

“Stories from No-Man’s Land?” Situated language learning through the use of role models in the context of international Higher Education.

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This article discusses the value of role models in the language acquisition process of international students following an English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) programme in the Netherlands. Narrative interpretations of qualitative data provide insights into the identity work involved in the use of role models and the impact that this work has on the participation of learners in their core learning community and other communities. The article compares the use of role models in the cases of three students. These learning experiences were recorded through Language Learning Histories (Murphey, Chen & Chen: 2004), semi-structured interviews and journal entries. Analysis is grounded in the theory of situated learning, taking Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998) as the main conceptual framework. The article also draws on related perspectives from within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), notably a heuristic understanding of Activity Theory (Lantolf & Pavlenko 2001; Ivanič 2006) and ‘person-in-context’ (Ushioda 2009). Narrative interpretations of language learning experiences are shown to provide understandings of the impact of local educational practices on learner participation in and across learning communities. These interpretations highlight the need for greater transparency and awareness of the tensions intrinsic to participation in language learning communities. These tensions are exemplified in these three cases by the learners’ use or non-use of role models, which is of particular relevance in the broader context of their experience outside the classroom setting. Such research provides an opportunity to incorporate learner perspectives in curriculum design and evaluation.

Keywords: communities of practice, role models, narrative, situated learning, person-in-context

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ISSN: 1457-9863

Publisher: Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä

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<http://apples.jyu.fi>

1 Introduction

This article discusses the value of role models to the situated language acquisition of international students taking an English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) degree at a university in the Netherlands. The learning experiences of *Leonie*, *Katerina*, and *Simona*, which are presented in the form of narratives in section 4 below, are derived from rigorous qualitative analysis of data collected over the course of one academic year (see section 2 below). Narrative interpretations of the data (see section 4) provide a record of the ‘identity work’ (Ivanič 2006) involved in the use of role models and the impact that this work has on the participation of learners in their core learning community and other communities. The narratives of these learners are grounded in the theory of situated learning, using Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998) as the main conceptual framework. The article also draws on related perspectives from within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), notably a heuristic understanding of Activity Theory (Lantolf & Pavlenko 2001; Ivanič 2006) and ‘person-in-context’ (Ushioda 2009). These conceptual foundations are explained in section 3.

The following excerpt from my research journal aims to provide the reader with an initial insight into the context of this study.

She sits attentively at the back of my class, but she does not speak unless she is spoken to. When she is asked a question, she answers politely and generally correctly. And yet she remains reluctant to speak. I feel as a teacher that the better I know my students, the better I am able to help them. I feel that I do not yet know Maaïke yet, and I would like to understand why. A month into the course, the students have the task of writing a ‘Language Learning History’, and I sit one evening reading Maaïke’s story.

Maaïke came from a small village in Frisia, where the first language was not Frisian [the local language] but a local dialect of that language. When she went to the grammar school in the nearest city, she was teased about her country dialect. When she left the grammar school, she first went to a university in Amsterdam, where she studied through Dutch. In Amsterdam, people would often comment on her Frisian accent. In her Language Learning History, Maaïke wrote:

“I always try to hide this accent when not being in the North of the Netherlands because people always have associations with my accent and living in Friesland [Frisia] which I try to avoid.”

When she left Amsterdam and joined our international degree programme, which was taught through English, she preferred not to speak too much. I thought that she was shy or maybe afraid of making mistakes. But now I understand her silence. And it has awakened something in me too. I understand now that, despite her silence, Maaïke is already something of an expert in languages. And I want to know more about what she and

other students bring with them to the language classroom. I want to understand how this affects their learning.

