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# Effects of authority: voicescapes in children's beliefs about the learning of English

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This paper examines learner beliefs from a dialogical point of view. Drawing on the writings of the Bakhtin circle, it sees beliefs as shared and recycled viewpoints that are multivoiced: they echo the voices of others as well as the voice of the speaker. A longitudinal interview study was conducted among a group of young Finnish learners of English. The analysis of the data focused on the voicework present in the learners' answers: how they, on the one hand, echoed or even repeated the voices of authority, and, on the other hand, brought forward their own insights. The results indicate that the authoritative voices strongly influence how the individual viewpoints are formed and presented and may consequently also influence learner actions.

*Keywords:* learner beliefs, dialogism, voice, language learning

Artikkelissa tarkastellaan oppijoiden käsityksiä dialogisesta näkökulmasta. Dialogisuus perustuu ns. Bahtinin piirin kirjoituksiin, ja sen valossa käsitykset nähdään jaettuina ja kierrätettyinä näkökulmina, jotka ovat moniäänisiä: niissä kaikuvat sekä toisilta haltuunotetut äänet että puhujan oma ääni. Artikkelissa esiteltävässä pitkittäisessä haastattelututkimuksessa tarkasteltiin suomalaisten englannin oppijoiden käsityksiä. Analyysissä keskityttiin oppijoiden vastauksissa kaikuviin ääniin: sekä kaiutettaviin tai toistettaviin autoritäärisiin ääniin että oppijoiden omalla äänellään esittämiin näkemyksiin. Tulokset osoittavat, että autoritääristen äänien edustamat näkökulmat vaikuttavat vahvasti siihen, miten omat näkemykset muodostetaan ja esitetään, ja niillä saattaa näin olla vaikutusta myös oppijoiden toimintaan.

*Avainsanat:* käsitykset, dialogisuus, ääni, kielen oppiminen

## Introduction

Research into learner beliefs began in the field of applied language studies in the early 1980s (e.g. Horwitz 1985, 1987, 1988; Wenden 1986a, 1986b, 1987; Abraham and Vann 1987; Holec 1987), sparked by an interest in how learner characteristics and contributions affected language learning. Over the past few decades, learner beliefs have mainly been looked at from two

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1 very different perspectives. Until fairly recently, beliefs have mainly been  
2 conceptualised from a cognitive psychological viewpoint, where they are seen  
3 as characteristics of the individual, relatively stable, and something learners  
4 have “inside their head” that they can be put into words (e.g. Wenden 1986a,  
5 1998; Horwitz 1987, 1988). When beliefs have been seen as fairly static, mental  
6 schemata possessed by the individual, they have mostly been looked at using  
7 experimental methods and quantitative measures, such as questionnaires.  
8 Radically cognitivist approaches have been justly criticised (see e.g. Sigel 1992;  
9 Barcelos 2003); however, one of the foremost alternatives in learner belief  
10 research has been to turn to exclusively socially-oriented paradigms. Learner  
11 beliefs have been seen for example, from a more discourse analytical point of  
12 view, where they are considered to be functions of social interaction, and  
13 ever-changing depending on the context of the interaction (e.g. Kalaja 1994;  
14 De Costa 2011). In the most radical approaches, what is said has been seen as  
15 exclusively socially and discursively constructed: individuals have been  
16 conceptualised as mere users of culturally and socially available resources and  
17 the focus of analysis has been on the interaction, without reference – or  
18 indeed, interest – in cognition. However, these positions have also been  
19 criticised (see e.g. Hammersley 2003, Dufva 2010). The polarised opposition  
20 between radical individualist cognitivism and radical social constructionism  
21 has resulted in a dichotomy: beliefs have for the most part been seen either as  
22 fundamentally individual, or as fundamentally social. At the same time, both  
23 extremes appear to struggle when it comes to dealing with certain central  
24 questions, such as theorising about cognising and learning.

