Language Narratives from Adult Upper Secondary Education:
Interrelating agency, autonomy and identity in foreign language learning

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Foreign language (FL) learning is increasingly examined in terms of the language learning person's agency, autonomy and identity. What agency refers to in FL learning and how it relates to autonomy and identity nevertheless remains unclear. As theoretical discussions about the interconnections are ambiguous, more empirical evidence is needed. The present article addresses this need, contributing to a fuller understanding of the three notions in FL education. The article explores one student's FL learning in a general upper secondary school for adults (GUSSA), analysing her language narratives, which refer to her storied, FL related experiences. The findings suggest that agency can be conceptualised in terms of agentic behaviour, personal disposition, contextually situated relationship and process. Agency refers to a contextually negotiated, socially motivated, dynamic process embedded in interplay between the prevailing individual-cognitive, social-interactive and socio-political forces. It manifests itself differently in different temporal-relational contexts of action. Two forms of agency involved in FL learning are identified in the analysis: learner agency and agency beyond language learning purposes. Together, they contribute to understanding agency as the actualised manifestation of autonomy and the mediating force between autonomy, identity and context in the process of FL learning. The article ends by discussing the implications of the findings in respect to FL teaching and suggesting pedagogy for autonomy as a plausible approach to foster agency in institutional FL education.

Keywords: adult education, agency, autonomy, foreign language learning, identity, language narrative

1 Introduction

The past decades have witnessed a worldwide scholarly interest in foreign language (FL) learning in terms of the language learners' autonomy and identity (among others, see Benson 2006, 2011; Block 2007; Kjisik, Voller, Aoki & Nakata 2009; Norton 1997, 2000; O'Rourke & Carson 2010; Palfreyman & Smith 2003).

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Not until recently has this research been complemented by a third component, agency, which has quickly established itself as a key notion in language education theories (Gao 2010; Hunter & Cooke 2007; Mercer 2011). As a hypothetical construct, the notion is nevertheless complex and difficult to conceptualise conclusively, despite the fact it is frequently recognised as a fundamental characteristic of being human (Ahearn 2001; Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain 1998; Hull & Katz 2006). Indeed, how agency is defined and what significance it is assigned have been the subjects of theoretical and philosophical debates (Biesta & Tedder 2006; Mercer 2011). It also remains far from self-evident what agency refers to in FL learning (Murray 2011).

Despite ambiguities, scholars within applied linguistics, language education, second language acquisition (SLA) and sociocultural theory have made implicit claims that agency is linked to autonomy and identity (see Benson 2006; Block 2007; van Lier 2007; Vitanova 2004) although not much empirical evidence to ground this theoretical assumption has surfaced thus far (among the few attempts, see Huang 2011; Gao & Zhang 2011; Toohey & Norton 2003; Yamaguchi 2011; van Lier 2008). According to Murray (2011), agency in language learning continues to be a source of confusion, as research has suggested that interconnections are complex and provide plenty of topics for investigation. This is hardly surprising since the three notions arise from different – though "quite compatible" (van Lier 2010: x) – traditions of scholarship and have thus often been viewed within different theoretical frameworks. This does not diminish the importance of examining their connections, however. For example Benson (2006) welcomes more interaction between the different concepts of language education theory as well as empirically-grounded examinations regarding the links between constructs such as autonomy, agency and identity.

This article takes the abovementioned concerns seriously and addresses the following questions: 1) How can agency be understood in adult FL education? 2) How does agency relate to autonomy and identity? The article contributes towards a situated understanding of adult FL students' agency in a general upper secondary school for adults (GUSSA), which is a Finnish adult education institute providing formal general education for adults of all ages (for a detailed discussion, see Siivonen 2010). The article first examines the notion of agency and its relationship to identity and autonomy in language learning. After introducing the study, an adult student's English learning is analysed by identifying significant aspects in her learning process. Based on the findings, her FL learning is conceptualised through the notion of agency. In the end, conclusions are drawn regarding agency in language learning and its connections to identity and autonomy in addition to briefly discussing implications to pedagogy.

2 Agency in language learning

Within sociology, agency is often opposed to social structures, which are seen to exist in a state of tension with the desires of individual agents (Giddens 1984; also Biesta & Tedder 2006). Treated like this, agency easily becomes a synonym

for action itself. Indeed, agentic language learners are often recognised as active participants in the construction of their own learning (Allwright & Hanks 2009). However, being able to control one's learning meaningfully also requires psychological dispositions. For example, Bown (2009), investigating language learning in a self-instructional program, points out that effective self-regulation depends on the learners' internal sense of agency whereas van Lier (2008) contemplates agency in relation to initiative, volition, intrinsic motivation and autonomy. Furthermore, Huang (2011) has viewed agency as the self-conscious, reflexive actions arising from deliberation and choice, thus echoing the ideas of many theorists working within SLA and applied linguistics.

According to van Lier (2008), agency is a social event shaped by historical and cultural trajectories and exercised by individuals, groups and communities. This view is inherent in Ahearn's (2001: 112) frequently cited definition for the notion as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act", and also reflected by Hunter and Cooke's (2007: 75) discussion about agency as "the ability to act with initiative and effect in a socially constructed world". Despite their provisional nature, both definitions capture the multicomponential nature of the term: in addition to involving an individual (physical, cognitive, affective and/or motivational) action potential, agency is situated and mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors. The different facets have also been recognised by Mercer (2012) who contemplates the notion in terms of the language learner's sense of agency and actual learning behaviour that are situated in a particular contextual framework. Seen like this, agency is not so much a property or a competence of the individual as a complex, dynamic relationship between the individual and their diverse contexts of action which both facilitate and constrain their sense of agency as well as their agentic behaviour.

Inherent in this view is the idea of people acting by means of rather than in an environment. Language learners are considered collaborating social agents who construct the terms and conditions of their learning in whatever communities of practice they engage (Kalaja, Alanen, Palviainen & Dufva 2011; Lantolf & Pavlenko 2001; van Lier 2007). They seize affordances – i.e. use the available mediating tools and resources provided by the context – more or less actively and intentionally to reach goals they have set for themselves. Elaborating on Gibson (1986), van Lier (2004, 2007) has adopted the idea of affordance to refer to a property of the environment that allow, afford, opportunities for participants to act and engage with the environment. Affordances are action potentials that emerge in interaction with the physical and social world. What becomes a real possibility depends on the participants' perceptions, behaviours and goals. Learning to perceive these affordances thus becomes a crucial prerequisite for language learning.