(Edited from Teacher Journal)

The stories constructed below of *Leonie*, *Katerina* and *Simona* (pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves) describe learning experiences in an 'English as Medium of Instruction' (EMI) Communication programme at a Dutch university, which I shall refer to using the acronym CIF (for *Community of International Fulltime students*). One of the key factors that emerged from narrative research amongst participants at CIF was the importance of role models to such language learners during the acquisition of English. This article focuses primarily on the value of role models in contexts beyond the classroom because this is an area which produces a wealth of learning experience but is often underestimated or inaccessible to educators. As Gee puts it, "what these young people see in school may pale by comparison. It may seem to lack the imagination that infuses the non-school aspects of their lives" (Gee 2005: 231). It seems essential then, when investigating the experiences of language learners, to capture the experience of the individual as a whole, and not only the identity that is expressed in the classroom environment. This article therefore takes a 'person-in-context' perspective when investigating the learning experiences of the research participants. Ushioda has described this as follows (Ushioda 2009):

I mean a focus on real persons, rather than on learners as theoretical abstractions; a focus on the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intentions; a focus on the interaction between this self-reflective intentional agent, and the fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro- and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded, moves and is inherently part of. (Ushioda, 2009: 220.)

Narrative analysis lends itself to investigations of the person in context, focusing as it does on the complications and resolutions experienced by individuals in relation to the social contexts in which they participate. This includes the complication of dislocation (Luttrell 2003; Hoffman 1989) and biographical disruption (Riessman 2004; Williams 1984) and the resolution offered by narrative reconstruction (Williams 1984) as a result of effective scaffolding and changes in self-understanding (Cain 1991). In applying a narrative analytical approach to language research, the use of cases (for example, Hoffman 1989; Kinginger 2004; Morita 2004) demonstrates that language socialization is also a process involving complications and resolutions, dislocations and reconstructions, and that language learners consequently have a tale to tell. The narratives presented in section 4 display the type of learning experiences which often remain untold; and I argue that where language learners are not provided with the opportunity to tell the full stories of their learning experiences, educators will not be in a position to support the complete learning processes of their students.

The current article takes narrative research to be a co-constructed process of data collection and analysis through which the researcher creates a conceptual space for the analytical investigation of experience. In this 'narrative space', the

researcher provides opportunities for participants to move towards new perspectives or understandings of themselves in relation to the world they inhabit, in this case a learning community (Wenger 1998). At this point, it is worth highlighting my position as a researcher in the co-construction of this narrative space. I take as my starting point the position outlined by Smith and Deemer (2000), who describe inquiry as a “social process in which we construct reality as we go along and as a social process in which we, at one and the same time, construct our criteria for judging inquiries as we go along” (Smith and Deemer 2000: 886). As a consequence of understanding research in this way, I recognize that (a) the researcher is a subjective agent in the research process, and that (b) the subjectivity of the researcher is not a threat to the quality of the research but a force for the construction of the rich understandings that develop from that research. Smith and Deemer (2000: 884) stress that this involves viewing research as a process of constructing/making as opposed to discovering/finding.

This process presents a dual challenge for the researcher who has to decide both how to construct the narrative space from a methodological perspective (see section 2) and how, through a process of interpretation, to describe the experiences that emerge from that space (see section 4). In the cases outlined below, the methodological development of individual stories from a parallel set of longitudinal case studies of language learners leads to the emergence of role models as a key element in the interpretation of the situated experience of those learners.

In this article, I further demonstrate how the move from methodology to interpretation might be achieved through the use of metaphors which are developed in relation to meaningful images, such as those presented in works of art. Such metaphors allow both the researcher and the researched to re-interpret their experiences of language acquisition by evaluating these experiences from a new perspective. Such evaluation may encourage processes of change in both the individual and the learning environment, as will be seen in one of the cases below (section 4.2).

2 Methods

Data was collected and analyzed for each of five CIF learners (see Appendix 1) through the course of an academic year. The data collection process consisted of three stages: firstly, through Language Learning Histories (LLHs) (Murphey, Chen & Chen, 2004) participants recorded their past language learning experiences; secondly, during interviews, participants reflected on their present circumstances in relation to these LLHs, referring back to their pasts and forward to envisaged futures; thirdly, participants provided me with journal entries tracking their journeys into that future, producing a longitudinal flow in the data.

Taking a qualitative approach, I categorized this data using the *NVivo 2* software package. I started by coding the texts in terms of the descriptive narrative themes *complications* and *resolutions* in order to consider whether the LLHs would lend themselves to narrative analysis. Further codes (or *nodes* in *NVivo* terminology) emerged during the coding process. These codes were

grounded in concepts derived from *Communities of Practice* (Wenger 1998) and other sociocultural perspectives of Second Language Acquisition (see section 3 below). These concepts provided me with a framework through which I could derive further categories for analysis, including references to membership, belonging or exclusion. This resulted in the nodes *communities/inclusion*, *communities/exclusion* and *communities/problematic*.