### A dialogical view of learner beliefs

25  
26  
27 This paper<sup>1</sup> presents and adopts a dialogical view. Like certain other  
28 frameworks in the field of language studies, such as the ecological approaches  
29 (e.g. van Lier 2004), the sociocognitive approaches (e.g. Atkinson 2011), and  
30 the sociocultural approaches (e.g. Lantolf and Thorne 2006), the dialogical  
31 approach aims at transcending the dichotomy between the social and the  
32 individual. From a dialogical stance, the social and the individual are looked  
33 at as complements rather than opposites: one cannot exist without the other.  
34 A dialogical point of view on knowledge and cognition is inspired  
35 particularly by the dialogical philosophy of the so-called Bakhtin Circle (e.g.  
36 Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Voloshinov 1973), and it is also draws on various non-  
37 Cartesian approaches to cognising (e.g. Järvillehto 1998; Cowley 2009). More  
38 recent contributions to the dialogical view on language studies, building on  
39 the works of the Bakhtin circle, include the works by Markova and Foppa  
40 (1990, 1991), Wertsch (1991, 1998), Rommetveit (1992), Linell (1998; 2009),  
41 Lähteenmäki (1994, 1998) and Dufva (2003, 2007, 2010); for dialogical  
42 theoretical and practical concerns specifically in foreign language learning  
43 and teaching, see Hall, Vitanova and Marchenkova (2005).  
44

### **Voicescapes in children's beliefs about the learning of English ♦ 3**

1 Bakhtin (1984) saw his notion of dialogue not only as an act of conversation  
2 between two people, nor only as human communication using language.  
3 Dialogue, for Bakhtin, is also an overall metaphilosophical principle of  
4 interaction, governing human existence. "Life by its very nature is dialogic"  
5 (Bakhtin 1984: 293) because dialogic relationships are an almost universal  
6 phenomenon, permeating all human speech, relationships and manifestations  
7 of human life (Bakhtin 1984). Similar ideas are brought up for example, in  
8 systemic psychology (Järvillehto 1998), and ecological perspectives to learning  
9 (van Lier 2004): cognition (or rather, cognising, since it is a dynamic process,  
10 cf. Edelman 1992) is looked at in terms of an intertwined human/  
11 environment-system, not as an activity involving two separate systems  
12 (human and environment). It is also through dialogue that humans learn and  
13 appropriate viewpoints, attitudes, memories, and other personal knowledge:  
14 through continuous interaction with the environment, both physical and  
15 social. An individual's beliefs thus have a social origin: they emerge while  
16 individuals interact with the physical world or take part in social practices,  
17 and often they emerge through the words of others (Bakhtin 1986). Beliefs are  
18 therefore rooted in social and cultural interactions – but they are not  
19 exclusively discursive or social. This is because, first, each individual has a  
20 unique life history. No two people share the exact same experiences, and  
21 therefore, the belief reservoir of each individual is unique, even if they share  
22 a culture and a social community. Second, individuals can choose to accept or  
23 not to accept the viewpoints – and their ideological contents – they come in  
24 contact with. In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, these ideological contents can be dealt  
25 with in three ways: the individual can choose to appropriate contents that he  
26 or she feels are internally persuasive and begin to use them as his or her own;  
27 ignore viewpoints he or she feels do not concern or interest him or her; or find  
28 that he or she is faced with authoritative views, words that he or she must  
29 either accept and repeat as they are, or reject them totally. Authoritative  
30 content rests on a hierarchical differentiation of power between the speakers,  
31 and, in Bakhtin's (1981: 342) words, "demands that we acknowledge it, that  
32 we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might  
33 have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already  
34 fused in it". Authoritative content thus reflects the words of the authorities (be  
35 they moral, political or religious) which individuals must either totally affirm  
36 or totally reject. In contrast, the internally persuasive content invites and is  
37 open to contact and dialogue.

38 When individuals talk about their beliefs, they are typically not repeating  
39 others' words in a mechanical manner (though they can certainly choose to do  
40 so too): they are recreating and recycling the contents for their own purposes  
41 and by doing so, returning the words and their ideologies back into the social  
42 sphere. Words and ideologies thus circulate in the human/environment  
43 system, from the social realm to the individual realm, and back again.  
44 According to Voloshinov (1973), the social and the individual are in a constant,  
45 reciprocal relationship where one extends into the realm of the other, and

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1 becomes the other. In a dialogical approach to learner beliefs, beliefs are thus  
2 not conceptualised as social or individual, but as shared; necessarily both  
3 social and individual.

