coulson and Harvey (2013) propose a scaffolding model which accounts for the development of student agency. In their model, students receive different types of scaffolding in different parts of their process of learning from experience. These stages are "learning to reflect, reflection *for* action, reflection *in* action, and reflection *on* action" (Coulson & Harvey 2013: 404), with the first stage being present throughout the process and the latter three being parts of the preparation, experience, and debriefing stages.

Correia and Bleicher (2008) studied students' use of reflection markers in their written reflections in the context of a service-learning course. These reflection markers were phrases, such as *I never thought*, which the students used to indicate they were making connections between their experience and their beliefs, the classroom, and outside sources (Correia & Bleicher 2008: 45). The study illustrates how students used different phrases to visibly link or compare different situations. Correia and Bleicher (2008: 47) argue that by using prompts that guide students to use reflection markers,

students can be taught to reflect in a way that goes beyond reporting. In other words, reflective writing prompts could be adapted to include reflection markers such as *I was surprised that* (Correia & Bleicher 2008: 47).

The Independent Use Portfolio used in my study shares similarities with Gibbs (1988), as it includes the elements of description, evaluation, and analysis of a specific experience, along with students' plans for an enhanced future language use event. Previous studies conducted in foreign language learning contexts have examined reflective writing that focused on reporting more general experiences, such as Crane (2016), or teacher-predetermined situations, such as in Marden and Herrington (2022), where students reflected on group work situations, or Kessler (2023), in which students reflected on the use of Duolingo. In contrast, the Independent Use Portfolio in this study focused on students' specific self-selected activities. The students did not receive scaffolding from the task or their teacher while in the wild. Instead, the Independent Use Portfolio scaffolded students to prepare *for action* and to reflect *on action* in the debriefing stage (Coulson & Harvey 2013: 404).

Like Correia and Bleicher (2008), I am interested in the phrases students use to reflect on their experiences. To my knowledge, there are no studies that use nexus analysis to map how phrases used in the reflective writing prompt circulate to the reflections, and the implications of this circulation for learning, even though the language used in the prompt likely plays an important role in scaffolding students' reflections and, consequently, how deeply the students reflect.

## 4 Data and methods

In the reflections in the Independent Use Portfolio, the students were tasked with writing about their observations and analyzing their learning. The portfolios were written in Finnish and English. The instructions were mainly given in English, although higher-level learners received them partially in Finnish. In the excerpts chosen for this article, whenever a reflection was written in Finnish, I translated it into English.

The study was guided by the stages of nexus analysis – engaging, navigating, and changing – as introduced by Scollon and Scollon (2004). I will discuss the change stage in Section 7. I had engaged and familiarized myself with the research context before the beginning of the study and had started to identify some of the relevant discourses already in my work as the Finnish language teacher of the participants. My ethnographic knowledge as the teacher-researcher and familiarity with the context facilitated the analysis. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University, and a third-party assistant was used to collect consent from the students.

The students participating in the study were university-level learners of Finnish who studied the language at different levels at an American university. The program

was geographically distant from any significant target language-speaking communities. The students' first language was English and only a few of them had Finnish heritage or any contacts in Finland. Altogether 17 students consented to the research study and the overall portfolio data includes 99 portfolio entries.

In the navigating stage, I used nexus analysis to map and analyze the different circulating discourses in place (Hult 2010, 2016; Scollon & Scollon 2004). In this article, I focus on the portfolio instructions as one important discourse in place that circulates through the students' reflections. I zoomed in on the text level and used discourse analysis (Gee 2014) to show how the instructions are negotiated in situ (Hult 2017; Källkvist & Hult 2016) through word and textual choices, such as the use of noun forms, pronouns, and conjunctions. These small 'd' discourses, in turn, impact the capital 'D' Discourses (Gee 1989). For instance, students use pronouns to construct their identity by positioning themselves in relation to others.

Teacher research should include reflections on researcher positionality (Jensen et al. 2022), especially when the researcher is also the teacher whose materials are being analyzed. Honko (2017), who examined the conceptions of language learning in her own field notes, noted that the passing of time introduced a distancing element into the analysis. Such passing of time, along with the change of roles from teacher to researcher (see also Hakala & Hynninen 2007), provided me with some distance. It was, however, also necessary that I conducted the analysis as a teacher-researcher so that the project would contribute to the development of the task.