By using these categories, and allowing other categories to emerge from the data during the analytical process, I both grounded the data conceptually and allowed meaning to emerge from that data. This reflects the suggestion that “researchers start with some general themes derived from reading the literature and add more themes and sub-themes as they go” (Ryan and Bernard 2000: 781). I eventually used 12 nodes or sub-nodes in my coding of the LLHs (see Appendix 2). Further nodes, including that of *role models*, emerged as I investigated the transcribed interviews and the journals. The NVivo2 software functioned effectively as my codebook (Ryan and Bernard 2000). In providing overviews in the form of Document Coding Reports and Node Coding Reports, it provided a manageable medium for interrogation of the texts produced by my research participants.

An example of this coding is provided in Appendix 3, which is an extract taken from a Document Coding report for *Simona's* LLH. It is difficult to provide a ‘representative’ example from such a wealth of qualitative data, but this extract from *Simona's* LLH (nodes 7 and 8) gives a good impression of her identity work. This extract gives the reader an impression of how the initial coding was conceptually grounded in the idea of participation (inclusion or exclusion) in communities of practice. I would also like to emphasise that this analysis was an iterative interpretive process during which I moved constantly between my *NVivo* codebook, the original texts and (for checking purposes) the participant who had provided the data. Figure 1 below gives an overview of my methodology for the analysis of the LLHs.

This detailed coding procedure allowed me to construct a series of ‘interpretive narratives’ which comprised understandings of the meaning of the data from a situated learning perspective (see section 3.1 below). By exchanging these interpretive texts with participants and with a second analyst, I ensured that the texts became the focus of a series of ongoing conversations (in interviews, through participant journals and by email) that resulted in the narratives that are related in section 4 below.