Finally, it is important to understand agency as a process. People are not only able to direct their lives but also influence the conditions that shape the contexts for their action "in a relationship of ongoing reciprocal causality in which the emphasis is on the complex dynamic interaction between the two elements" (Mercer 2011: 428). For example, Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 148) view agency as a "relationship that is constantly co-constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with the society at large" whereas Biesta and Tedder (2006) have suggested that it could be justified to consider agency a process in which the capacity to act can be achieved through a dialogic engagement with

others and the world. A similar take has been adopted by Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 970, 973) who conceptualise agency as

> the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which […] both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. […] Agency entails actual interactions with its contexts, in something like an ongoing conversation; in this sense, it is "filled with dialogic overtones," as a sort of "link in the chain of speech communication" (Bakhtin 1986, pp. 92, 91). Following Mead and Joas, we highlight the importance of intersubjectivity, social interaction, and communication as critical components of agentic processes: agency is always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action.

I conceptualise agency in language learning in terms of the four dimensions discussed in this chapter. For me, agency is a question of the language learning person's agentic behaviour, personal disposition, contextually situated relationship and process.

3 Theorising interconnections between identity, autonomy and agency

FL learning refers to a holistic, socially and culturally situated process entailing identity struggle – a construction, creation, development or modification of FL identity (Kaikkonen 2012; van Lier 2010). Echoing Benson and his colleagues (2012), FL identity is provisionally defined here as any aspect of a person's identity that is connected to their knowledge and use of a foreign language. Following Ricœur (1988, 1991b, 1992), identity is considered a narrative, hermeneutic and multi-layered process of making sense of oneself over time and space in relation to the world. It is an ongoing, experiential project involving questions such as Who am I as a FL learner and user? Where do I belong? Where do I come from? Where am I going? Adopting a poststructuralist and social constructionist view, FL identity is also seen as dynamic, interactive, discursively constructed and contextually situated (Block 2007; de Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg 2006).

   When it comes to understanding the relationship between identity and agency, Vitanova (2004: 152) has made an important claim regarding the notions, pointing out that "the subject can move between discourses; reflect how they position on him or her; and can negotiate, modify, or even resist them in the process of experiencing one's subjectivity". This statement draws implicit connections between agency and identity, implying that agency plays a significant role in constructing one's identity. A similar argument has also been made by Lave and Wenger (1991; also Wenger 1998) who have famously connected identity formation with increasing participation in communities of practice. On the other hand, Holland and his colleagues (1998: 40) have theorised the interconnections as follows, suggesting – in contrast to Vitanova and Lave and Wenger – that identity development is an essential precondition for agency:

> Persons develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds, and these senses of themselves, these identities […] permit these persons […] at least a modicum of agency or control over their own behavior.

In FL context, van Lier (2007) has connected agency and identity through the notion of voice, which in the Bakhtinian sense refers to infusing one's words with one's thoughts, feelings and identity (Bakhtin 1981). According to van Lier (ibid.), voice is the core of identity and implies agency. Van Lier's discussion is not the only one pointing out similarities between the two notions, however. Comparing Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualisation of agency with the poststructuralist and Ricœurian views on identity (Block 2007; Ricœur 1988, 1991b, 1992), one can notice their similar starting point, both involving dialogic overtones and emphasising intersubjectivity, interaction and communication as their components. Clearly then, agency and identity are interrelated although the nature of this relationship remains ambivalent and ambiguous.

Another underexplored relationship exists between agency and autonomy. The mainstream learner autonomy tradition has long viewed autonomy in individual-cognitive terms, emphasising language learners' capacities and competences to regulate and direct their learning (e.g. Benson 2006, 2011; Kohonen 2009; Rebenius 2007). If agency is seen as a sense of agency combined with agentic behaviour, it is difficult to give a precise delineation of the differences between the two notions. Indeed, van Lier (2010) has regarded them as synonymous. Elsewhere, Hunter and Cooke (2007) have criticised learner autonomy for its predominant focus on the independence of the individual as opposed to recognising the social matrix of language learning involving complex dependencies and interdependencies. As a solution, the writers offer the notion of agency to broaden and deepen the autonomy discourse by engagement in the social world. In many respects, Hunter and Cooke (ibid.: 76) see agency as the sociocultural equivalent for autonomy, a cultivated and extended version of the notion: "Agency offers potential for action that is rooted time, history, space and culture […] opening up dimensions that might complement but go beyond the concept of autonomy." A somewhat similar approach to autonomy and agency has also been adopted by Toohey and Norton (2003) who view agency as a kind of socially oriented autonomy.

In recent years, the mainstream learner autonomy discourse has also expanded its dimensions towards the social-interactive and the socio-political, adding contextually anchored, process-oriented, dialogic, dynamic and critical properties to the concept (Aviram & Yonah 2004; Benson 2006; Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira 2007; Murray, Gao & Lamb 2011; Oxford 2003; Pennycook 1997; Zembylas & Lamb 2008). As a result, autonomy in language learning is increasingly linked to ideas of empowerment, (inter)personal transformation and authenticity as a member of complex network of communities. This is how I see autonomy in language education – it is a particular form of personal autonomy that involves language learning and use. Again, autonomy and agency come close to each other. For example, Menezes (2011: 63) has suggested that

autonomy is a socio-cognitive system nested in the SLA system. It involves not only the individual's mental states and processes, but also political, social and economic dimensions. It is not a state, but a non-linear process, which undergoes periods of instability, variability and adaptability. It is an essential element in SLA because it triggers the learning process through learners' agency and leads the system beyond the classroom.

