Learners Authoring Their Agency Related to an English for Academic Purposes Course

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Given the demands of modern working life, university studies should support students' life-long learning and agency. This article explores the types of agency learners from an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course described in interviews. The interviews were conducted in two groups in 2 consecutive years, in two stages: at the end of the EAP course as well as 6 to 7 months later. Through thematic content analysis, three types of agency were identified: instrumental agency, operational agency, and reflective agency. These types usually differed in terms of the contexts in which the learners placed the agency, the positions the learners took, and their descriptions of whether the agency continued or ended. Furthermore, individual learners often described different types of agency within the same interview. This highlights the messiness, fluidity, and dynamic changes in the ways of speaking as the key aspects when learners were authoring their agency. The findings are used to critically evaluate current higher education language teaching practices and discuss what kind of higher education language teaching challenges the students' answers reveal, particularly in regards to compulsory language studies for students of other fields.

Given the demands of modern working life (Conole, 2012; Kalantzis & Cope, 2001; Sawyer, 2006; Taalas et al., 2007; Tynjälä, 2011), university studies should promote students' life-long learning and agency (Jääskelä et al., 2017). This support requires constant research-driven development of higher education. For example, quantitative methods and learning analytics have been employed to study university students' agency with large groups through self-assessment questionnaires (Jääskelä, Heilala et al., 2020). The focuses of these studies have included, for example, the link between university students' agency profiles and their experiences of teaching practices (Jääskelä, Poikkeus et al., 2020), and engineering students' course satisfaction and agency resources (Heilala et al., 2020). These studies have shed light on supporting university students' agency in their major (and minor) studies. In addition to the courses of their own faculty, other courses might be compulsory for students. Because those courses might not be a priority for students, the agency stories related to them are of particular interest, providing a starting point for the critical evaluation and pedagogical development of higher education teaching. In addition, in earlier qualitative agency studies, the multilayeredness and even "messiness" of learners' agency has been observed. This multidimensional nature of agency might not be easily grasped with quantitative methods, justifying studies with rich qualitative data.

In this article, higher education students' agency is explored with qualitative methods on an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. The research question is as follows: What types of agencies can be identified in interviews in which learners describe their learning experiences related to an EAP course? The results will be discussed to critically evaluate current higher education language teaching practices and to address

what type of higher education language teaching challenges those answers reveal in terms of supporting learners' agency, particularly in the compulsory, degree-specific language studies.

Learner experiences described in interviews at the end of an EAP course as well as 6 to 7 months later are the focal point in this article. Here, EAP refers to a branch of applied linguistics where the focus is on instructing higher education students in their use of English in academic contexts (for further discussion of EAP, see Hyland & Shaw, 2016). Agency is viewed from the dialogical perspective (Dufva & Aro, 2014) and defined as the way in which learners author their own learning experiences and their feelings related to them. As mentioned previously, real-life agency descriptions are often messy and involve various storylines and dynamic changes in the ways of speaking. In line with Dufva and Aro (2014), learners' choices in authoring their agency with different ways of speaking are also of focus.

Supporting Agency in Higher Education Language Teaching

As in all education, higher education language courses should support students' agency. The agency of language majors has been the focus of research by, for example, Kalaja et al. (2011), Mercer (2011, 2012), and Alanen et al. (2011). However, students from other fields might also take degree-specific or elective language courses during their studies. As opposed to language majors, students on these courses might take one to three English courses, some or all of them possibly integrated into their subject studies. Fostering learners' agency in this limited amount of time becomes an even greater challenge, as language courses might be seen as separate

elements in a university degree, as a duty without an actual connection to students' other studies. For a teacher of such language courses, students' motivational problems might be familiar, at least at the beginning of a course. It is therefore crucial to focus on the challenges of these types of language courses and the ways in which agency could be promoted in them.

The central role of learner agency for life-long learning has been recognized in agency research over the past years, but the definition of the concept has not been fully established. In the context of language learning, agency research has gained ground particularly following the social turn (Block, 2003), with many researchers drawing on Ahearn's (2001, p. 112) definition, in which it is "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act," or van Lier's (2008) notion of the concept: "a contextually enacted way of being in the world" (2008, p. 163). These definitions emphasize the role of the context for an individual's agency. Hunter and Cooke (2007) define agency as "the ability to act with initiative and effect in a socially constructed world" (2007, p. 72), also highlighting the learner's active role in the process. In recent studies, agency is usually defined as dynamic and contextual. Rather than a fixed, inner ability, agency could be viewed as being expressed as observable action—individuals acting with mediational means within social structures. However, van Lier (2008, p. 172) highlights learners' initiative and self-regulation as well as their "awareness of the responsibility for one's actions," stressing the learner's conscious role. In addition to observable action, therefore, another level should be added to the exploration of agency. An example of this is Mercer's (2011, 2012) conception of agency, consisting of action and the learner's sense of agency.