## 5 Recycling phrases from the instructions

In their reflections, the students commonly recycled phrases from the instructions. These phrases thus scaffolded and shaped how the reflections materialized. The scaffold impacted what aspects of their initial experiences in the wild the students explicitly processed.

A common source for recycled elements was the question prompts given in the instructions. The instructions state (I added the bolding later):

- (1) You **can also** write about the following:  
 ....  
 What was **challenging or confusing**?  
 What would you **do differently next time**?  
 (Portfolio instructions)

Most students ended up recycling phrases from the questions directly in their reflections. The questions posed in the instructions reveal the instructor's historical body, her presuppositions of language learning, and scaffold students to write about the

things she considers relevant for learning. Asking a question implies there is an answer. Posing these *wh*-questions presupposes some of the content of the students' reflections: that something has been *challenging*. The phrase *challenging or confusing* comes from the instructor's historical body that assumes the students will experience some challenges. Experiencing challenges is embedded in the role of language learners simply because they are learning. The questions that direct the students to think about a next time enforce the idea of developing an action plan for a repeated experience (cf. Gibbs 1988). At the same time, the questions are open-ended *wh*-questions instead of verb-initiated questions that typically prompt a yes/no answer, and as such, they encourage the students to reflect on them further.

Perhaps because of this teacher-directed interaction order and the students' expectation to fulfill the task, students use these prompts in their reflections directly. There is thus a connection between the small 'd' discourses and capital 'D' Discourses (Gee 1989): By using the teacher's phrases, the students can perform the role of good learners and show her they are answering all her questions while demonstrating their learning exactly the way the teacher wants.

Especially the terms *challenging* and *confusing* from the questions appear in the reflections frequently, as the following Excerpts 2 and 3 demonstrate:

- (2) The only parts that were **challenging and confusing** was the huge amount of new vocabulary, **but** it was not an impossible obstacle to overcome.  
(Reflection; read articles from a Finnish news website)
- (3) I don't find the music to be **challenging or confusing** to listen to, **however** I'm not putting a great amount of effort into understanding the lyrics, I have tried a few times, and that has been difficult.  
(Reflection; listened to Finnish folk music)

The recycling of the phrasing from the questions demonstrates that the students not only follow the instructions but use them to structure their writing. The terms frequently appear together in the portfolios either as a chunk, or the words *challenging* and *confusing* are used separately. Around half of the time, the use of these words is, followed by the contrastive conjunctions *but* or *however*.

This practice of contrasting a limitation, in Excerpt 2, emphasizes the role of the student's agency in resolving obstacles. Since a certain level of not knowing and non-expertise are part of the learner's role (Hauser 2018), the resulting challenges belong to the language learning process, as indicated by the learner. He can solve these challenges on his own, and this fact signals his self-directivity in guiding his learning process, which is an important part of agency (van Lier 2010). In the reflection, the student writes that he is reading the same articles in Finnish and English (a statement not included in this article) and that he mostly orients to cultural learning.



He thus implicitly indicates how he does not need to understand all the vocabulary because he merely wants to learn the content.

Agency is also a criterion in the assessment of the portfolio. The word *effort* is used in the grading rubric (see Appendix 1) to receive full points from the portfolio entry, signaling that the students need to show they are engaging their agency for the portfolio.

However, the student in excerpt 3 explains why he has not fully engaged his agency. The student's explanation appears as a justification for why the entry does not fulfill this requirement. The student indicates he has not worked to overcome the obstacle because the task is above his level. It can be inferred he has not learned that much from listening to Finnish folk music. In his later reflection, he states that he has engaged in the activity because as a beginning language learner, he finds it helpful to immerse himself in the target language even when not explicitly paying attention to the lyrics. The explanation can function as a strategy to receive points for the task: Even though the student has not learned language from this activity, he has prepared himself for future learning.