In her comment, Menezes portrays autonomy as a required precondition for agentic behaviour. Agency, on the other hand, seems to operate on a more practical level, re-presenting a kind of actualisation of autonomy. This interpretation still differs from that of Benson's (2006: 30) who has proposed that "agency can perhaps be viewed as a point of origin for the development of autonomy, while identity might be viewed as one of its more important outcomes." Contemplating both autonomy and identity as processes fuelled by agency, this proposal has also been supported by empirical proof recently (see Huang 2011; Yamaguchi 2011). As Benson's suggestion is one of the few to incorporate all three concepts, it will be adopted as a starting point in this article. Even though these brief comparisons by no means provide an exhaustive discussion of the diversity of the differing views, they clearly foreshadow the need for explorations of agency and its relationship to autonomy and identity in FL education.

4 The study: Investigating language narratives

This article relates to my longitudinal narrative inquiry into adult FL learners' identity and autonomy, contributing to the increasingly popular tradition of narrative research into language learning and teaching (among others, see Barkhuizen 2011; Barkhuizen 2013; Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott & Brown 2012; Benson & Nunan 2004; Block 2008; Huhtala & Lehti-Eklund 2012; Jaatinen 2007; Johnson & Golombek 2002; Kalaja, Menezes & Barcelos 2008; Karlsson 2008; Pavlenko 2007; Yamaguchi 2011). Although a number of narrative studies focus on issues related to agency, autonomy and identity and thus also have relevance for this article, only a few address more than one of the notions in their research agenda.

   As one of the few, Huang (2011) draws on learner autobiographies, life history interviews and participant observation to study student autonomy in an institutional context in China. Also paying attention to agency and identity, he provides evidence that support Benson's (2006) claims regarding the links between the notions. Furthermore, Yamaguchi (2011) investigates the narratives of a Japanese student staff member who uses English in her work at a self-access centre. Exploring the student's agency and identity by drawing on the theory of narrative positioning, Yamaguchi suggests that gaining voice through agency in the target language (TL) community enables the student to become more autonomous.

   When it comes to other studies of significance with regard to this article, Block (2008; also Block 2007) provides interesting viewpoints to consider. Analysing the narrative interview data of an adult language learner to study learner identity in an EFL classroom, he argues that identity work in the

classroom is very different to what goes on in naturalistic contexts and the prospects for developing English-mediated SL/FL identities are therefore minimal. In contrast, Huhtala and Lehti-Eklund (2012) also investigate emerging L2 identities in their study when thematically comparing narratives written in the TL by first and third semester university students of Swedish. Their findings show how the university context and the community of fellow students, teachers and TL users may promote the FL learners' L2 identity development.

4.1 Data and method

One of my assumptions is that narrativity plays a fundamental role in constructing human lives and identities (Bruner 1987, 1991; Ricœur 1991a; Taylor 1989). Following Ricœur, I believe we are entangled in stories, narrating being a secondary process grafted onto this entanglement. Through stories we organise and give meaning to our experience and engage in self-construction, the narrative interpretation of the world representing an imperfect, time-dependent "practical wisdom" caught in tradition (Polkinghorne 2007; Squire 2008). When representing and reconstituting what it is like to undergo the events, narratives involve the social, cultural and historical context in which the experiences are formed (cf. Herman 2009).

In this study, FL learning (agency, autonomy and identity included) is studied through FL students' narratives. These narratives are viewed as stories of personal experience (Denzin 1989; Squire 2008) and investigated by examining the meanings given to experiences of learning and using the TL over time and space. As the narratives are languaged descriptions of FL related experiences acquired in contact with the TL both in and beyond the classroom, they will be called language narratives. The language narratives will be examined as fragmentary, dynamic, dialogically constructed and socio-culturally rooted stories, through which their authors attribute meaning to their life-worlds and perform themselves (see Barkhuizen 2011; Pavlenko 2007). They include practical sense-making of their authors' FL related life events and (re)constitute these lives and their authors' FL identities from multiple perspectives, thus allowing access to the adult FL learners' subjective realities (see Pavlenko & Lantolf 2000).

As Pavlenko (2007) points out, the range of materials that can be analysed for narrative research is wide, including oral, written and visual data. My data consists of language narratives generated by the FL students as part of their EFL studies in the GUSSA. The research participants form a heterogeneous group of 34 adults who attended my English courses regularly between spring 2009 and autumn 2012. The data was collected from their learning journals, self-reflective writing tasks and audio-recorded teacher-student counselling sessions. The teaching journal was also included as data as it offered valuable insights into the students' FL learning from the teacher's viewpoint.

This article focuses on Suvi, a female English student in her mid-twenties. My analysis is based on her journal entries (ca 50 computer-written A4 pages) from 10 EFL courses and her reflective writing tasks (ca 7 computer-written A4 pages) that she wrote at the end of seven courses as part of the course exam. The journal entries touch upon a range of topics, covering her thoughts, beliefs, emotions and attitudes regarding her English learning and use at different times

and places. They were written with little guidance whereas the writing tasks were based on particular topics which assumed the students to write, for example, about their conceptions of themselves, their current skills and the meanings they give to studying and learning EFL. In the data, Suvi constantly reconstructed her FL identity by reflecting on her subject positions as a FL learner and user, working on her attitudes to English and defining her relations to various FL related groups and communities.

To guarantee the validity of the autobiographical data (see Polkinghorne 2007; also Pavlenko 2007), I followed four principles in data collection: 1. The participants had the possibility to choose if they wanted to use English or their native language, in which they usually have access to more figurative expressions. 2. The participants produced the data regularly in their English courses during more than two school years, which allowed them time to deepen their reflective gaze. 3. As the participants wrote most of their texts at home without much guidance and encountered me as their teacher in every English course they took – thus increasing their confidence and trust in me – I was able to reduce my influence on the texts and the students' possible resistance to reveal their authentic selves in them. 4. If and when needed, I could return to the participants to gain clarification for their written entries for example in the counselling sessions.