The importance of learner views of themselves and of the learning situation are also reflected in Jääskelä et al.'s (2017) Agency of University Students (AUS) Scale, developed to assess students' agency on a specific course through questionnaire answers. The scale is composed of three main domains: individual resources of agency (including the dimensions of interest and motivation, self-efficacy, competence beliefs, participation activity), relational resources of agency (equal treatment, teacher support, peer support, and trust) and contextual sources of agency (opportunities to influence, and opportunities to make choices). Even though the scale has not been developed for language courses in particular, it still highlights the multidimensional nature of agency and the relevance of students' own perceptions related to these domains. Concepts of identity and learners' views have also recently been closely linked to agency in language learning (see Deters et al., 2014, and Kalaja et al., 2016).

In line with these views, many scholars see agency as being constructed through individuals' own words, highlighting learners' feelings and personal experiences.

As a result, the importance of learners authoring their own agency story has been acknowledged, with interview data and learners' verbal descriptions deemed valuable in shedding light on these aspects. Agency in language learning has been researched using a range of introspective data: Flowerdew and Miller (2008) looked at learners' life histories, Skinnari (2012) examined language learning paths, and Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2015) analyzed language learning biographies.

Many of these types of studies draw on (without necessarily naming it) a dialogical view on agency (Dufva & Aro, 2014), with an emphasis on learners' narration. Drawing on Sullivan and McCarthy (2004), Aro (2015b, p. 49) highlights agency as a "felt, lived experience." Aro (2015b, p. 51) defines agency as the ways in which learners describe their "learning activities" and their feelings related to them. This lived, narrated experience forms the essence of the dialogical view of agency. Dufva and Aro (2014) focus on how learners see and voice themselves verbally— the way they author themselves and their agency in the "on-going narrative" (Dufva & Aro, 2014, p. 38; see also Aro, 2015b, p. 50). According to Dufva and Aro (2014), agency is dynamic in the sense that, when encountering new situations and experiences, learners' histories are authored again (Dufva & Aro, 2014) by the learners and new meanings to those experiences are possibly given (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 143). Agency is constantly changing, and the agency story of an individual is rewritten along with new experiences.

Dufva and Aro (2014) also highlight individuals' choices in authoring their agency with different ways of speaking. Individuals do not necessarily express their agency in a single manner. Instead, they dynamically shift between different ways of speaking. This type of messiness in the descriptions of learning experiences, at times contradicting each other, was also identified by Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2015) when analyzing student teachers' language learning experiences. Due to this messiness, they focused on, instead of individual profiles, the settings that triggered proactive or reactive activities, which defined the subjects' life-course agency. In addition, Korhonen (2014) focused on one adult learner's English as a foreign language (EFL) learning narratives in journal entries and reflective writing tasks. Korhonen used the terms "learner agency" (drawing on Hunter & Cooke, 2007) and Korhonen's own term "agency beyond language learning purposes" to highlight the difference between the agency related to learning the language and the agency related to engaging in "meaningful interactions with the world" (Korhonen, 2014, p. 78) using the foreign language. These agency types were identified for different purposes, emerging in different situations, highlighting the dynamic, contextual nature of agency.

In this article, agency is understood as the learners' lived and felt learning experiences which are authored in interviews with different ways of speaking. Those interview answers are explored from the perspective of the dialogical view on agency. A particular interest lies in examining what the answers reveal about learners' agency related to an EAP course (instead of the courses of their major). The answers could enrich understanding of the challenges of higher education language courses for all students and help respond to them.

Data and Methods

The setting described is the starting point for a design-based research (DBR) process of one individual higher education language teacher. Design-based research is a research strategy usually intertwining and alternating cycles of data collection, research, and development (e.g., Amiel & Reeves, 2008; Barab & Squire, 2004; Edelson, 2002; Sandoval & Bell, 2004; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). Design-based research is often conducted by practitioners themselves, and is aimed at deeper understanding of learning processes, generation of new theory of learning, and changes in education. This article reports on one perspective adopted regarding learners' agency during such a DBR process.