The phrase *next time* from the questions is also frequently recycled in the reflections, and a few students recycle the phrase *do differently*, as the following Excerpts show:

- (4) **Next time**, I'm going to use this portfolio as an opportunity to explore more verb tenses (Reflection; emailed a Finnish acquaintance)
- (5) I would not really **do anything different** in the future from what I did when reading the Charlie Brown comic book. (Reflection; read Charlie Brown comics in Finnish)

The recycling of these phrases engages the students to make an action plan for a repeated language use situation, as proposed in Gibbs's (1988) reflection model. The recycling of the phrase enables the student to include such a future orientation (Räsänen 2024). In excerpt 4, the student refers to his earlier reflection on how he has used the portfolio to learn about the perfect tense and includes a concrete, linguistically oriented action plan for his next entry. By tasking the students to orient to the future, the portfolio scaffolds the students to do learning through planning how to improve.

However, the students do not, in some instances, take up this opportunity. In excerpt 5, the recycling of the word *different* appears redundant, because of the lack of detail or explanation. The mere mention of doing *anything different* does not indicate that the student has critically reflected on her need to learn more. Crane (2016) reported that such generic descriptions most likely reflected what the teacher wanted to hear. The teacher has asked about future language use, so the student is writing about it but is not engaging her agency. This could be because students do not automatically know that providing a conclusion is not enough if not followed by a justification (Grossman 2009): According to Crane (2016), students' reports about

their future plans for language use were often short and general. Yet here the phrase appears to fulfill the function of demonstrating to the instructor that the student has completed the task by answering all the prompts. By not concretely reflecting on future actions, the student is not setting herself up for further learning from the previous experience.

Recycling phrases from the task is often a means to structure one's reflection or to simply demonstrate fulfillment of the task. Although the Excerpts in this section focused on commonly recycled phrases, other phrases from the instructions, such as the words *understand* and *discovery*, were also used in the portfolios. When the instructions were in English, the students translated these expressions into Finnish when they wrote in Finnish. At their best, the prompt questions provided scaffolding and a structure for the reflections, directing the students to reflect on the things the teacher considered important for the students' learning. However, sometimes the phrases merely functioned as placeholders for more in-depth reflection.

## 6 Negotiating or reinterpreting the instructions

The students also negotiated or reinterpreted instructions in their reflections. The discourse analysis reveals they did so either because of unclear wording and expectations in the instructions or because the instructions did not align with the students' experiences in the wild. When the students explained their choice to deviate from the instructions, it was not always clear whether they did so to either engage their agency to learn in their own preferred way, or to get an easier way to complete the task. The reasons for the negotiation and reinterpretation of the instructions are, however, significant to consider because they have implications for evaluating the quality of the instructions and developing the task to better support learning.

### 6.1 Negotiating the instructions

On some occasions, the students negotiated the phrases used in the task. This negotiation indicates that the students presupposed they would be expected to follow the instructions literally but at the same time makes salient how they assume agency in the task. While negotiating the instructions, the students express the need to deviate from them and offer justifications for this deviation. Sometimes the explanations, however, signal that the student did not fully engage their agency and merely completed the task because they needed to.

The following Excerpt 6 from the instructions details the instances expected to be reported in the portfolios:

- (6) Entries: Collecting samples of your work  
 Keep a journal about **different situations** in which you use Finnish **outside of class time**. ... Collect **samples of things** you are doing in the target language. Did you write **emails** to your friends in Finland?  
 (Portfolio instructions)

The instructions emphasize that the portfolio entries need to focus on *different situations* that take place *outside of class time*, in contrast with classroom activities. In addition, as in Crane (2016), the instructions require the students to be specific and detailed.

In a separate assignment from the portfolio, the students have had the assignment to post five messages to a class chat each week. A student justifies why he has deviated from the portfolio instructions, and written about the class chat for his portfolio:

- (7) **While it is an assignment**, I try to be **extra** active and **go above the required** 5 chats in the group chat as **it is one of few places** I have to practice.  
 (Reflection; posted messages to the class chat)

The student negotiates the task and indicates taking charge of his own learning (agency) by deviating from the portfolio instructions that tell him to stick to situations outside of class. He starts with the disclaimer, pre-empting the instructor's possible rejection. The portfolio instructions directly state that the language use events need to take place *outside of class time*, and the student has not engaged his agency to seek out such an opportunity. However, he emphasizes that he has gone *above the required* and is thus exempted from the rule. The student further justifies his choice by emphasizing the rarity of his opportunities for practice elsewhere. In this way, he highlights the value of the class chat as a resource for his learning. Indeed, the line between *outside of class* and classroom learning becomes blurred in the task since the portfolio itself is a classroom task.