4 As stated above, what individuals learn in interaction are not neutral  
5 words, but value-laden words containing ideological interpretations of what  
6 the world is like (Bakhtin 1981). This idea of intention and worldview  
7 embedded in words is captured in Bakhtin's concept of voice. The numerous  
8 voices an individual comes into contact with result in a knowledge reservoir  
9 that is multi-voiced, polyphonic. Certain voices are privileged (cf. Wertsch  
10 1991), in the social community – they are more frequently repeated and more  
11 highly regarded – while others are marginalised or even silenced. This may  
12 also be evident in people's beliefs: certain beliefs may be more prevalent and  
13 therefore more readily available for verbalisation, because they circulate more  
14 frequently in the social sphere. Other beliefs may be weaker, less powerful  
15 and less readily verbalisable. The individual him/herself also privileges  
16 certain voices over others: his or her own voice, which emerges and develops  
17 through cognising activities and social practices, is constantly evolving and  
18 changing as he or she takes part in new interactions and gains new  
19 experiences (Dufva 2003). The process of development is pushed forward by  
20 dialogue with other people and the environment, and it is never complete.  
21 This process, "inner monologue" (Bakhtin 1981: 345), continues throughout  
22 the individual's lifetime.

23 Below, excerpts of longitudinal interview data of young learners talking  
24 about the learning of English are analysed from a dialogical viewpoint. As  
25 beliefs about language learning appear to influence the language learning  
26 process (e.g. Bandura 1986; McDonough 1995; Navarro and Thornton 2011),  
27 in-depth knowledge about beliefs not only adds to our notions of cognising,  
28 but also contributes to our comprehensive understanding of language  
29 learning. Such knowledge may also have important learning, theoretical and  
30 pedagogical implications. A dialogical reading of the data reveals whose  
31 voices are influential in the learners' beliefs: whose viewpoints are privileged  
32 and repeated, whose voices are considered authoritative, and how the various  
33 viewpoints interact. Furthermore, as the data are longitudinal, they provide  
34 the opportunity to examine the changes and variations that take place in the  
35 polyphony of the learners' beliefs over the years and thus shed light on the  
36 development of beliefs.

#### 37 38 **Data and methodology**

39  
40 To illustrate the concept of voice – and the role of authoritative voices in  
41 particular – in learner beliefs, interview excerpts are analysed below. The  
42 excerpts have been taken from the study reported in Aro (2009; see also  
43 Aro 2004; 2006a; 2006b). The data were collected, using semi-structured  
44 interviews, in connection with a longitudinal research project<sup>2</sup> that followed a

### Voicescapes in children's beliefs about the learning of English ♦ 5

1 group of elementary school children through school years 1–6. The study  
2 reported here looked at longitudinal interview data on how 15 Finnish L1  
3 children – seven boys and eight girls – talked about English and learning of  
4 English as a foreign language. The children were interviewed on three  
5 occasions: in Year 1 (when they were aged 7), Year 3 (aged 9) and Year 5 (aged  
6 11). The first year interviews were conducted by two researchers involved  
7 with the project; the third and fifth year interviews by the present author.  
8 English was introduced as a school subject in Year 3. The interviews were  
9 audiotaped and transcribed. The transcribed data were then transferred to  
10 Atlas.ti (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin) software and coded.  
11 In the analysis, the polyphony in the learners' answers was examined through  
12 several cues: the voice to be heard could be brought about by the combination  
13 of the content and formulation of what the learners said. For example, they  
14 may have used a speech genre that indexes a particular group of people or  
15 sphere of language use, reflecting the viewpoints of the same. The learners  
16 could also use the voices of others both overtly (by quoting) and more covertly  
17 (by simply mimicking, or, in Bakhtin's 1981 words, *ventriloquating* them).  
18 Alternatively, the learners may have clearly marked some answers as their  
19 own. The analysis of the data focused on the voicework reflected in the beliefs  
20 and its changes and variations over the years. The data analysis sought to  
21 address the following questions: what kinds of voices could be heard in the  
22 learners' beliefs, whose voices did the learners appear to consider important,  
23 and how did the various voices interact?