The data for the research were collected during and after a blended EAP course focusing on academic writing and learners' views on language learning. This university course was one of the optional courses offered once a year and it could be taken during one academic term to fulfill a part of the foreign language requirements of a Bachelor's degree. Students from all faculties could take the course, but most students in these two groups were majoring in social sciences or humanities. Many of them had already taken other compulsory, field-specific language courses. The teacher-researcher, who also taught the course, conducted learner interviews in two groups in 2 consecutive years (seven learners in 2011 and six learners in 2012), in two stages (at the end of the course and 6 to 7 months later). Interviewees gave informed consent by signing a form at the beginning of the course in accordance with the decision of the university's ethics committee for the responsible conduct of research in human sciences. All of the interviewees were female, which reflected a vast majority of the course participants. Most of the selected learners were interviewed twice, but three learners were not able to attend the follow-up interview due to timetable and location challenges. There were 27 interview questions, mostly focusing on agency-related topics: learners' perceptions of their own learning and course experience. Students were asked about their English usage, their reasons for attending the course and their goals for it, elements that supported or hindered their learning on the course and what they had learned. In the follow-up interviews, students were asked about their gains from the course, their strengths and development areas, and the topics raised in the first interview were returned to. The video-recorded interviews were semi-structured (e.g., Dörnyei, 2007) in the sense that agency-related questions were decided in advance, but in the interview situations, other themes were allowed to emerge if the learners' raised new topics. The discussions were informal and resembled conversations. Due to the nature of the data, several cycles of analysis were performed. First, the main topics of the interviews were marked with preliminary, open coding. These were simple, descriptive codes. Based on these, learners' course-related personal experiences and feelings were selected for more thorough analysis, and they were transcribed and translated from Finnish into English. Thematic content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007) was conducted, and more specific codes on the ways of speaking about learners' own gains and agency related to the course were applied. This analysis resulted in three agency type categories (discussed in Unraveling the Messiness: Three Types of Agencies). The agency type descriptions were then analyzed in terms of the situations and contexts the agency was placed in, the positions the learners took, and the effects of agency they implied: whether those remained within a single language course or whether they were brought into the learners' wider lifeworld. Later, when applicable, linguistic analysis was conducted, focusing on verb types, verb tenses, and expressions of time.

In the analysis, 13 individual learners' descriptions were examined. In agency studies drawing on interview data, the focus is often on an individual learner (or a few) and their learning experiences spanning over years or even decades (see, e.g., Dufva & Aro, 2014, for a study of language learners interviewed over the course of more than 12 years, and Flowerdew & Miller, 2008 for a 3-year data collection cycle with follow-up data gathered 3 years later). In this research, the decision to interview 13 learners stems from the research question, focusing on the ways several learners described their learning experiences in the interviews related to the same course. Interviewing all of the students in the groups was not possible but interviewing 13 was considered to give a comprehensive picture of learners' experiences of the course, allowing their diversity in different fields, backgrounds, goals, and experiences to be demonstrated. Instead of focusing on the agency paths of individual learners in depth, the ways of speaking were used to explore how the course experience is positioned along the learners' path and exposes possible challenges related to higher education language teaching in terms of learner agency. In that sense, the perspective, despite individual learners' answers being at the center, is that of a teacher-researcher who is teaching one course during learners' university studies.

Unraveling the Messiness: Three Types of Agencies

As a result of the analysis of the interviews, three types of agencies were identified: instrumental agency, operational agency, and reflective agency. Each category is first presented by describing its main characteristics and, in some cases, the linguistic elements that illustrate it. These agency types usually differed in (a) the contexts in which the learners placed the agency, that is, the context learners referred to in the interview situation, (b) learners' descriptions of whether their agency continued after the course or not and whether it would affect their future, and (c) the positions (see Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) the learners took based on those contexts and the temporal description of their agency. In reality, individual learners often described at least two different agency types within the same interview. This messiness of the learner interviews is further discussed after the introduction of the agency categories.

All examples were originally in Finnish and have been translated into English by the author. Possible emphases have been added by the author to highlight interviewees' typical word choices illustrating a specific way of speaking, introduced before (or, in some cases, after) the quotations. The pseudonyms include information about the student (e.g., S1 = student 1), data collection cycle (e.g., C1 = cycle 1) and interview (e.g., I1 = the first of two interviews).