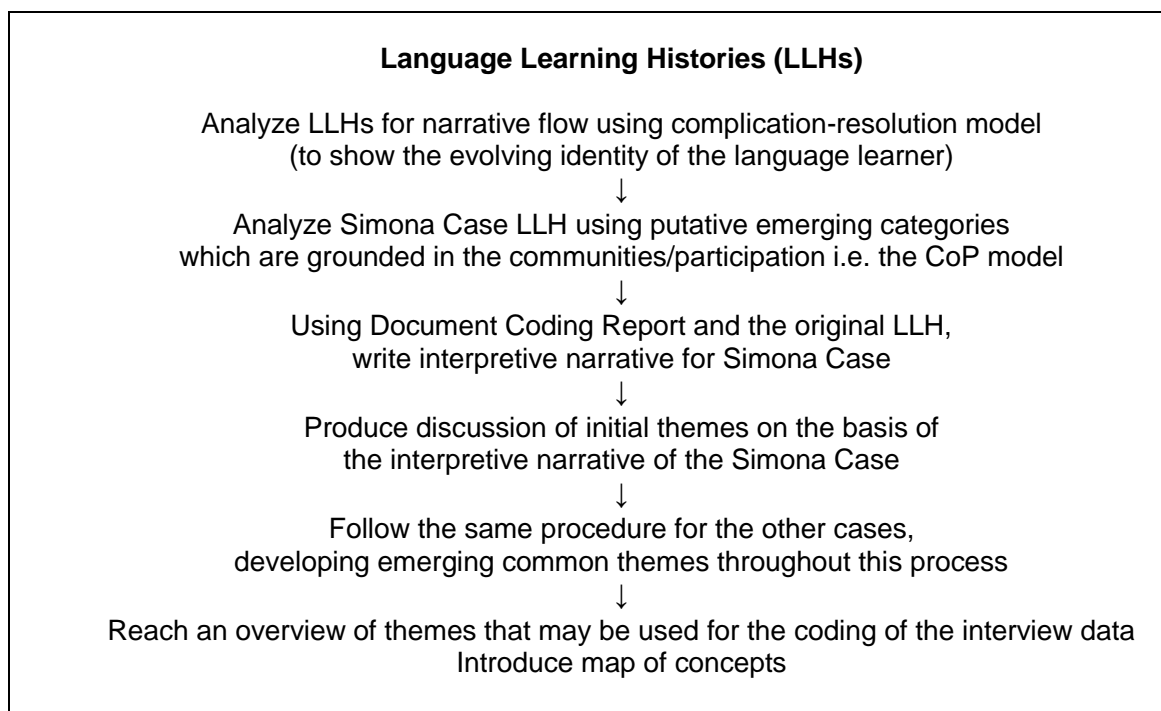


Figure 1. An overview of the research methodology for the Language Learning Histories (LLHs)

3 Conceptual foundations

3.1 *Situated language learning*

A key element in situated learning is ‘participation’, which can be described as “both the product and the process of learning” (Zuengler & Miller 2006: 38). This process is in turn related to the study of evolving social structures and roles.

We can consider second language learners who demonstrate a change from limited to fuller participation in social practices involving their second (or additional) language as giving evidence of language development (Zuengler & Miller 2006: 41).

In the cases described below, the unit for the investigation of this participation is the community of practice, or specifically, in the case of Higher Education, the concept of community epitomised by the *learning community*. According to Wenger (1998), the learning community “includes learning, not only as a matter of course in the history of its practice, but at the very core of its enterprise” (Wenger 1998: 214-215). Ivanič describes the central role that learning the language plays in attaining membership of such communities:

One of the objectives of a newcomer to a social practice is to learn the language and other ways of communicating which characterise that context: the way of achieving this is by becoming 'one of them' – becoming recognized as a member of that community. And it is by their use of language and other semiotic resources that other people recognize someone as 'belonging'. (Ivanič 2006: 22.)

In this research, the strength of identification with the CIF community was underlined by participants who made direct reference to the CIF learning community in the interviews, referring to the relatively small size of the cohort (about 30 students) and the time they had been together: "we all identify ourselves with CIF strongly" (Leonie) and "we all know each other for four years now almost" (Ilana). Katerina was expressing this same *we all* sense of belonging, togetherness, or being 'one of them' (Ivanič 2006) when she told me that the learners were all 'in the same situation'.

Ivanič further emphasises the role that participation plays in the development of identities through socially constructed discourse(s):

Identity is discursively constructed when people participate in the practices which constitute a discourse, and thereby affiliate themselves with others who engage in the same practices (Ivanič 2006: 16).

For instance, Katerina described her affiliation to CIF as a community with a shared language, which engenders the togetherness described above 'because here I speak English'.

At this point, in the context of the cases of Leonie, Katerina and Simona (section 4), it is also important to stress that situated learning involves the often simultaneous membership of a number of communities, each of which impacts on the identity of the learner. Ivanič recognizes that identity is 'networked', suggesting a number of simultaneous 'activities' (see Figure 2 below). She concludes that "...while a person is participating in an activity, activity A, their identity is networked to the identities supported by other activities in which they (con)currently participate" (Ivanič 2006: 22-23).

Zuengler & Cole note that "in some cases, there may be multiple communities that are the targets of socialization or communities that discourage learners from seeking full membership" (Zuengler & Cole 2005: 314). One of the issues considered in this article, therefore, is the idea of participants striving for membership and expression in several communities, and how this might influence and be influenced by their use of language. As Lemke observes, "few communities today insulate their members effectively from the subversive texts and values of other communities. Barriers between cultures and languages are weaker today; our loyalties to them are moderated by our multiple lives and lifestyles" (Lemke 2002: 75). Wenger also describes the need for the individual to undertake an active, creative process of 'reconciliation' between different communities. During this process, "our identities dynamically encompass multiple perspectives in the negotiation of new meanings" (Wenger 1998: 161). This may be compared with *identity work*, which Ivanič describes as "the continuous making and remaking of who we are" (Ivanič 2006: 21).