4.2 Narrative analysis

Narrative research is careful in offering any single account of how to analyse the data; a great number possible means exist instead. Elaborating on some of the earlier models (see Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber 1998), Pavlenko (2007; also Barkhuizen 2011) has suggested a classification of the analytical approaches. According to her, the analysis of narrative data can rely on cognitive, textual and discursive approaches which allude to the tensions between analysing the content of narratives, their rhetorical and structural form and the social contexts of their production. A basic approach to conduct analysis is to describe the contents thematically, and from this develop and test explaining theories, paying attention to the sequencing, progression, transformation and resolution of the themes (Squire 2008). Suvi's language narratives were subjected to such holistic analysis of the narrative content (Lieblich et al. 1998). The analysis was based on the idea to read the narrative as a whole, identify themes or foci of content, follow them from beginning to end and submit them to descriptive treatment. This approach was chosen because it allowed the data to be read systematically as temporally-structured, cognitive evidence of Suvi's developing language learning process. The data was analysed like this in terms of what it revealed about Suvi's relationship to English at different times and places both in and beyond the institutional context.

To form a general impression of Suvi's texts, I began the analysis by carefully reading the data line by line in temporal order with an open mind. I selected those passages for further investigation that were relevant for Suvi's development as a FL learner and user. The second reading focused on searching the data for key themes or storylines. It proved useful to pay attention to frequent references, thick descriptions and Suvi's emotional evaluations and commentaries. In the end, I was able to identify three broad storylines: Suvi's

subject positions and actions in her learning process, the meanings she gave to various contextual factors and her emerging FL identity. The third reading followed how the story evolved through these themes. It turned out the storylines were connected to agency, which then became the key notion in conceptualising Suvi's FL learning. As Suvi generated most of her data in Finnish, the fourth reading consisted of translating the extracts selected for this article into English. When translating, I paid special attention to keeping Suvi's tone of voice as authentic as possible. The original Finnish extracts that my analysis was based on can be found in the appendix.

Analysing the data, I adopted a "middle-course" (Lieblich et al. 1998) approach, i.e. I viewed the language narratives as authentic responses to real life events but I neither treated them as mirrored reflections of the experience nor texts of fiction (see Pavlenko 2007; Polkinghorne 2007). Although the data includes interpreted worldviews, narrative "truths", which hardly reveal themselves directly in what people say or write, they still allow me to look for and interpret the experienced meanings through the process of narrative knowledging (Barkhuizen 2011). However, I cannot transcend my historical and situated positions and circumstances. My knowledge claims are informed by my "prejudiced" embeddedness that prevents me from understanding the narratives purely as their authors intended (Schwandt 2000). What my analysis can provide at best is a well-motivated interpretation seeking to clarify the meanings of Suvi's storied descriptions of her FL learning. Still, I expect the data to include clues that help me propose knowledge claims about agency and its relationship to autonomy and identity.

5 Findings: Analysing Suvi

Suvi studied for the upper secondary school certificate and took the matriculation exam as a young student in the early 2000s. By that time she had already developed a dislike for English, which was due to her negative learning experiences and unfortunate encounters with English speakers abroad. In the years to come, Suvi showed an increasing anxiety towards the language, resulting in fear of English speaking people, and avoidance of English use. At the beginning of her GUSSA studies, Suvi had shut English away from her life in many ways. She felt both discouraged and intimidated by English and English speakers. The following two extracts depict how she felt she lacked a voice and capacity to act altogether. The codes at the end of each extract indicate the temporal order of the passages so that EN0 refers to the preparatory English course at the beginning of GUSSA studies, EN1 to the first compulsory course, etc.

1. The usual psychological snowball effect characterises my relationship to English, as small problems have grown bigger ones. At first I was a bit nervous, after a couple of bad experiences I was more nervous, and then I avoided the subject of my fear and let the problem grow unnoticed. The snowball kept on growing until one day it turned into a nightmarish, abominable snowman that follows me everywhere and does its best to restrict my life. (EN0)

2. I decided to study English to get rid of the suffocating feeling of anxiety that I have whenever I have to use the language. My aim's to get over my traumas so that I'd feel like getting along in my life. Communication [in English] has turned into a huge mental threshold for me. (EN0)

Suvi's experiences of rejection as an English user had made her exclude herself from the imagined English-speaking community. The traumatic experiences of her past have had had a huge disempowering effect on her. Her accounts about her inability to get her voice heard "with initiative and effect in a socially constructed world" (Hunter & Cooke 2007: 75) provide evidence of her fragile FL identity in English, with many negative connotations. Similar observations about voice and identity have been made by Miller (2003) who argues for FL learners' need to become audible in the TL to develop a strong social identity in TL speaking communities. After years of frustration, however, Suvi had developed an image of herself with less complicated relationship to English. Starting her studies in the GUSSA signified her first aspirations to that direction.

It was easier for Suvi to participate and use English in than beyond the classroom. As the learning environment felt safe, she assumed active, responsible roles as a FL learner, without even shunning the more daunting learning tasks, such as speaking in English in front of others, which exposed her to her fears of TL use. Gradually Suvi recognised herself as the agent of her own learning, which according to Bown (2009) is essential in effective self-regulation. However, the role of other students was not insignificant: self-regulation and dependency on others were not mutually exclusive ideas for Suvi. On the contrary, the presence of significant others seemed to be one of the driving forces in her learning. The language classroom with its mixed group of people often encouraged Suvi to seize the emerging affordances. These findings closely relate to the social-interactive and communitarian dimensions of autonomy, emphasised by the current learner autonomy discourse (see Jiménez Raya et al. 2007; Kohonen 2010; Ushioda 2006).

3. On Monday I was so nervous about having the speech. I can hardly remember anything about it, and I've tried to guess later, what I may have said and if I roughly managed to say what I planned to. I feel I didn't benefit much from giving the speech because it made me anxious for a month and the result was no more than shaking hands and black holes in my mind. Weird. But it was an experience. (The peer assessments I got were quite encouraging, though.) (EN1)

4. The study group is a peer support group that advances my learning and raises my motivation; I wouldn't study by myself. It's important to share opinions and experiences. (EN0)

From early on, Suvi felt the teaching provided her with meaningful and motivating learning opportunities. She often pointed out how wonderful it felt to learn to make mistakes again. She was encouraged by her widening repertoire of learning strategies, possibilities to contemplate her learning and negotiate

about her learning tasks as well as her feeling of being valued by the teacher. This emphasises the significance of engaging in a dialogue with adult learners, encountering them as equal, authentic human beings and treating them as "key developing practitioners" of their learning (Allwright & Hanks 2009). This combined with a flexible learning environment which adapted to Suvi's individual needs played an essential role in her development.