Instrumental Agency

Instrumental agency examples emphasized agency as meeting the requirements of university studies, with learners authoring their "student responsibilities" at a given time in the contexts of university studies in general and as part of one EAP language course in particular. The "agency story" was authored from the position of a university student attending a mandatory course, and agency was described in terms of earning compulsory language course credits for their degree by completing the course and its assignments. Typical examples of this category include quotes in which learners highlighted how they "got assignments done" or that although the course had a heavy workload, the learner was able to complete everything:

S1C2I1: Very clear instructions and—I was able to complete the assignments on my own. At the beginning of the course, I was concerned about the independent assignments and a given deadline that how I would be able to concentrate on getting them done but it went really well.

The agency was related to the ways the learners had been able to arrange their schedules and other plans during the academic term to enable the completion of the required language courses and earning the credits:

S1C1I1: I was able to work at my own pace and work on the assignments when I really had the time for it.

S2C1I1: I have made an effort to work hard on the English courses so I would be able to take the compulsory academic English course next autumn—so [completing my degree] would not be delayed for not completing the language courses.

The content of the assignments, the language skills needed or language use in general were not the focus in these quotations. Instead, it was on the workload, timetables, and scheduling the work for the course assignments. The relief of successfully submitting finished work was often emphasized. This implies that the course was mostly about compulsory credits for a degree and its value was mainly instrumental.

In their interview answers, learners framed and simultaneously defined their agency in different spaces or contexts, some very narrow, some much broader. Typical contexts for instrumental agency included learners' university studies in general, illustrated with explicit references to the degree requirements imposed by the higher education system:

S3C1I1: Well, we have to take two English courses so it was not really an elective course for me.

S4C1I1: I needed three credits of language studies.

Within that specific context, the agency to meet requirements was then described. Another typical context was the world of the language course in question with references to the course itself, its assignments, learning environment, or schedule:

S2C1I1: Well if I think about working on the course assignments, we had good materials and they were easy to find so that was something that helped me during the course, and probably the feedback when I finally got the assignments submitted.

S4C1I1: I feel that at the beginning of the course we had more assignments or more demanding assignments but then I also had more time to work on them … so I feel that at the beginning the English course was very time-consuming.

In addition to the contexts, learners describe the temporal dimensions of their agency in various ways. At times they clearly voiced their agency in the past, ending also in the past without any connections to, or effects on, the present or the future. This was expressed with the use

of the past tense. For example, in the following description, the agency took place at a particular time during the EAP course and once the course was completed, the agency ended:

> S5C1I1: I am glad that it is finally over…I feel good, I got it done, and I survived.

Naturally, the positions learners took in their answers also aligned with the depicted contexts as well as the temporal descriptions. If agency was placed in the context of university studies in general, the position was a university student (often without a specific reference to their field of study) in the midst of the official requirements:

> S1C2I1: It was precisely because I had to take something … I needed 3 credits so I had to take one English course and the others did not fit my schedule.

> S6C1I1: These English courses have to be completed at some point to be able to apply for the Master's studies so I could not take one this Spring and the other next Autumn. I had to take two English courses this Spring.

If a learner described their agency as activities to complete given assignments, their position seemed to be that of a rather generic student in a language course and the context for the agency was precisely that course and its assignments:

> S1C2I1: I got to write and got instructions on what the text should be like and then I got feedback on it so that was nice.

> S3C2I1: (There was) a lot to learn at a fast pace so it was good to have the material (in the course workspace) and be able to return to it later on.

Here, the traditional teacher and student positions are implied, with learners working on predetermined assignments with specific instructions, with more flexibility offered only in scheduling the workload. Other contexts were described but these were the most typical cases. As a result, when learners described instrumental agency, the contexts were rather narrow and limited. The effort was made at a particular time and it ended at that moment as well.

In summary, the gains of this type of agency were instrumental: by completing the course and its assignments, learners earned compulsory study credits for their university degree. With instrumental agency, learners seemed to describe "student agency" instead of "learner agency." The former indicates their activities related to scheduling their studies and organizing their study responsibilities and assignment completion, and the latter would focus on their own skills and expertise. This resembles the strategic approach to learning (e.g., Entwistle & Peterson, 2004), emphasizing organized studying, time management, and being aware of the responsibilities placed on oneself. However, this type of agency could also be viewed as the starting point enabling other types of agency, particularly for blended, online, and independent courses, and lifelong learning. In terms of developing higher education language teaching, clear frames but enough flexibility in the course design would support this type of "student agency." However, attention should be paid not only to becoming aware of but also going beyond this type of agency. Compulsory courses might be viewed merely in terms of the credits, and valuable agency experiences can be missed if other types of agency are not supported.