### Voicescapes of learner beliefs

25 Some of the most prevalent authoritative voices in the children's beliefs were  
26 what could be called *voices of society*. These refer to slogans, or cultural truths,  
27 that "everyone knows" in Finland – voices and viewpoints that are frequently  
28 repeated and privileged in Finnish society. It is for example, widely accepted  
29 that "everyone" in Finland knows English. English is a compulsory subject in  
30 Finnish comprehensive schools and by far the most popular choice as the first  
31 foreign language: in 2007, approximately 90% of pupils chose it as their first  
32 foreign language (National Board of Education 2011). The 15 children  
33 participating in the study were on all three interview occasions asked why  
34 people studied English, and many children found it easy to find an answer to  
35 this question already in the first year, using oft-repeated slogans that testify  
36 to the usefulness of English skills. The following excerpt is from the third  
37 year data:  
38  
39

40 I: No minkäs takia ihmiset opiskelee englantia?

41 Sakari: Öö, no iskä sano ainaki et sillä pärjää joka maassa, melkeen joka  
42 maassa.  
43

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1 *I: So why do people study English?*

2 *Sakari: Er, well dad at any rate said that you can get by with it in every country,*  
3 *almost every country.*

4  
5 Sakari's answer is an obvious example of polyphony. Sakari is doing the  
6 speaking but he is openly quoting his father's words; the father's words, in  
7 turn, reflect a voice of society, a cultural truth about the role of English. The  
8 excerpt also shows how parents mediate such cultural viewpoints on to their  
9 children. The viewpoints then become recycled and reproduced in new  
10 communicative contexts by the children.

11 Rauli answered a similar question, also in the third year, by first trying to  
12 explain his idea of the usefulness of English in his own words:

13  
14 *I: No minkäs takia ihmiset sitte opiskelee englantia, mitä hyötyä siitä niille*  
15 *on?*

16 *Rauli: Että, kun ne menee töihin nii sitte, jos joku kysyy niiltä että, tiiätsää*  
17 *mitä, mitä tää tarkoittaa, nii eli englantia täytyy oppia, ja sitä tarvitaan.*

18 *I: Why do people then study English, how is it useful for them?*

19 *Rauli: So that they, when they go to work so then, if someone asks them that, do*  
20 *you know what, what this means, so in other words English must be learnt, and*  
21 *it is needed.*

22  
23 It appears that Rauli first tried to use an example to describe how English  
24 could be used: people go to work and someone asks them something.  
25 However, after stumbling over his words slightly, he eventually resorted to  
26 using a slogan-like ending, "English must be learnt and it is needed". The end  
27 of his answer – which he presents as a summary of sorts – sounds very  
28 different from the beginning. We could say that he started answering using  
29 words that were internally persuasive, words he was familiar with, but  
30 decided in the end to appeal to a well known cultural truth: he ventriloquated  
31 the words of others. The slogan seems to indicate what in Rauli's opinion is in  
32 fact at the root of the matter: that English simply must be learnt and that this  
33 is fairly self-evident.

34 When the *Why* questions were presented in a general form ("Why is  
35 English learnt?", "Why do people study English?"), answers such as those  
36 shown in the excerpts above were a staple ever since the first year: the learners  
37 said that "English must be learnt and it is needed, one can get by using  
38 English in many countries, one needs to know English in order to be able to  
39 speak to people abroad", and so on. The learners thus appeared to feel that  
40 such ideas – all appealing to the generally accepted usefulness of English as a  
41 medium of verbal/oral communication – constituted a good answer to these  
42 questions. The basic idea behind the formulations was like a ready-made  
43 opinion, a slogan that was easily available to the learners and easy to deliver,  
44 even if they still referred to other people's words or found it difficult to  
45 explain the idea further when answering.

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1 By the fifth year the learners appeared to have appropriated the  
2 authoritative belief that "English was needed in order to be able to speak  
3 abroad". The learners could deliver it effortlessly and without an overt  
4 reference to a source, such as a parent. In the following excerpt, Aku's answer  
5 reflects the answer of the entire group of the fifth-year learners when he  
6 answers the question as he does:

7  
8 I: No, minkäs takia Aku ihmiset opiskelee englantia?

9 Aku: Että ne osais puhua ulkomailla.

10 I: *So why is it Aku that people study English?*

11 Aku: *So that they know how to speak abroad.*

12  
13 The content of Aku's answer shows, in a nutshell, how all 15 learners  
14 answered this interview question in the fifth year. All of the participants'  
15 answers contained the same authoritative idea: that English is used for talking  
16 with people, or, more specifically, talking with people abroad. The  
17 authoritative viewpoint that the learners have encountered – in talking with  
18 their parents and presumably from other people as well – is being recycled  
19 and thus further reinforced as the authoritative voice; a good reason for  
20 English studies and a good answer for questions regarding reasons for  
21 English studies.