5. I could browse through my writing assignments from the previous courses, looking for mistakes typical of me and make a compilation of them as my Language Portfolio assignment. Then I could observe if I've learnt anything from my mistakes at the end of the course. (EN3)

6. Even though the reflections and journals bite a big piece of my time/energy, I find them useful ways to observe things, they help me understand, what it is that I'm trying to do here, how and why. (EN1)

7. The teacher's email messages have been supportive; they've given me a nice kick when doing the assignments at home. For me, the teacher's messages, his friendliness and calmness have been especially significant because they remind me of the teacher's humanity. (EN2)

Gradually Suvi started to perceive more opportunities to learn and use English beyond course and school settings. She succeeded in combining the settings into a learning context, in which the different environments had mutually supportive roles. Suvi's FL learning became versatile and flexible, including lifewide and lifedeep dimensions, which are concepts that Karlsson and Kjisik (2011) use to broaden the process of FL learning beyond the traditional classroom and the acquisition of linguistic competence.

8. I was wondering of a possibility to read a book [in English] (while I was copying a randomly selected page of Twilight [for my portfolio assignment]). It would probably be useful to read a book if only I could find one which would be easy and interesting. (EN4)

9. The homework and the lessons provide me with tightly-packed portions of knowledge, the digesting and soaking of which is good for learning but requires intensive concentration and mechanical work. I can also learn in a more relaxed and easier manner for example by listening to music, browsing through magazines, watching movies and striking up conversations in English [with my spouse at home]. It counterbalances [my] cramming and provides useful repetition when I can find what I just studied in other places besides the course book. (EN2)

Language learning in the GUSSA was not an easy process for Suvi, however. Haunted by reflections, memories and feelings dating back to her past experiences, she struggled with her language learning from lesson to lesson, from task to task. The following passages highlight the situational, dynamic and affective aspects of her learning process and preparedness to use English. In the extracts, Suvi's sense of agency varies remarkably both temporally and spatially.

10. "Improvising" takes my breath away and turns off my brain. I envy my fellow students' courage to answer questions there aren't ready-written answers to on paper. When I can't do it, I feel like giving up. On Monday it was too overwhelming to go to the lesson and I stayed on the couch waiting to get to work. Studying is voluntary for me, still, being absent felt strange. I was disappointed with myself, not having the energy to go. (EN0)

11. I was doing the mind map task pretty ok with my pair until the teacher said we would do it again in public. As a result I started to stutter helplessly when practising it with my pair. My reaction irritates and annoys me very much. (EN2)

Suvi efforts paid off in the end. As she gradually began to believe in her chances of improving, she learnt to leave the haunting experiences behind her, take English less seriously and value herself as a FL learner, thus identifying stronger with the language learner community. She became relaxed and began to see herself in a positive light as a TL user with courage and self-confidence to use the language. These signs of Suvi's emerging sense of agency are accompanied by a reconstruction of her FL identity.

12. My development as an English user has increased my confidence in myself, it has decreased the feeling of being an outsider in situations where I used to be confused when I was unable to understand a thing and too embarrassed to say it. (EN6)

13. I can express myself orally and in writing when it comes to the course themes and topics. I'm usually stronger in writing since I don't need to react so quickly then. The oral presentation [during the course] was a sort of test for me, I didn't prepare for it well as I could've done (I wanted to take the risk) and it turned out to be an important [learning] experience. (EN5)

14. In addition to language skills, I've learnt many things about myself as a student and an individual, I've learnt to move beyond my comfort zone and started to appreciate myself a bit more the way I am. The English courses have had a delightfully sophisticating effect on me, I've learnt many cultural things I didn't know before, and the thought-provoking topics have made studying especially meaningful […] Due to studying English, I have gained a wider selection of possibilities to acquire experiences and knowledge. Besides entertaining myself and satisfying my hunger for knowledge I can also do my share by making more responsible choices. (EN7)

As a result of her positive learning experiences, Suvi tentatively assumed more active FL related roles in her life. These roles were first confined to the safe classroom and domestic environments, but later on they expanded towards various multicultural spheres of her life. Based on my observations, Suvi's

development in the institutional FL contexts also contributed positively to her behaviour and actions in others.

15. When I started studying English, I didn't dare to go to the kiosk of the Chinese (where they spoke Finnish!). Now I can easily go there, I've even called there. My next challenge of development is to have the courage to talk to a foreigner in English again. (EN6)

16. We went on a cruise to Stockholm during the holiday. The last time there was before I (re)started my English studies. Now I had much more self-confidence, I was brave enough to exchange money at the museum and order food [in English], for example, and it didn't feel much of an effort. I could call it a significant, positive experience for me. (EN7)

Time will tell whether Suvi's experiences of FL learning in the GUSSA will have any permanent impact on her life. A slow but steady development of Suvi's agency and identity can nevertheless be identified in the data. This change not only seems to contribute to her social empowerment but also greater personal autonomy in life in general (cf. Benson's (2008, 2009) and Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira's (2007) discussions about autonomy in language education).

6 Discussion: Interrelating autonomy, identity and forms of agency

In the light of my analysis, Suvi's development can be conceptualised through the notion of agency. Her agency can be seen to develop temporally in and beyond the language classroom in diverse FL contexts that promote and/or constrain her possibilities for meaningful interaction with other people as she also learns to perceive and contribute to these affordances herself (cf. Emirbayer & Mische 1998). This process is enacted by socially and culturally mediated means, i.e. other people and semiotic and material tools (cf. Lantolf & Thorne 2006). Through negotiation, Suvi succeeds in achieving a balanced relationship between her temporal-relational contexts of action that support and motivate her language learning.

Hunter and Cooke (2007) have pointed out that agency in language learning is influenced by the relevant communities and languages, pedagogical frameworks, existing belief systems as well as the historical and emergent rules and divisions of labour that structure the ongoing agency. This is true in Suvi's case as well; she develops and exercises her agency as a result of complex interplay between the prevailing socio-political, social-interactive and individual-cognitive forces. Such an ecological approach views learners as "holistic beings nested within the bigger systems of their personal histories and the entirety of their lives and multiple contexts" (Mercer 2011: 435). Adopting this type of whole-person approach may be especially important in adult education like the GUSSA where the students have very different backgrounds, skills, desires, goals, learning opportunities and belief systems. Contributing to versatile contextual affordances may therefore become crucial for successful pedagogy.