Operational Agency

Operational agency highlights agency as language learning activities and working methods, with learners referring to their concrete actions in language use and the processes related to working on assignments. Described or implied contexts ranged from common academic language use situations and other university courses to the world of language learning and use in general as well as learners' own life worlds. Positions taken included university students, students on a specific language course, as well as language learners and users either in general or as individuals. The "agency story" was thus authored from various positions and placed into versatile contexts. However, a common feature in all learner descriptions was that something got easier through gaining or acquiring new language skills, strategies, or resources:

> S7C1I1: Well this academic writing and formal style—in the first writing assignments I had used more of those "non-academic" words and as we went through them, comment after comment in the feedback, I learned to avoid them and write better text.

> S4C2I1: I was able to practice writing with the same structure that we need to follow in our bachelor's and master's thesis, the typical thesis structure; so perhaps I got more practice in it and learned what to include in each part.

More specifically, learners referred to their own actions in (a) language learning and use, or (b) ways of working. In both cases, the focus was on concrete activity. Learners referred to specific examples including learning to use online dictionaries or mark down sources

correctly, to make use of process writing or to write a research paper as well as learning about sentence structures or argumentation. This was expressed with verbs such as *have acquired, learned how to, got to practice,* and *made an effort to.* Learners gained new knowledge, expertise, or independence, which affected their own actions.

The typical instrumental agency contexts—the EAP course and university studies—were often described in this category as well. However, learners sometimes specified or at least implied that their agency extended to broader contexts, such as common academic language use situations or other language courses at the university:

S5C1I1: Now I am able to read academic texts in English so I do not have any problems with them.

S6C1I1: When the next English course began, I was able to start the writing process better and knew which words were formal and which were informal.

In those cases, the position of the learners ranged from a student on a language course to language learners and users in academic settings. In addition, one fairly vague but very common operational agency context was the world of language learning and language use in general:

S6C1I1: Well, first of all I need to congratulate myself for getting so much further from where I used to be. It has been such a long time since I used English almost at all.

S2C1I1: I wrote the first assignments in Finnish first and then I started thinking about translating them into English so I ended up doing the work twice. Now I notice that I automatically start writing in English.

Without giving more detailed information, their position then seemed to also be that of a language learner/user in general. The agency was related to developing generic language skills, which might be useful later on.

Occasionally, learners' life worlds were described as contexts, with the implied position being the learners themselves as language users in that context, connecting their agency to everyday activities:

S2C2I1: Well, I actually have begun to think of ways in which I could enhance learning English so probably I could use tips from the [course] presentations and projects. Earlier I have tried to do that by watching some TV series in English but perhaps I have not kept it up but now I have really

made an effort to do it—so it would not be something superficial but I would really work on it.

There was more versatility in the contexts described and positions taken, which was reflected in the temporal descriptions of agency. At times, the agency was described as occurring in a certain moment (expressed in the past tense)—when engaged in working on the course assignments. Once those assignments had been completed, the agency ended:

S4C2I2: During the course I was able to choose the direction I took with the assignments. They were not given to us but we were able to choose the topics ourselves and then I automatically drew on my own field of study, for example the vocabulary.

In other cases, agency was described as clearly continuing after the course (expressed with the present or the present perfect tense):

S5C2I1: I started thinking about myself as a language learner. Now I am able to focus on the things I do not know yet and the things I have learned.

The message seemed to be that the acquired skills and expertise had been and could be made use of in the future as well.

In summary, when learners described operational agency, they offered various contexts for agency, temporal descriptions, and implied different positions. What was common for all of those descriptions was that the gains were based on learners' actions: language use, language learning, and ways of working—when they were concretely and purposefully acting with the language; for example, when working on assignments. In order to support operational agency, learners should be supported in becoming aware of what resources their actions have created and what processes have enabled the development of those resources. To assist in making the course design explicit to the learner, there should be explanations of why learning assignments are carried out in a certain way, why certain learning assignments have been selected for the course, and what kind of strategies support (see Oxford, 2017), for example, the development of writing. In addition, the course design could be negotiated and developed together with the learners. In that sense, operational agency here is closely linked to the course itself. Jääskelä et al.'s (2017) AUS scale could, for example, provide insights into supporting student agency on an individual course. This type of agency would also be similar to Korhonen's (2014) learner agency. As opposed to "agency beyond language learning purposes" which emphasizes the wide scope of learner's interaction with and encounters in the

world using a foreign language, this "learner agency" refers to intentional language learning activities in a particular context.