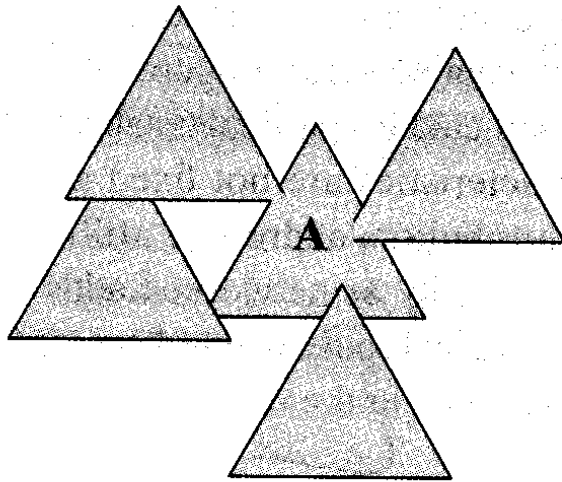


Figure 2: The networking of identity (Ivanič 2006: 23)

3.2 Role models in situated language learning

Role models provide examples that can help language learners make sense of their learning in specific, situated contexts. At times, such modelling may be related to language itself, in particular where a learner values the language demonstrated by a particular teacher or peer. However, in situated contexts, learners do not need to acquire specific language from role models in order for the relationship to be of value to their acquisition of language. Role models may perform a gate-keeping function, opening doors for learners by offering an example of how to behave, and hence how to belong, in particular social, linguistic or intercultural contexts; and it is through participation in these contexts that language acquisition can take place.

Interestingly, when language teachers are portrayed in the literature as role models, the relationship between teacher and learner may rely on metaphors not conventionally associated with teaching. For instance, Oxford (2001) demonstrates a teacher functioning as a role model in the words of a student, *Tamer*: “He (the English professor) treated us as human beings or as friends. He know (sic) the psychology of his students... He became like water everyone like to drink it and without it we will die” (Oxford 2001: 102).

Other types of role model emerge in the spaces that language learners inhabit beyond the classroom. For instance, Kinginger (2004) describes how *Alice*, in her attempts to learn French, situated her learning in social networks: “She worked to get introduced into student cliques and organized most of her time around these, hosting dinner parties in her room, going to where other parties were taking place, and having sophisticated conversations” (Kinging 2004: 236). In such contexts, role models may embody the *future self-states* discussed by Ushioda (2009). The sophistication that *Alice* perceives in her French-

speaking peers may represent or embody an identity that she imagines for herself:

Future self-states can have a strong psychological reality in the current imaginative experience of learners, as they try to envision or see themselves projected into the future as competent L2 users. (Ushioda 2009: 225, with reference to Dörnyei.)

A more subtle embodiment of this modelling beyond the classroom is found in the following description of Mr Ostropov in Hoffman's (1989) autobiographical account of learning English in Canada and the United States: "And so, sitting bent over a piano, with this seventy-year-old man who sometimes scares me and sometimes makes me bite my lip with impatience, I nevertheless feel that we are talking a language that really matters" (Hoffman 1989: 155). Wenger maintains that "what the subject matter comes to mean in the lives of learners still depends on the forms of participation available to them" (1998: 265). The affiliations that learners form with role models such as those presented by Kinginger and Hoffman demonstrate the means by which learners may agentically construct their own forms of language participation through identity work beyond the classroom.

References to linguistic role models in my data highlight the limitations of a de-contextualized perception of language acquisition. Learning in socially-constructed spaces implies learning by example. Simona learns from "how the other, especially German students, do it", while Katerina observes, "she's doing that and that and I'm trying to do it as well because I like it". Role models may perform an informal scaffolding function beyond the formal curriculum. The fact that this scaffolding generally takes place in other spaces (in a cafe or at a piano lesson, for instance) emphasises how important it is for educators to gain a fuller awareness of the investment or identity work of their learners in a variety of social and linguistic situations.

Educators are often unaware of such processes, which makes them ill-equipped to absorb the benefits of this range of learning outside the classroom into the learning environment in the classroom. If teachers base their language support for their learners solely on the identity portrayed by the student in and around the language classroom, they may underestimate other potential influences for learning when the student is performing other identities elsewhere. We can conclude that an understanding of the learner as a social individual is invaluable to educators, especially given the increasingly fragmented social and educational experiences of young people in the first decades of the twenty-first century, with identity "generally imagined as discontinuous, shifting and polycentric" (Brockmeier 2000: 69).