22 Another type of the more authoritative voices was the voices of the school  
23 world and the classroom. Understandably, these began to emerge more in the  
24 third year data when the learners had had more experience of going to school.  
25 The voice of the school could be heard in for example, special classroom  
26 terminology that the learners began to use to describe the business of learning  
27 English. In the following excerpt, Mervi, in the fifth year, talked of the kinds  
28 of things she did in order to learn English:

29  
30 I: No mitenkäs sää opiskelet englantia minkälaisia asioita sää teet koulussa  
31 ja kotona?

32 Mervi: No, meillä o aina kaikkia kuuntelutehtäviä ja, sit mejän pitää  
33 esittää joku, tai meillä on aina joku satu ja sit mejän pitää se ryhmän  
34 kanssa lukee ja, ja, sitte, meillä on ihan tavallisia kotitehtäviä sitte  
35 englanniks.

36 I: *Well how do you study English what kinds of things do you do at school and  
37 at home?*

38 Mervi: *Well, we always have these listening comprehension exercises and, then  
39 we have to perform a, or we always have a fairy tale and then we have to read it  
40 with the group and, and, then, we have just ordinary homework then in English.*

41  
42 As Mervi's answer illustrates, the learners began to appropriate specific terms  
43 that the school environment provided them with. Their answers started to  
44 include school-specific and school-taught terms such as "homework,  
45 vocabulary lists, exams, revising, translating, listening comprehension



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1 exercises" and so on. In addition to using school-specific vocabulary, the  
2 children also began to speak "like pupils" and to voice themselves as learners  
3 in the classroom. Examples of this included references to institutional  
4 authority, so that the learners voiced themselves as obedient pupils. As an  
5 example, Mervi, in the excerpt above, says that the learners *have to* read and  
6 *have to* perform, and in saying so she thus indicates that the learners are under  
7 the power of the authority of the teacher and the school system. Similar ideas  
8 were recycled by many other learners too. A further illustration of the  
9 authority of the school institution is shown in the next excerpt, also from the  
10 fifth year data, where Matti talks about the differences of learning maths and  
11 learning English:

12  
13 I: No onks englannin opiskelu sun mielestä erilaista ku vaikka matikan  
14 opiskelu?

15 Matti: No on se nii, jotenki erilaista ku, joutuu s- vaikka sanomaan toisille  
16 (ja), matikassa saa ite päättää mikä, mikä on vastaus. Englannissa pitää olla  
17 kaikki niinku oikee, niinku matikassaki.

18 I: *So do you think studying English is different from say studying maths?*

19 Matti: *Well yes it is, somehow different coz, you have to s- for example say to*  
20 *others (and), in maths you get to decide by yourself what the answer is. In English*  
21 *everything has to be like correct, like in maths too.*

22  
23 Matti states that one *has to* do various things as a pupil, and also that these  
24 things *have to be correct*. Not only is the school authority telling learners what  
25 to do, Mattis' answer also indicates that at school there is the one correct,  
26 predefined answer that a learner can manage to land on: from the learners'  
27 point of view, it appears that the school tells them what to do and then  
28 assesses if it was done in the correct manner. In many ways, the school thus  
29 has a very authoritative voice that the learners react to: both by appropriating  
30 its words and by responding to its demands. Karasavvidis, Pieters and Plomp  
31 (2000) point out that one of the demands of the school is precisely to  
32 "appropriate its words", to learn the subject-specific vocabulary; when the  
33 student has appropriated the right words and concepts, it is considered that  
34 he or she has in essence learnt the task. The view of Karasavvidis et al. (2000)  
35 is supported by the observation that teachers often explicitly forbid the  
36 students to explain things in their own words and emphasise that the point of  
37 the task is to acquire the appropriate way of speaking (Karasavvidis et al.  
38 2000). It is thus no wonder that the learners echo the voice of the school world  
39 in their interview answers, too.

40 The discourses and practices of the school also influenced how the learners  
41 said English should be learnt. Some of the learners said that in order to learn  
42 English one should go to school or attend a course – it was, after all, what they  
43 themselves were doing. However, the learners also appeared convinced that  
44 one learnt English through written language, most importantly by reading  
45 books, as shown in the excerpts below:

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1 I: No, mitenkäs englantia opiskellaan jos joku haluaa oikei hyvin oppia  
2 englantia nii mitä sen kannattaa tehdä?