Reflective Agency

Reflective agency refers to learners' own thinking as they reported it in the interviews, which was often a changed notion of themselves with new potential for the future. In the quotations categorized as displaying reflective agency, learners shared their views on (a) themselves as language learners and users, and, in some cases (b) language use in general. The focus was on their own meta-level thinking. Learners described their experiences and connected realizations about themselves to it. This included what they are capable of as well as how they feel about themselves as language learners and users. For example, learners described their own changed attitude toward learning or using languages, their newfound enthusiasm to learn, and their realizations about their progress in learning English or academic writing:

> S2C1I1: The whole spring term has been a turning point for me in language learning. If I think about what has happened since mid-January, March, April, just a few months, and so much has happened. I view language and language learning in such a different way.

> S6C2I1: I tried to learn vocabulary and realized that it is not such a big deal; there is no need to practice 2 hours every day but it can be intertwined with everyday life … that "academic English" has always been a huge and even scary issue for me ... as if I had to take the books and start cramming—I have had that kind of an image in my mind. But that image has been shattered during this course. It is not such a big deal anymore.

Often the descriptions revealed that the learners saw themselves in a new light: gaining confidence and overcoming their own fears of using English. Learners also described beginning to analyze themselves as language learners and becoming more aware of, and realistic about, their strengths and areas for development. These agency stories were expressed with verbs referring to cognitive processes, for example, *realized, noticed, understood, thought,* and phrases such as "the feeling that…," "I believe…," and "now I see…."

When expressing reflective agency, learners referred to broader contexts than they did when expressing instrumental agency. For example, some learners described university studies of their own field and explicitly referred to their agency in reading

scientific articles or writing their bachelor's or master's thesis:

> S4C1I2: When working on my master's thesis I use some database, search for articles, save and read them and that [no longer] feels like "a scientific database and I have to read in English, help me" but it is just like any other handbook—I just read it.

> S6C2I1: I realized that I can … combine acquiring English vocabulary of social sciences with watching an interesting documentary in English.

Learners' own life worlds were clearly the most common contexts for reflective agency. For example, learners referred to events in their everyday lives or situations in their current or future work, their life experiences or thoughts about themselves years or even decades ago. This could be something in their personal background that had significance or connection to the present moment, referring to travelling or other language-use situations encountered in their free time. Learners framed their descriptions of agency with phrases that contextualized it in those life worlds, clearly outside the settings of the course:

> S2C1I2: I think that if I travelled abroad, it would be much much easier … to survive because I have gained courage. I do not expect perfection but "ok it is enough to be understood and to understand others."

> S3C1I2: It made me feel that I could really write my master's thesis in English and it truly made me feel that I would be able to write anything in English because I have had such a low self-esteem in it thinking that I am not able to write anything.

When referring to their own life worlds, the position of the learners seemed to be, in a way, themselves as language users, without any particular "label." Learners also often highlighted the personal meaning of an experience and made remarks about their changed thinking and potential with references to future possibilities, often expressed in the present or present perfect tense or by explicit (or more implied) references to the future:

> S1C2I2: I remember earlier I avoided anything that had to be done in English but it is not like that anymore. I have gained confidence in it.

> S3C2I1: Perhaps the way of thinking remains—at times I feel that "Oh no, I do not know the word in English" but then I just explain and somebody helps out if I don't know something.