4 Participation and role models in the CIF community: three cases

In section 3, the connection was made between the use of role models and the agency of learners such as *Alice* (Kinginger 2004) who seek to acquire language through participation elsewhere. While this agency can be mediated to some extent through the learners' alignment with role models within a certain learning community, we can also expect identity work to involve role models from the other communities to which the learners are affiliated, as in the *Mr Ostropov* example (section 3.2). This may result in what I have termed 'agency elsewhere'. During the research process, I mapped a set of relationships in the learning process into working models or 'conceptual maps' (see figures 3 and 4). The main concepts described in these maps are drawn from the theories discussed in section 3, but the more detailed understandings of these concepts emerged through my analysis of the data which is presented in the cases below.

These conceptual maps are not proposed as definitive frameworks but as a point of reference to help the reader follow the main thought processes that I went through when seeking to understand the participants' learning experiences during the narrative analytical process. In other words, this was my way of explaining the relationship between the concepts 'agency', 'participation' and 'inclusion' in relation to the emerging data, and it provided me with a consistent foundation when constructing the interpretive narratives.

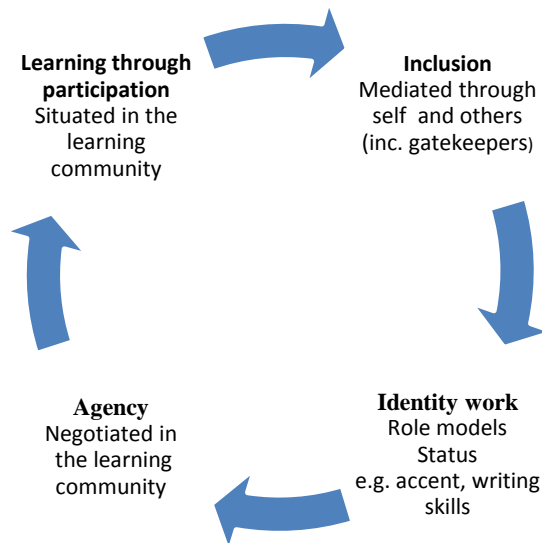


Figure 3: an inclusive social learning process

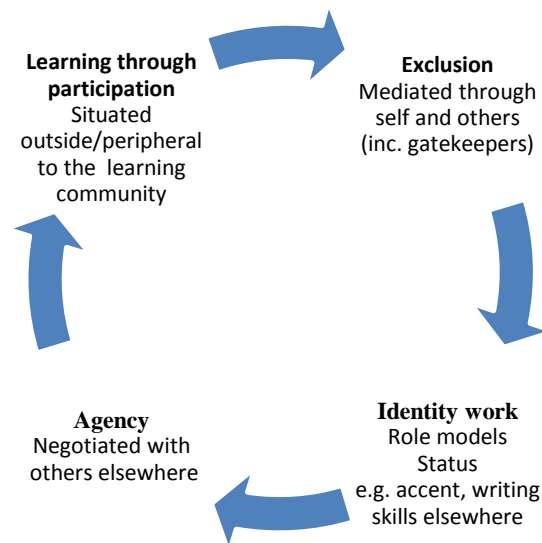


Figure 4: an exclusive social learning process

In the conceptual maps, I theorize learning through participation as either an inclusive social learning process that contributes meaningfully to the learning of the individual in the context of the community as a whole (Figure 3) or an exclusive social learning process that contributes meaningfully to the learning of the individual but not necessarily or directly to learning in the community as a whole (figure 4). Figure 3 therefore represents an idealized inclusive process through which the learning community accommodates the agency or resolutions of the learner and the affiliation of the learner to that community is therefore strengthened. This working model serves as a useful point of reference for the reader when contemplating the participation of the three learners in the following cases at CIF.

4.1 Leonie's story

Leonie is a German student who spent a year studying in the United States before joining CIF. She also previously followed an international programme at another Dutch university, which “improved my level of English again, since I had to read and understand a lot of academic terms and since I followed the highest English level class there was”.