However, the student only mentions the class chat in his reflection and does not elaborate on what he has learned from writing more messages in the chat. With no evidence, it is unclear whether he has fully engaged his agency in the task. The student brings up several other activities he has engaged in, and he seems to have reinterpreted the instructions to mean that he needed to write about several activities (for more see Section 6.2).

Another student negotiates the emphasis on *different situations* in the instructions:

- (8) Use the language in a **variety of different** ways (**make sure that you are recording different kinds of instances of language use**, e.g. **not just** listening to songs or reading the news **but also** having conversations etc.).  
 (Portfolio instructions)

The instructions highlight the significance of writing about something other than *just* listening to music, indicating a presupposition coming from the instructor's historical body of prior experience that students would *just* be writing about music unless told not to do so.

The student writes:

- (9) For this portfolio, I listened to Disney music in Finnish. **I know that I have covered music before** in the portfolio. **I was curious to see**, because I know the English language version, if it would be easier. **And I have not listened to Disney music in Finnish before** (maybe one song in Frozen) **which is funny to me** because **I like Disney music a lot**.

(Reflection; listened to Disney songs in Finnish; translated from Finnish by the author)

The student justifies why she deviates from the requirement to reflect on different situations in each entry, highlighting the role of her agency and decision-making in directing her learning. The student explains why she has done another portfolio entry on music, stressing the added value of this specific type of music, by referring to her historical body of experiences: It is her first time listening to it in Finnish. She further justifies her choice with her historical body of interest in Disney music, adding to the personal value of writing about this activity – to make learning personally relevant to her. The disclaimer, starting with *I know*, demonstrates that the student has understood the instructions and deviates from them by choice. She pre-empts the instructor's possible rejection.

However, engaging in the same type of activity twice can be an easy solution for the student. The overall reflection (not included in this article) does not serve to demonstrate that the student has fully engaged her agency to learn, as she does not provide any concrete examples of what she has learned while listening to Disney songs.

The Excerpts in this section demonstrate that the students used their agency to deviate from the instructions when relevant to their learning and offered justifications in their reflections for doing so. Since the instructions highlight that the purpose of the portfolio is to *support your language use*, this deviation seems to fit within the scope of the task: The scaffold is only necessary when it helps the students – the purpose is not to hinder learning. However, it was not always clear whether the explanations to deviate from the instructions were just a way for the students to explain why they had not fully engaged their agency. By including their disclaimers, the students signify their awareness of the requirements and pre-empt the instructor's possible response.

## 6.2 Reinterpreting the instructions

Along with the negotiation, the students also *reinterpret* (see also Källkvist & Hult 2016) the instructions in their reflections. An original phrase used in the instructions

can become something different in a student's reflection, or it may be reinterpreted with a new meaning.

The following excerpt, for example, demonstrates how a student has read the instructions so that *situations* refer to *interactions*. In Excerpt 10, the student writes:

- (10) **I'm not sure if this counts as interaction, but** Saturday Night Live did an impression of the president of Finland this past week, **and** it was interesting to see them portray him.  
(Reflection; watched the tv show Saturday Night Live)

The student uses the word *interaction*, despite how the portfolio instructions instruct the students to write *about different situations*. With the word choice, the student signifies his most likely not deliberate interpretation of the backgrounded agenda that interaction is valued over receptive skills. In the bracketed commentary in excerpt 8, the significance of oral interactions is highlighted by the command *make sure* and the use of the adverb *just* in the meaning of 'only', followed by a *but*: make sure to do this and not only that. Thus, oral interactions seem to be valued higher than other types of language use situations in the instructions. Cultural learning is not mentioned in the instructions, and the student indicates that the scene in the TV show did not involve that much interaction on his part, as he merely consumed the show. The disclaimer pre-empts the instructor's possible rejection of the student's choice to write about the show while also revealing his interpretation of the instructions. This discrepancy between the intent of the task and the student interpretation of it signals that the instructions could be clarified.