In summary, reflective agency refers to learners' meta-level thinking about their experiences and realizations about themselves. Overall, learners' sense of agency (e.g., Mercer, 2011, 2012) seems to be embedded in reflective agency: how they see themselves now that they have gained new resources and experiences. Learners' reflective agency in higher education language courses should be supported by allowing them to verbalize their turning points and milestones. In addition, the possibility to update and change the direction of one's agency story and to become aware of all this should be emphasized. Compared to the other agency types, in reflective agency the learner as the main character in their agency story is highlighted. This approach should also be a goal, to avoid the situation where individual compulsory courses are viewed as some kind of sidetrack or secondary to one's main studies. Supporting learners in taking charge of building their own stories beyond an individual course is essential. Korhonen's (2014) "agency beyond language learning purposes" bears resemblance to this type of agency, highlighting learners' meaningful encounters and actions in the world using the foreign language. Ruohotie and Lyhty (2015) also identified the learners' changed notions of themselves as language users, sparked by proactive activities linked to achieving one's own goals. Individual experiences and realizations can therefore have a strong effect on one's sense of agency as well as change one's agency story.

Intertwined Agencies Illustrating the Fluidity of Agency

As the analyses show, learners described their agency at different levels. This was not only the case between the learners, but it was typical for individual learners to move between these ways of speaking in the same interview. For example, Student 2 in Data Collection Cycle 1 expressed all agency types in Interview 1, as seen in the quotations. In the first interviews, Students 2, 5 and 6 in Data Collection Cycle 1 also expressed at least two agency types, based on merely the quotations presented here. Thus, the messiness and the dynamic changes in the ways of speaking seemed to be key aspects when learners were authoring their agency, a finding that is in line with Dufva and Aro's (2014) views about individuals' choices in authoring and verbally constructing their agency with different ways of speaking. Connections to Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate's (2015) and Korhonen's (2014) findings on the multilayered and messy nature of agency were also established. Together, these findings highlight the fluidity of agency as described by the learners. Certain types of agency were more typically placed in particular contexts with particular positions taken, but they were still interconnected and intertwined,

with the various positions of an individual learner alternating in the messy authored descriptions.

The different contexts, positions and temporal dimensions shed light on the fluidity of agency. When analyzing the contexts the learners referred to (explicitly or more implicitly), the concept of *chronotope* emerges as a central aspect. Dufva and Aro (2014, p. 37) view agency "as emergent in the dynamic, continually fluctuating 'eventing' in time and place." They refer to the "chronotope," defined as the time-place in which history, the present time, and the future are connected, with new meanings made (Dufva & Aro, 2014). This means that agency is not completed but continually evolves in different situations and over the course of time on the life path that a learner authors. Through this authoring, a learner recreates their past agency path as they encounter new experiences (Dufva & Aro, 2014). In addition, they connect the past and the current experiences to their potential in the future (Dufva & Aro, referring to Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004), which brings Norton's (2000) views on identity—how the learners see themselves and build their relationship to the world and their future possibilities—close to the dialogical view of agency. Based on Norton's definition, all three agencies could be described as identity work. Particularly in reflective agency examples, learners described that through their experiences, they saw themselves in a new light (see also Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). In operational agency examples, the change was related to concrete ways of working and language use, such as how they were able to cope better with the course assignments:

> S2C1I2: Particularly the assignments in which references were required were very helpful. Now [in the other English course] I did not have to think about them anymore and I was able to focus on something else.

Here, the learner gave meaning to knowledge and skills relevant in their current world of studies and possibly in the future. Finally, instrumental agency examples also refer to a changed relationship between the learners and the world, although the change was not related to language learning or use. All this highlights a learner's own authorship and initiative in creating one's agency (Dufva & Aro, 2014) as well as the importance of their lived experience in the process.

Discussion and Implications for Higher Education Language Teaching Development

This research is part of a higher education language teacher's design-based research (DBR) process, which aims at supporting academic graduates' agency. In this article, agency was explored by drawing on the

dialogical view on agency and the focus was on the learners authoring their agency in interviews at the end of and after an EAP course. Through their ways of speaking, learners referred to different types of agency: instrumental, operational, and reflective agency. These learner descriptions revealed some of the challenges learners might face on English for academic purposes (EAP) courses. First, when making use of this analysis in the pedagogical development of higher education language teaching, it should be remembered that interview data do not directly reveal that these types of agency were supported or expressed on the course in question. Rather, such data show how the learners describe and analyze their experience in the interview situation and possibly reveals learners' perceptions and ideals of "success" in language learning and use, or their assumptions about the appropriate ways to describe what the course had to offer.