For Leonie, participation at CIF seemed to be primarily defined in terms of ‘production’ and ‘grades’. At the time of the interview, she was working on a project in a group of six international students. She chose to work largely through German in collaboration with a fellow German student, Renate, whose writing skills she valued, and who emerged as a role model within Leonie’s story.

I can see that some people are not as good at writing as others. So then for me it’s natural that then the people who are willing to do it, or who think they are better at doing it also take it up and then make it one style.

Leonie and Renate became the self-assigned 'expert' writers in this project group, which limited their interaction with the other project group members. By dividing the writing task in terms of language ability, other students were excluded from some parts of the learning process. However, another result of this process was the effective exclusion of Leonie from aspects of participation which could have been beneficial to her own language development. For example, she excluded herself from English language practice by tackling the production process through her L1: "We lot of times switch into German to discuss important issues if we talk".

Leonie described this situation not only in relation to language ability but also in terms of national culture, differentiating the approaches of fellow German students from the others: "We're really responsible and most of the Germans care for the grades and not for the passing". By attributing different attitudes to different cultural backgrounds, Leonie ascribed herself a certain status, distancing herself from the less responsible 'others', who from her perspective were less desirable as study partners because they were less focused on grades. She also designated a negative role model status to these less responsible others, whose behaviour she wanted to avoid replicating. However, this effectively limited her own opportunities for interaction through English, which conflicted with her stated desire for greater social contact in small groups in order to practice her English language. Through this process, Leonie reduced her sense of affiliation with the CIF learning community and did not make full use of opportunities to interact through English.

Referring to her English teacher, Leonie recognized that the classroom could only offer a partial solution to her language acquisition needs:

The teacher gives us the kind of tools or says 'OK cross all the unnecessary words out' or 'use special linking words' or 'provide us with lists', so that's very helpful. So she gives us the tools that we can then use. But the problem is that we never really use this language when we speak. So then you have the writing but not the speaking.

Yet, through her decision to work primarily with other Germans during the project work, and to some extent through German, Leonie did not extend her opportunities to speak English. In this way, she was unable to access role models outside her immediate community of German students, with the result that she eventually used English with some emotional reluctance:

Due to the intense group work ... and due to the fact that speaking English is always connected to work and not to socializing and using it for "pleasant" conversation, I noticed that I try to minimize speaking English, talking German most of the time to my fellow students and almost avoid speaking English, because it is more connected to work than to enjoyment!"

This response contrasted entirely with her description of her earlier learning experiences in the United States:

During my stay in the United States, I realized what it meant to speak English and I was eager to learn, in order to better communicate to other people and know what they are saying.

One possible conclusion is that Leonie effectively excluded herself from full participation in the CIF learning community as she was unable to find positive role models that would have encouraged her active use of academic English. The result was that she only partially engaged with the learning community, relying heavily on students who shared her mother tongue. Ironically, she also recognized the potential value of the very exercises that she opted out of:

The good thing is that you interact naturally a lot with others, with Dutch people or wherever they come from and then you do use a lot of English. Especially the social aspects that you have within these studies, also if you sit together with your groups, you always talk about different things. And then the time period in which you use English gets greater. So the more I do work in groups and the more I have to speak or explain myself or something, the more practice I get in English.

Ambivalence lay at the centre of Leonie's experience at CIF. She never fully resolved her conflict of interests between taking the 'responsibility' (a word she used several times) to achieve high grades and her need for greater practice in English through group processes. In terms of role models, she instinctively turned to other fellow German students, in particular Renate, avoiding working with students who presented the negative role model of aiming to pass with a minimum grade. The result was that she partially excluded herself not only from the CIF learning community but also from the language learning experiences that fuller participation would have provided.

4.2 Katerina's story

Katerina's first language is Russian and her second language is German. She decided to study through a third language, English, after a formative gap-year in New Zealand. Her LLH describes the influence of moving across communities on her approach to language acquisition. Her early experiences of language learning were of flux: success, followed by a family move, followed by a complication and subsequent adjustment towards a resolution. For example, she described how, having been promoted to the 'A class' for English in one town, she moved with her family to another town where her first educational experience was of failing an English exam. This was followed by a period of private English lessons, after which she reported that "the next exam I passed as usual".