My findings contribute to a view of agency as a contextually negotiated, socially motivated, dynamic process that includes psychological (affective, reflective, self-regulatory) dimensions and manifests itself as the FL learner's authentic and conscious behaviour. The findings resonate with those of Mercer's (2011), who has treated agency in ecological terms as a dynamic, complex system, viewing the notion as a latent potential to engage in self-directed behaviour, the outcome of which depends on the person's abilities, sense of agency and the actual and perceived affordances of the settings. Thus, my findings provide empirical evidence for conceptualising agency in terms of the language learning person's agentic behaviour, personal disposition, contextually situated relationship and process (see chapter 2; also Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Hunter & Cooke 2007; van Lier 2008).

According to van Lier (2008; also Ahearn 2001), agency is not a question of being active instead of passive; agency manifests itself in different ways and it might be useful to pay more attention to different degrees and forms of agency. In the data, Suvi perceived significant others (her spouse, her classmates and the teacher) and her possibilities to contemplate and influence her learning as affordances that increased her commitment to studying. As a result, she developed a form of agency situated specifically in institutional FL contexts. For me, this is what Hunter and Cooke (2007) refer to when discussing *learner agency*: learner agency refers to the active, reflective promotion of one's language learning, using the TL to increase awareness about it, construct meaning in it and make connections between the language, text and society.

However, we also need to identify another form of agency related to Suvi's FL learning. She often pointed out it was easier for her to exercise agency in the language learner community than beyond it. She drew a distinction between language learners and users – the latter she associated with people who knew the language well and used it for meaningful communication and behaviour in multicultural encounters without intentional learning purposes. I will provisionally refer to this form of agency as *agency beyond language learning purposes* (ABL). Whereas learner agency entails the person's premeditated TL use both in and beyond school settings to learn the language, the latter need not embrace such tendency but merely involves a person's meaningful interactions with the world, using the TL. Suvi did not show development in her ABL until the end of her two-year English studies when her agency slowly expanded beyond the learning community. Acknowledging the existence of different forms of agency that manifest themselves at different stages of the learning process can also help bring sense to the differing interpretations of the relationship between agency and identity (see chapter 3).

My analysis indicates that Suvi's agency developed alongside with her emerging FL identity in a mutually supportive process. According to Holec (2009), self-direction in language learning entails accepting and adapting to new social roles as the students are expected to develop as self-regulating social agents in their learning processes. Becoming a fully functioning member of the language learning community entails identity development (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). In her learning process, Suvi first negotiated her subject positions in and identified as member of the classroom English learner community, thus initiating the construction of her FL identity (cf. Taylor 1989). As her belonging to this community intensified, she began to identify with the imagined community of English users she felt she was denied access to when

she was younger. Initiated by the development of learner agency, this process also shaped Suvi's image of herself in relation to English in a broader level, as her FL identity expanded – along with her developing ABL – from the institutional FL context towards other multicultural spheres of her life. Eventually, Suvi's strengthening voice (agency and identity combined; see van Lier 2007) not only enabled her to participate more meaningfully and effectively in the classroom but also beyond it. Supporting Huhtala and Lehti-Eklund's (2012) and contradicting Block's (2007, 2008) arguments to some degree, my findings indicate that a development of FL identity may possible in institutional FL contexts.

As for agency and autonomy, interesting parallels can be found between the two forms of agency and the different views on autonomy. Learner autonomy has classically been defined as the learner's "ability to take responsibility for one's own learning" (Holec 1981: 2) or as a "capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (Little 1991: 4). Comparing learner agency with learner autonomy, it is tempting to see the former as a concrete, "real-life" manifestation of the latter, as if learner autonomy was channelled, mediated or actualised through learner agency (Also cf. Toohey and Norton's (2003) idea about learner autonomy as agency in sociocultural settings.). ABL, on the other hand, seems to be more compatible with the broader approaches to autonomy (see Benson 2006; Oxford 2003; Zembylas & Lamb 2008; also chapter 3). For example, Jiménez Raya and his colleagues (2007: 1) have defined autonomy as a "competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, with a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation". I am suggesting that ABL can be seen as a manifestation of these broader approaches to autonomy in life (cf. Benson 2008, 2009). All in all, interpreting agency as actualised autonomy would also make sense with regard to Menezes's (2011: 63; see chapter 3) suggestion about the relationship between the two terms.

To sum up my argument, agency, autonomy and identity are, indeed, interrelated in FL learning, which can be seen as a process involving different forms of agency that closely connect to autonomy, entail a reconstruction of identity and – hopefully – extend the realm of the three notions beyond language learning contexts. A non-linear relationship can be identified between agency, autonomy and identity, all of which play essential roles throughout the learning process. In Suvi's case, autonomy and identity connect to one other through a reciprocal relationship while agency, through which the process connects to the surrounding sociocultural context, becomes the mediating force between the two components manifesting themselves in and through this agency. The relationships can be indicated diagrammatically as in Figure 1. My proposal is that language learning takes place in this dynamic, social-interactive and socio-political process, in which agency is negotiated anew in interaction with each context.
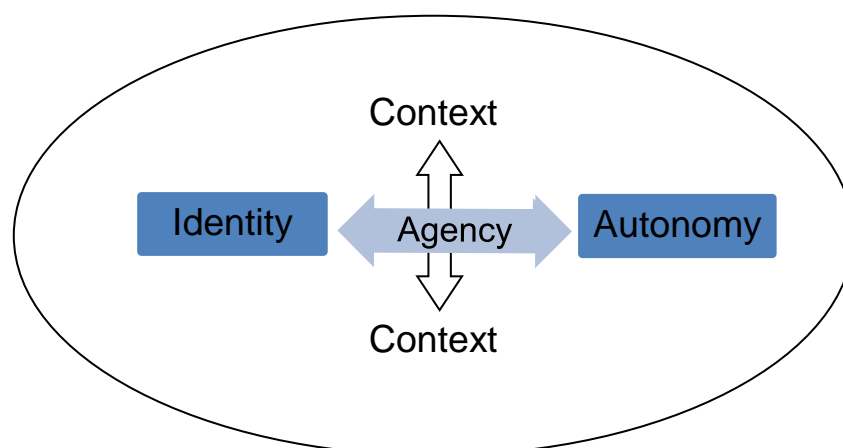
Figure 1. The reciprocal relationships among agency, autonomy, context and identity in the process of (foreign) language learning