It is interesting to consider how differently the learners referred to success when adopting the three different ways of speaking about agency. What type of "success" is important and appropriate for specific positions and in specific contexts? For example, descriptions of instrumental agency (and partly operational agency) highlighted success as meeting requirements (instrumental agency) and following the rules or conventions of a particular language use situation (operational agency) set from outside. In contrast, in reflective agency, success referred to learners' achieving more intrinsic goals or realizing their changed or existing potential. Similarly, in Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2015), reactive agency was initiated from the outside, whereas proactive agency was geared toward reaching one's intrinsic goals. Both types of activities could still be described by one individual in Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate's research, highlighting the dynamic nature of agency.

These differences represent valuable information for critically evaluating higher education language courses, particularly compulsory courses which students of all faculties might be required to take. Learners referred to different forms and degrees of agency, so it is worth asking what this means for supporting life-long learning. It would be misleading to focus on each category of agency separately and assume the category fully represents the agency of an individual learner. The conclusion might then be that learners referring to the gains of the course merely as meeting requirements felt that the course did not offer meaningful experiences for them. A closer examination, however, showed that different ways of speaking usually emerged in the same interview. The main challenge is perhaps more likely related to making use of the levels of agency that were mentioned. Do we discuss all of the different positions, worlds, and contexts, and how crossing their boundaries could be related to agency? Do we discuss that gaining

resources and abilities in one context could also create new potential for acting in other contexts in the future? Dufva and Aro (2014, p. 47) introduce this approach as "cross-contextual" agency: the type of agency that is not limited to, say, academic settings or the context of one individual course but which is described as having significance in other contexts, too.

To be able to make use of the different agency descriptions, awareness of them should be raised. Support should be offered for learners to author their agency during their studies and the meaning of experiences of agency should be discussed. For example, even though instrumental agency seems to be superficial, time management in an individual course and university studies is crucial for completing a degree within a certain timeframe. It is still an authored part of a learner's path, an example of their success and capabilities, which could be related to an individual's language user identity (a learner's language learning and use, a learner's own thinking about themselves as language users). One result of this finding is that support should be offered for going beyond operational agency and for merging different levels of agency into learners' own agency story, particularly on compulsory (language) courses. This could challenge preconceptions of separateness, and individual courses could become meaningful in changing the story a learner authors, both to themselves and to others. It would also be essential to gain and reinforce the understanding that one's agency story evolves and can be constantly updated.

A critical assessment of the current research includes a discussion of the position of the teacher-researcher. The interviews were conducted by the teacher of the course, so the interview situations could, in the eyes of the learners, be viewed as mutual reflection and still a part of the course, with rather fixed roles for teacher and student. This view might affect learner descriptions, with learners describing experiences they deem appropriate for that situation (see, e.g., Duff, 2012). For example, many operational agency descriptions seemed to fit a scripted situation in which students report on their learning to the teacher of the course (see Aro, 2015a, pp. 38–41, on learners voicing themselves as "pupils" or "English learners in the classroom" in interviews and, later, as English "users"). In fact, Aro (2015b, p. 51) noted the "double context" as the learners were, at the same time, authoring their agency in the language learning context they referred to as well as in the context of the interview itself. This contributes to the way learners manifest their agency. In this research, the interview could be the first time after the course when the learners were able to verbally author their agency. In that sense, it would not only be reporting on their experiences but retrospectively creating new meanings for past experiences in a new context. This could also be seen in a positive light: without the

interviews, this type of analysis (on the part of the learners) and authoring their agency might not have happened. Perhaps the reflection and authoring one's agency sparked by the interview questions (see Murphey & Carpenter, 2008) allowed turning the ended agency experiences into part of a longer learning path and identity work. Even after that, a learner's agency story is subject to change, and voicing one's changed potential could change the agency story the learner tells.

Questions about the learners' experiences could thus be incorporated into the course design to spark reflection. However, it would be important to challenge the assumed "good" answers and encourage learners to engage in cross-contextual thinking. That could aid learners to author themselves and rewrite their past histories (time-place, past-future), as suggested by Dufva and Aro (2014). This type of reflection could be incorporated into higher education language studies. For example, learners could describe how they view their abilities and expertise at the end of language courses. They could then return and edit that profile later, once they have a wider perspective on their own learning. This approach might also support the notion that even if students only take one or two language courses, these courses could still offer meaningful experiences that carry far into the future, a compulsory but meaningful step on their life-long learning path. By developing the design of higher education language education as a whole, and the design of individual courses as a part of that larger entity, these challenges might be addressed. As DBR allows dialogue between research-driven development work and teachers' day-to-day work, research projects by individual teachers can contribute to the development of higher education language teaching.

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