3 Emma: Lukee niitä sanoja ja harjotella kirjottamaan niitä.

4 *I: Well, how does one study English if one wants to learn English really well what  
5 should they do?*

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

7  
8 I: Miten englantia vois oppia ilman opettajaa?

9 Aku: Ostaa enkun kirjan.

10 *I: How could one learn English without a teacher?*

11 *Aku: Buy an English textbook.*

12  
13 According to Emma, one ought to *read* words and practice *writing* them in order  
14 to learn English. Aku talked about what happens if the language teacher is  
15 taken out the equation: in order to learn English without a teacher, one ought to  
16 get an *English textbook*. It may be that, in this case, the appropriated belief was  
17 conveyed through classroom practices – also a dialogical enterprise – rather  
18 than the words of others: it was acted out rather than spoken. Language lessons  
19 at schools have been found to be fairly book-centric: the teachers tend to refer  
20 to the textbooks a great deal and most of the activity in the classroom is focused  
21 on them (see e.g. Pitkänen-Huhta 2003). It therefore seems likely that the  
22 answers cited above echo the learners' own experiences of learning English –  
23 and thereby provide them with an idea of how others could learn, too.  
24 Whatever the case, the majority of the learners stated that what was to be learnt  
25 was to be found in a book, and one could learn it there by reading: their  
26 descriptions of learning activities were very focused on written language.

27 Over time and as their experiences accumulated, the learners began to rely  
28 less and less on repeating the words of others. Instead, they began to bring forth  
29 their own, personal experiences of learning and using English when answering  
30 the interview questions. By the fifth year, they started, for example, to use their  
31 own experiences as grounds for their answers: they said that they held a particular  
32 view about learning English because of their own learning experiences. In the  
33 following excerpt, fifth-year learner Jari was asked about the usefulness of watching  
34 English-language television programmes in learning English:

35  
36 I: Luuleksää että, kun kattelee semmosia englanninkielisiä ohjelmia sitte  
37 nii luuleksää et siitä vois olla hyötyä enkun opinnoissa?

38 Jari: Mmh. Emmää kyllä usko.

39 I: Joo.

40 Jari: Emmää ainakaa opi kyllä siitä paljoo.

41 *I: Do you think that, when one then watches English-language programmes do  
42 you think they might be useful for one's English studies?*

43 *Jari: Mmh. I don't think so really.*

44 *I: Yeah.*

45 *Jari: I for one don't learn much from it.*

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1 In his answer Jari first said that he did not think watching English-language  
2 programmes on the television would be useful in helping one learn English,  
3 and then added that he, *for one*, did not feel as if he learnt *much from it*. He  
4 thus indicated that the reason that he said that he did not find English-  
5 language programmes useful in general was because he himself did not find  
6 them useful. Phrases such as those used by Jani were frequent in the fifth  
7 year data: when the learners talked about things they did not find useful for  
8 the learning of English (be it watching television or listening to English-  
9 language music), they usually stated it was because it was *not useful for me*,  
10 *anyway*. Such comments underscored that the answers were based on the  
11 learner's own experiences, but they may also have served as hedging  
12 comments: while the learner himself or herself did not find a particular  
13 activity helpful, they did not wish to suggest that this would be categorically  
14 true for all learners.

15 Not only did the learners' own experiences function as a reason for  
16 answering a question in a particular way, the experiences sometimes also  
17 provided the content of the answer. Sometimes the learners appeared to use  
18 their own life events or encounters with English as examples or illustrations,  
19 as the excerpt below illustrates:

21 I: Miten siit on hyötyä että osaa englantia?

22 Matti: No osaa vaikka tilata jotai ruokaa tai sitte, sitte jos ostaa jotai ni, osaa,  
23 pyy- kysyä paljonko se maksaa. (. . .)

24 I: Minkälaisissa paikoissa sää muistat et sä oot törmänny englantiin nyt  
25 vaikka viimesen viikon aikana?

26 Matti: Emmää viimesen viiko aikana mutta, en muista kuinka kauan siitä  
27 on mutta Curaçoaalla törmäsin englantiin . . . lentokoneessa tilasin ite  
28 ruokia ja.