If the language learning context favours learner agency, FL students can negotiate their subject positions in and identify themselves more easily as members of the language learning community, thus initiating the construction of their FL identities and development of learner autonomy. This contributes to their agency beyond language learning purposes, sense of cultural and social belonging and personal autonomy in life. To some degree, then, my study confirms Benson's (2006: 30) theoretical suggestion about the relationship between the three notions, providing relatively similar empirical evidence to Huang's (2011) and Yamaguchi's (2011) case studies. Based on my findings, however, I would slightly revise Benson's (2006: 30) proposal as follows: learner agency as a form of committed intentional engagement in one's language learning – negotiated in interaction with each learning context – can be viewed as a point of origin for the development of learner autonomy and identity that contribute to achieving agency beyond language learning purposes; this expansion of the scope of agency entails a reconstruction of the language learning person's FL identity as well as growth towards personal autonomy that manifests itself as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation.

7 Conclusion: Pedagogy for autonomy as agency-oriented foreign language teaching

My aim has been twofold, to investigate how agency can be understood in adult FL education and how the notion relates to autonomy and identity. Agency appears as a dynamic, contextually negotiated process between the social agent and the sociocultural context (see Emirbayer & Mische 1998). Although the notion is essential in being human (see Biesta & Tedder 2006; Mercer 2011), it remains a latent potential if it cannot be achieved through interplay between the individual-cognitive, social-interactive and socio-political forces that promote, constrain and/or prevent it. Despite a common core (including the person's will and skill to interact with initiative and effect in a socioculturally constructed world; cf. Hunter & Cooke 2007), agency manifests itself differently depending

on the individual and his/her temporal-relational contexts of action. We can talk about situated actualisations of agency (see van Lier 2008). This article contributes to understanding FL learning through fostering two forms of agency in particular: learner agency and agency beyond language learning purposes. It seems useful to differentiate between these actualisations because it increases understanding about how agency, autonomy and identity are connected. The three notions play essential roles throughout the language learning process. They appear to be connected non-linearly so that agency functions as the mediating force that not only connects autonomy and identity to each other but also anchors them contextually.

When it comes to pedagogical implications, three conclusions can be drawn. First, pedagogy cannot ignore the significance of contextual affordances in facilitating FL learning. Recognising the particular challenges and advantages of each learning context is important in adult education institutes like the GUSSA where the students' personal histories and lives may pose serious obstacles to language learning. Another challenge is to encourage the students to find meaningful ways to participate as active language learners and users within the framework of individual choice, pedagogical support and institutional control, as their own ways would most likely motivate them to go on in their efforts in the middle of their busy lives. Third, it seems important to integrate personally meaningful, lifewide and lifedeep elements (see Karlsson & Kjisik 2011) to the process of FL learning, as these elements may also encourage the students to explore the world and themselves authentically as agents of their own lives. This can be fuelled through learning tasks which develop the students' voices in the TL, provide possibilities for reflection and embrace the idea of the classroom as only one possible setting for language learning. This type of pedagogy has much in common with Hunter and Cooke's (2007) suggestion for a profile for language courses.

In the language classroom examined in this article, the abovementioned challenges are addressed by teaching focusing on a) authenticity of TL use, learning process and classroom life, b) responsible participation in the language learner community, c) development of self-regulatory and reflective skills and d) counselling students as developing practitioners in their learning processes. These elements relate to autonomy-oriented FL education in many respects (Benson 2011; Jiménez Raya & Lamb 2008; Jiménez Raya et al. 2007; Kjisik et al. 2009; Kohonen 2010; Little 2007; O'Rourke & Carson 2010). All in all, it seems pedagogy for autonomy can be a plausible approach in fostering agency in FL teaching. As Kohonen (2009: 26) has put it: "[A]utonomous learning and target language use are also a question of encouraging the participants to develop their agency and identity as intercultural language users."

Findings about one unique individual are not easily applicable beyond her own personal history and contexts in time and space. In other words, what works for Suvi, may not work for everyone. My analysis contributes to a situated understanding whose validity beyond this particular context is to be determined by studies to come. Any general conclusions, for example about pedagogy, should therefore be considered with caution. Still, this case study can hopefully increase interaction between the different concepts of language education theory and generate useful ideas and hypotheses to be explored in further research on agency, autonomy and identity.

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Appendix: The original Finnish extracts from the research material

(1) Suhteessani englanninkieleen on aikojen kuluessa tapahtunut tavanomainen psykologinen lumipalloefekti, pikkuongelmat ovat kasvaneet isoiksi. Aluksi vähän jännitti, parin huonon kokemuksen jälkeen jännitti enemmän, sitten välttelin pelon aihetta ja huomaamattani annoin ongelman kasvaa entisestään. Lumipallo kasvoi ja kasvoi, kunnes siitä kuoriutui painajaismainen lumimies, joka seurailee minua kaikkialle ja tekee kaikkensa rajoittaakseni elämääni. (EN0)

(2) Päätin opiskella englantia päästäkseni eroon tukehduttavasta ahdistuksen tunteesta, jonka englanninkieliseen kommunikaatioon liittyvät tilanteet minussa aiheuttavat. Tavoitteeni on päästä traumoistani yli, jotta voisin tuntea pärjääväni elämässä. Kommunikointi [englanniksi] on muodostunut suureksi henkiseksi kynnykseksi minulle. (EN0)