The student justifies why he deviates from his understanding of the instructions: After the disclaimer, he follows with *but*, contrasting his previous statement. He justifies his choice with his historical body of personal interest. Students in Crane's (2016) study also expressed excitement about seeing references to their target language and culture in their environment after starting to study the language. Additionally, perhaps because of the rarity of opportunities to practice oral interaction in the non-target language-speaking environment, he has focused on cultural learning.

Another example of a reinterpretation is how the students interpret the prompt so that they need to write about several situations in each portfolio entry. While the original idea in the task was that students would write about one in each, the analysis of the instructions explains why many students write about several. The instructions state *keep a journal about different situations*. The use of the plural form in many parts (*things, emails, songs*) can be interpreted to mean that the requirement is to write about several instances of language use in a single entry.

Although the instructions state that *even small things count*, the grading rubric that emphasizes effort also offers a contradictory message. Excerpt 11 features the beginning of the instructions:

**247** SCAFFOLDING LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: FINNISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS RECYCLING, NEGOTIATING, AND REINTERPRETING INSTRUCTIONS IN A PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

- (11) **Even small things count:** Do you **greet** your **classmates** in Finnish when you run into **them** on campus? ...  
**Not doing much** in the language outside of class time? **Start now!** ...  
(Portfolio instructions)

In contrast, the grading rubric highlights a different message:

- (12) **The emphasis will be on the effort** you have put in your portfolio entry and less on the accuracy of your language. ...  
(Portfolio instructions)

The importance of *effort* becomes emphasized in the instructions, further stressed with the prelude *the emphasis will be on*. The list of various examples in Excerpt 8 further highlights the message that students are, in contrast with what has been stated before, expected to write about many activities in each portfolio entry and to go beyond the *little things*.

This interpretation becomes especially clear when students negotiate or explain why they have not written about several activities. A student writes:

- (13) These past few weeks have been pretty busy with midterms and classes, and I have **also** been sick **so I unfortunately did not** explore **too much extra** Finnish culture this time **outside of class**. **I was able to** continue to listen to the playlist of Finnish music, and that helped keep me in touch with the culture **as much as possible**.  
(Reflection; listened to Finnish music, spoke Finnish to a non-Finnish-speaking friend)

In his reflection, the student demonstrates interpreting the instructions so that he would need to write about several activities and then explains why he has not done so. The justification serves to explain that he has indeed utilized his agency to its topmost potential under the circumstances. The student starts with a disclaimer. The word choice *too much extra* indicates that he has done something but has not gone beyond the regular expectations. By adding that he *was able to* continue listening to Finnish music, he highlights his agency in overcoming the obstacles. He adds *as much as possible*, signifying that this activity was within the limits of what he could achieve.

The original idea to focus on one instance in each entry has pedagogical reasoning behind it: If students focus their reflections on a single experience, they can write about it more profoundly. If they write about several experiences, the reflections easily become lists rather than evidence-based reflections on learning, as was the case with many reflections. However, it seems that the instructions are unclear about this.

The Excerpts in this section showed how the students reinterpreted the instructions to mean something different than what was stated on the textual level or what I as the teacher had originally planned. This revealed that the scaffold sometimes conveyed contradictory messages or confused students with ambivalent wording. It was

common throughout the portfolios for the students to interpret the prompt to mean that they were expected to write about multiple activities in a single entry, although the instructions highlight that they can also engage in smaller acts of language use. The students explain their deviation from their interpretation of the requirements to show the role of agency in their learning or why they have not engaged their agency.

## 7 Discussion and implications

As reflection is key to learning from experiences in the wild (Gibbs 1988; Wagner 2015), this article focused on mapping and analyzing how phrases from the Independent Use Portfolio instructions, as a central, material discourse in place, circulated to the students' reflections on their learning in the wild and what implications this circulation had for the created discourses and learning. The analysis reveals how the students recycled, negotiated, and reinterpreted phrases from the instructions, demonstrating how the prompts scaffolded the reflections and how they could be developed to be more beneficial to students' learning.