29 I: *How is it useful for one to know English?*

30 Matti: *Well one can for example order some food or then, then if one buys*  
31 *something so, then one can, ask how much it costs. (. . .)*

32 I: *In what kinds of places have you come across the English language, say, during*  
33 *the past week?*

34 Matti: *Not during the past week but, I can't remember how long ago it was but*  
35 *in Curaçao I came across English . . . I ordered some food on the airplane and.*

36  
37 Early on in the interview, Matti listed examples of things one could do if one  
38 knew English: *order some food, ask how much it costs*. Later, he talked about the  
39 holiday he had had in Curaçao, and mentioned that he had ordered food on  
40 the airplane in English. The activities he had earlier used as examples of using  
41 English were probably also the kinds of things he had done or seen others do  
42 during his holiday: ordering food and asking how much things cost are  
43 typical tourist interactions. Like many other learners in the fifth grade, Matti  
44 thus appeared to feel confident citing his own experiences of how English  
45 could be used as a general answer to a general question.

**Effects of authority**

In light of the interview data, it seemed that as soon as the learners had some personal experience of something connected to learning and using the English language, such experience immediately found its way to their interview answers. The learners, in fact, seemed to look for ways to make their own increasing expertise known, adding "side notes" to their answers and referring to their own encounters even when they were not, strictly speaking, relevant to the question they were answering. However, it seemed that these voices of personal experience were in fact conditioned by the authoritative voices (Bakhtin 1981) of society and school: that the authoritative voices got to define how the learners' own experiences were interpreted; that the learners' own voices were spoken through the authoritative voice.

As mentioned earlier, one of the authoritative "cultural truths" was that English is needed for speaking to foreigners abroad. If it is considered that using English means speaking it in a foreign country, then, consequently, not going abroad to talk to people means that one is not using English. In the above excerpt, Matti was in fact asked if he had come across the English language *over the past week*, when he had been in his home town, attending school and living his regular everyday life. The English language is omnipresent in Finland: foreign language television programmes and movies are not dubbed; there are plenty of English-language advertisements and commercials that are brought to Finland as-is; there is the Internet along with computer games and console games, all with English content; the children attend English classes at school, and so on. Despite all of the English language surrounding the children in their everyday lives, none of these examples made it into Matti's answer. Instead, he referred to something that had happened months earlier but that was compatible with the authoritative belief and its basic notion of speaking to foreigners abroad: *when I was in Curacao I came across English*. In the same way, if the belief is that using English means speaking it, it was understandably difficult for the learners to think how the ability to read English could be useful. When asked how being able to read English could be useful, Jari – who appeared to be quite baffled by the question – simply said that *it, too, is a skill* (see Table 1). Like most of the young learners who were interviewed in the study, he found the questions regarding the usefulness of written forms of English difficult, and could not come up with a scenario where being able to read English could be useful. It appeared that, as, for the children, using English meant speaking it, being able to specifically speak English was also the reason for learning it. Consequently, the uses for writing and reading skills of English appeared to be somewhat of a mystery for these young learners.

In the third example in Table 1, Maija answered the question "Do you need English, do you use it anywhere?" The girl, in fact, had a very valid way of using English. A need she had was met by speaking in English: when she wanted to communicate something to her mother, but wanted to make sure

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1 **Table 1.** The effects of the authoritative belief about why English is studied  
2

3

4 Authoritative belief	Learner beliefs
5 English is needed 6 for speaking to 7 foreigners abroad	8 <i>Not during the past week but, I can't remember how long ago 9 it was but when I was in Curaçao I came across English. 10 Well, I suppose [being able to read English] too is a skill. 11 Well, I don't really, need it as such but sometimes if there's 12 something with the little sister, so that one wants to go somewhere and the little sister cannot come along so one says it to mom in English, then the sister won't understand.</i>

13

14 **Table 2.** The effects of the authoritative belief about how English is studied  
15

16

17 Authoritative belief	Learner beliefs
18 English is learnt 19 through books, 20 primarily at school	21 <i>Well one should go study it at school 22 Read the words and practice how to write them. 23 . . . one could also learn for example if back there [of a novel or a comic] there was a vocabulary list where one could look them up, the words then one could learn the words at the same time too.</i>

24

25 her little sister could not understand what she was saying, she spoke to her  
26 mother in English. Yet, in her opinion, using English at home to communicate  
27 did not constitute *really needing English as such*.