(3) Maanantaina olin hermostunut puheeni pitämisestä. Puheestani en muista juuri mitään, olen jälkeenpäin arvaillut mielessäni, mitähän tulin sanoneeksi ja sanoinkohan suunnilleen kaiken mitä olin suunnitellut. En koe hyötyneeni puheesta paljoakaan, sillä se aiheutti ahdistusta melkein kuukauden ja loppurutistuksesta ei jäänyt kuin tärisevät kädet ja mustia aukkoja mieleeni. Outoa. Mutta kokemus tuokin. (Saamani arvioinnit olivat ihan mukavan kannustavia.) (EN1)

(4) Ryhmä on vertaistukijoukko, joka edistää oppimista ja motivoi, yksin ei tulisi opiskeltua. Mielipiteiden ja kokemusten jakaminen on tärkeää. (EN0)

(5) Voisin kahlata läpi vanhoja kirjoitustehtäviä, etsiä niistä minulle tyypillisiä virheitä ja tehdä niistä koosteen omana Language portfolio -tehtävänäni. Sitten, voisin havainnoida kurssin loppupuolella, olenko oppinut noista virheistä mitään. (EN3)

(6) Vaikka opiskeluajastani/energiastani haukkaa suuren palan reflektiot ja päiväkirjat, koen ne silti hyödyllisinä havaintovälineinä, jotka auttavat ymmärtämään, mitä minä tässä yritän, miten ja miksi. (EN1)

(7) Sähköpostiviestit opettajalta ovat olleet kannustavia ja kivoja, niistä on saanut potkua itsenäisten tehtävien tekemiseen. Itselleni erityisen merkityksellistä opettajan viesteissä, ystävällisyydessä ja tasapainoisuudessa on, että ne muistuttavat opettajan inhimillisyydestä. (EN2)

(8) Mietiskelin mahdollisuuksiani kirjan lukemiseen [englanniksi] (samalla kun kopioin Twilight-kirjan sattumanvaraista kohtaa [kielisalkkutehtävääni]). Olisi varmaan hyödyksi lukea jotakin kirjaa, kunhan löytäisi sopivan helppolukuisen ja mielellään mielenkiintoisen painoksen. (EN4)

(9) Läksyjen ja oppituntien avulla saan tiivistepakattuja perustietoannoksia, joiden sulattelu ja imeytyminen ovat hyväksi oppimiselle, mutta ne vaativat intensiivistä paneutumista ja mekaanista työtä. Oppia voi myös rennommin ja helpommin esimerkiksi kuuntelemalla musiikkia, selailemalla lehtiä, katselemalla elokuvia ja virittelemällä keskusteluja englanniksi [puolisoni kanssa kotona]. Vastapainoa pakertamiselle ja hyödyllistä kertausta on, kun opiskellun asian löytää myös muualta kuin oppikirjasta. (EN2)

(10) "Improvisointi" salpaa hengitykseni ja kääntää aivoni off-asentoon. Kadehdin kanssaopiskelijoideni rohkeutta vastata kysymyksiin, joihin ei ole valmista vastausta paperilla. Kun en osaa, tekee mieli luovuttaa. Maanantain tunnille meneminen osoittautui ylivoimaiseksi ja jäin sohvalle odottamaan töihin menoa. Opiskelu on minulle vapaaehtoista, mutta poissaolo tuntui silti oudolta. Olin pettynyt itseeni, etten jaksanut lähteä. (EN0)

(11) Mind map harjoitus eteni parin kanssa jotenkuten, kunnes opettaja sanoi, että siitä pitäisi vielä julkisestikin kertoa. Sehän vaikutti minuun niin, että parinkin kanssa puhumisen yrittäminen meni aivan onnettomaksi änkyttämiseksi. Reaktioni kovasti ärsyttää ja harmittaa minua. (EN2)

(12) Kehittyminen englannin kielen käyttäjänä on edistänyt luottamusta itseeni, se on myös vähentänyt ulkopuolisuuden tunnetta sellaisissa tilanteissa, joissa ennen olin ymmälläni kun en ymmärtänyt juuri mitään, enkä kehdannut ottaa selvää. (EN6)

(13) Kurssin aihepiireihin liittyen osaan ilmaista itseäni suullisesti ja kirjallisesti. Kirjallisesti olen yleensä vahvemmilla, koska siinä ei tarvitse olla niin nopea reagoimaan. Esitelmä [kurssin aikana] oli minulle vähän sellainen kokeilu, etten niin hyvin siihen valmistautunut kuin olisin voinut (ikään kuin pieni riskin otto) ja se oli tärkeä [oppimis]kokemus. (EN5)

(14) Olen oppinut kielitaidon lisäksi monia asioita itsestäni opiskelijana ja yksilönä, olen oppinut liikkumaan mukavuusalueeni ulkopuolella ja alkanut arvostamaan itseäni vähän enemmän tällaisena kuin olen. Englannin kursseilla on ollut myös ilahduttavan yleissivistävä vaikutus minuun, useita ennen ymmärtämättömiä seikkoja kulttuureista on jäänyt mieleeni ja ajatuksia herättelevät aihesisällöt ovat tehneet opiskelusta erityisen mielekästä. […] Englannin opiskelun myötävaikutuksena olen saanut entistä suuremman valikoiman mahdollisuuksia, joiden kautta voin hankkia kokemuksia ja tietoa. Itseni viihdyttämisen ja tiedonnälkäni tyydyttämisen lisäksi voin samalla kantaa korteni kekoon tekemällä entistä vastuullisempia valintoja. (EN7)

(15) Kun aloitin englannin opiskelun, en uskaltanut mennä (suomea puhuvien!) kiinalaisten kioskille. Nyt uskallan asioida siellä helposti, olen soittanutkin sinne. Seuraava kehityshaasteeni ajatuksissani on, josko sitten uskaltaisin jotain puhua englanniksi jonkun vierasmaalaisen kanssa taas. (EN6)

(16) Kävimme risteilyllä Tukholmassa lomalla. Siellä kävin viimeksi joskus ennen englannin opiskeluni (uudelleen) aloitusta. Nyt oli paljon itsevarmempi olo, uskalsin hienosti mm. vaihtaa rahaa museossa ja tilata ruokaa, eikä se tuntunut mitenkään ponnistukselta. Voisi tätäkin sanoa positiiviseksi kokemukseksi, on sillä minulle merkitystä. (EN7)