The students highlighted their agency in the reflections when they indicated how they fulfilled the task by following the instructions. They emphasized how they overcame obstacles and explained how they took charge of their learning by sometimes deviating from the instructions. However, their explanations might have sometimes functioned to justify finding an easier way to complete the task and not fully engaging their agency. Especially phrases from the prompt questions were recycled in the reflections. They provided the students with scaffolding and structure for their writing. Sometimes this recycling of the phrases merely demonstrated fulfillment of the task, without strong added informational and learning value. Students also negotiated the instructions, especially the quality and number of situations required to be reported in each entry. They additionally reinterpreted some of the instructions to mean different things than what the instructor had planned, mainly the number of language use instances to be reported in each portfolio. This reinterpretation demonstrated that the instructions left room for interpretation because of their ambiguous or contradictory wording.

Because it is a classroom task, the students performed being good learners in their reflections, often even repeating the prompt word for word. The prompt questions reflected the instructor's own historical body of what good experiential learning through reflection is. For example, they asked about challenging or confusing elements or backgrounded the assumption that oral interactions are more valuable than practicing receptive skills in the portfolio. Similar assumptions were not always embodied in the students' historical bodies, yet they still performed fulfillment of the prompt.

Guided by nexus analysis's orientation to change, the study was motivated by my desire as a teacher-researcher to examine how the task impacts student learning and then develop the reflection prompt further, scaffolding students into reflecting more deeply and being more agentive learners. The instructions left room for interpretation, so I implemented changes during the portfolio process by adding a video, alongside the written prompt, where I explained the instructions to the students. The video provided instructions in a different modality, thereby accounting for different types of learners. I used visual cues to point to the parts of the instructions as I spoke and summarized the different steps required. I explained the motivation for doing the portfolio, personally encouraged the students to explore, and told them to ask me any questions they may have about the task.

The findings offer many more potential developments for instructional change. They indicate that the students would need more scaffolding than the prompt to reach a deeper level in their reflections. By *deeper*, I mean that the students provide concrete evidence of their learning instead of general references to past experiences while evaluating that learning instead of just listing or reporting what they did. I suggest introducing reflection as one of the objectives of any language class (see also Correia & Bleicher 2008), albeit with enhanced scaffolding. This enhanced scaffolding would support students in reaching a deeper level of reflection by demonstrating to them the value of being concrete and evaluative. It would be beneficial for the students to receive instruction on how to engage in reflection, such as in the workshops described by Dressler et al. (2018). Students should be given opportunities to practice reflection skills in in-class assignments and to analyze the depth of their and their peers' reflections together (see also Corrales & Erwin 2020).

For instance, the analysis showed that some students perceived it as challenging or unnecessary to reflect on how they can develop their activity for a future language use event. The task, by posing a question concerning future enhancements, presupposed that there is always room for improvement. Not all the students, however, concurred with this idea in their reflections, and they sometimes used the phrase *next time* or *differently* without actively reflecting on improvements. This confirms the finding in Crane (2016), where students often reported their plans in one statement. The students would need more scaffolding to reflect on improvements. Students could also potentially receive reflection markers in Finnish or English as part of the task, as recommended by Correia and Bleicher (2008). One such reflection marker could point to the future (In the future I will...), instead of the future-oriented question.

A potential way to enhance the reflection task would have the students track their progress by re-engaging in a similar situation as in a previous portfolio entry and then reflecting on how they did better (see also Corrales & Erwin 2020). This would also answer the concern of the student in excerpt 9 over wanting to do several entries on music. The instructor could scaffold the students to prepare for future repeated



experiences. The students would have more concrete evidence of their improvement to deepen their reflections.

The task could also be expanded by making it more participatory. The students could collectively develop the prompt questions and thus engage their agency more. Students would discuss the learning expectations and define what language learning is and who they are learning for. The students seemed to be targeting their portfolios at their instructor, an observation in line with Porto (2007). The reflections revealed the students' historical bodies of what they considered reportable as learning. The task could be further developed to target a wider audience in a blog or chat format. As the portfolio instructions emphasize the importance of social support in learning, classmates, alongside the teacher, could also scaffold their peers.