28 The world of school also appeared to supply the learners with an  
29 authoritative belief. Its effect, however, did not seem to be quite as powerful  
30 as that of the cultural truth regarding why English is learnt. The voice of the  
31 school attended to the question of how English is learnt, and stated that  
32 English is learnt *through books*, primarily at school. The learners appeared to  
33 view learning through this authoritative filter: in their answers, learning took  
34 place mostly at school or on a language course, and always by reading books.  
35 In the first excerpt of Table 2, Sakari – then a fifth year pupil – was asked how  
36 English is learnt: what should one do in order to learn English? *Well one should  
37 go study it at school* was his answer. Emma, also in the fifth year, was asked:  
38 how does one learn English? She answered by saying *read the words and  
39 practice how to write them* – both written activities. The idea that English  
40 is learnt from books also affected how the children viewed learning  
41 opportunities outside of the classroom. Written language material was  
42 considered useful: the learners said that reading English novels or comics  
43 would be useful for one's English studies, as would computer or console

### Voicescapes in children's beliefs about the learning of English ♦ 13

1 games, insofar as the speech of the game characters was also written on the  
2 screen. English-language television programmes or English-language pop  
3 and rock music were not considered helpful in learning English, because they  
4 featured spoken or sung language, which the learners found difficult to follow  
5 and understand. Even with written material encountered outside of the  
6 classroom, the model that the school gave of learning activities ruled supreme,  
7 as illustrated by the third excerpt in Table 2. One of the learners stated, in a  
8 fifth year interview, that reading novels and comics in English would be  
9 useful for the learning of English, especially if the publications came with a  
10 *vocabulary list* – a list of English words and their Finnish equivalents, like the  
11 ones they had in their English textbooks at school.

12 The learners' views of how to learn and use English thus appeared to be  
13 influenced by authoritative voices circulating frequently in the social sphere  
14 and reinforced by practices of the school. An interesting observation on the  
15 two authoritative viewpoints is also how they seem to contradict each other in  
16 the learners' interview answers: one learns English in order to be able to  
17 speak it, yet it is learnt almost exclusively through written language. The  
18 authoritative voice of society, attending to the *why* questions, privileged oral  
19 forms of language, while the authoritative voice of the school, evident in the  
20 *how* questions, privileged written language. When these two views are put  
21 together, it seems that one learns to speak English by reading it.

### Concluding remarks

22  
23  
24  
25 The analysis of the interview data in this paper provided insight into the  
26 voicescapes of learners' beliefs. It appears that there are certain fairly  
27 powerful and authoritative viewpoints in learner beliefs that have been  
28 appropriated early on, and that may consequently strongly influence what the  
29 children perceive and consider important in learning and using English.  
30 These are not only authoritative voices in the sense that one needs to repeat the  
31 words as they are (cf. Bakhtin 1981); they also appear to be authoritative  
32 viewpoints the validity of which one needs to accept. Consequently, they  
33 appear to affect how learners see and value various things connected to the  
34 English language. Such beliefs may thus influence how the children voice  
35 themselves as learners and users of English – and whether they, in fact, see  
36 themselves as learners and users of English at all – what kinds of things  
37 learners deem important and worthwhile when learning and using the  
38 language, and how learners view learning opportunities both in and outside  
39 of the classroom. A learner may consequently feel that he or she is learning  
40 only when he or she is studying with a text book, or feel that his or her  
41 everyday uses of English are not important or relevant. While the study  
42 reported here was conducted in a Finnish context with young learners of  
43 English, a dialogical reading of learner beliefs using Bakhtin's concepts, such  
44 as polyphony and authority, will certainly prove useful in various other

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1 contexts as well. An analysis of the polyphony of learner beliefs may well  
2 provide us with new perspectives on which beliefs are privileged and are  
3 therefore likely to have an actual impact on how learners go about learning a  
4 language, and consequently, what kinds of learner beliefs both teachers and  
5 learners themselves might need to be aware of. Such knowledge may also lead  
6 to a need to re-evaluate current pedagogical practices.

7  
8 **Notes**

- 9  
10 1. This paper is produced in the context of research project 'Dialogues of  
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