While this article focused on scaffolding, it did not analyze the role of teacher feedback in the students' reflections. The students did, however, receive written feedback from the instructor throughout the portfolio process. A potential future study on the portfolios could look into the feedback and the students' responses to that feedback (for more about feedback, see Coulson & Harvey 2013).

Finally, due to its emphasis on change, nexus analysis proved to be a useful approach to bridge research practice with instructional change. Before seeking improvements, it is important to fully understand the phenomenon and any underlying forces. The discourse analysis of the learning task and the subsequent reflections revealed how the task impacted the students' reflections and what implications this had for learning.

This kind of examination of one's learning tasks would be useful for all (language) instructors, and I propose it to be used as part of training for pre-service language teachers and continuing education for teachers. I recommend that pre-service teachers collect and analyze student data to study the implications of the learning tasks they develop and use. A nexus analytical approach and the examination of the different circulating discourses that impact learning can help obtain a holistic understanding of complex phenomena. Nexus analysis is an especially useful way of examining the teacher-researcher's own instructional practices so that the impacts are visible. For example, the nexus analysis was necessary for me to understand the impact of the task I had developed on the student reflections. Understanding the impact of the task on the students' outcomes is an eye-opening experience for the teacher and this understanding can facilitate not only task development but one's professional growth.

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## Appendix 1

### 7.1 Portfolio Instructions (Räsänen & Kivik 2023)

#### INSTRUCTIONS

##### Independent use portfolio

Keep a record of your language learning outside of class. Do you participate in coffee hour? Do you chat with your Finnish friends face-to-face or online? Do you watch YouTube videos or listen to Finnish music? Even small things count: Do you greet your classmates in Finnish when you run into them on campus? Collect samples of your activities. For example copy the email you have written to a friend in Finnish.

Not doing much in the language outside of class time? Start now! Contact your instructor/classmates for tips and ideas. Your instructor can also connect you with a native speaker of Finnish to have a conversation with.

The purpose of the project is:

1. You will keep track of and actively process your language use and learning (we are learning the language to be able to use it not only in but also outside of class)
2. Your instructors and classmates can find ways to support your language use outside of class. We will read and discuss your portfolio entries in class, and you will also receive feedback.

##### Entries: Collecting samples of your work

Keep a journal about different situations in which you use Finnish outside of class time. Include a date and time to your journal entries. Try to be as detailed as possible. Collect samples of things you are doing in the target language. Did you write emails to your friends in Finland? Copy the email and keep it for your records (ask permission from your friend to include their responses in your portfolio). Did you listen to a song? Copy the link to your entry. Use the language in a variety of different ways (make sure that you are recording different kinds of instances of language use, e.g. not just listening to songs or reading the news but also having conversations etc.).

In your entry, describe what you did in the target language: When? With whom? Where? Why?

You can also write about the following:

- What did you say, how did your peer respond?
- What did you learn in this language use situation? New phrases, vocabulary, or something else?

**255** SCAFFOLDING LEARNING THROUGH REFLECTION: FINNISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS RECYCLING, NEGOTIATING, AND REINTERPRETING INSTRUCTIONS IN A PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

- What discoveries did you make about the language?
- What did you understand? What didn't you understand?
- What was challenging or confusing?
- What would you do differently next time?

Write 120–150 words

**Grading**

The portfolio entries are graded using the following rubric. The emphasis will be on the effort you have put in your portfolio entry and less on the accuracy of your language. However, it is important that you use your own words: please do not look up entire phrases or use a translation tool.

**Grading: entry, max 5 p.**

5 = Deep engagement with the target language. Entry and reflection written in coherent and comprehensible language and in your own words. You reflect on your learning in depth and provide examples.

4 = Portfolio entry and reflection completed with good effort, coherent text, and/or mostly comprehensible text. Entry and reflection written in comprehensible language and in your own words.

3 = Portfolio entry is completed with some effort but might be list-like or difficult to comprehend.

1–2 = Portfolio entry and reflection are only partially completed, list-like and/or difficult to comprehend.

0 = not submitted