At the start of this research, Katerina was preparing for an internship in Spain, and the need to reconcile the demands of different communities was of immediate concern to her. Despite worries about her immediate future, Katerina expressed confidence in her level of English, which she attributed directly to the preparation she had received at CIF. "Even if you could not talk perfectly, you had the knowledge so you felt more secure". She contrasted this assessment with her experiences in learning Spanish during an earlier study period in Barcelona, which had led her to "feel like they're judging me, that I'm a bit stupid or something".

Despite this earlier experience with Spanish, Katerina was planning to return to Spain for her internship, but she expressed doubts about the practicalities of her continued participation in the learning environment of CIF, in particular when writing her Bachelor's thesis in Spain. She had shared these doubts informally with Leonie, which is consistent with the idea that her core learning community remained CIF, or possibly in this case the smaller sub-community of German-speaking CIF students (see also section 4.1). However, my impression was that Katerina needed more support than could be provided by informal contacts with her peers, and she did not feel empowered to resolve the issues through the formal language provision (an academic writing course) offered in the curriculum: "I see that the class is supposed to prepare us but I think first of all my personal opinion is, it's too late and it's too rushy."

Writing her thesis lay at the core of her dilemma:

There's going to be in my case probably two versions [of the thesis]. I'm going to make one practical version for the company and then the paper which is for the university is going to have all the theory, so these are also things which I don't know.

Katerina's recognition of the need to produce documents for two different audiences was compounded by fears that distance from the learning community during her internship would result in isolation:

I'm not going to be in Holland, not going to be in Germany, I'm going to be in Spain. So basically all on my own.

Thus, Katerina's participation in the educational process was threatened by unresolved concerns. She could not find formal resolutions from within the learning community, nor could she draw on informal role models for meaningful guidance. In response to the fear she expressed of being alone, I wrote a narrative interpretation in which I wrote that she seemed to be falling into a 'no-man's land' between two learning communities with different expectations and requirements'. I subsequently shared this interpretation with Katerina, and she later responded by email from Spain: "I can tell you that my story of 'no-man's land' (I like this metaphor a lot) is continuing."

As discussed in the Introduction, images have provided me with meaningful metaphors at various points in my research, and at this point in the interpretive process, I became fascinated by Andrew Wyeth's 1948 painting *Christina's World*. This poignant image depicts a young woman in its foreground, half-sitting, apparently stranded in a wide expanse of open space; scattered buildings in the far distance seem to be beyond her reach. In Wyeth's painting, I saw a 'no man's land' with an isolated 'Katerina-like' figure 'all on her own' without access to role models or other means of support.

An image like this challenges me as a qualitative researcher not to become too comfortable with my own analyses. *Christina's World* led me to reconsider my interpretation of Katerina's experience and to re-assess the fundamental dilemma facing her. In my research journal, I wrote:

The painting conjures up an image of a human vacuum, and in the absence of social contact there can surely be no such thing as participation.

I decided that Katerina's context could be more meaningfully understood as a contested space in which a variety of interactions were possible, and in which claims were being made on individuals like Katerina by competing communities. Hence my association of Katerina with *Christina* ended. In this revised understanding, the insecurity that Katerina experienced when she moved from Spain to the Netherlands and back again through these contested spaces made more sense to me. This insecurity seemed to be perfectly in keeping with Katerina's own description of her experience, in which she focused on herself in relation to the judgments of other people:

Because now I'm going back [to Spain] and I just remembered that actually the last time I came back [to the Netherlands] the only thing I was happy about was 'finally I can express myself really perfectly again so that people are not misjudging me'. Especially those moments where you get angry and you just cannot talk any more, and you have to accept those looks.

My conclusion in this case, therefore, was that the tension or insecurity experienced by Katerina in relation to her language learning was explicable in terms of the social context in which she found herself. Whereas Leonie sought out role models in the familiar context of her German mother tongue community, Katerina was not able to find adequate support, and she makes no reference to the role models that might have helped her to resolve her tensions. In this respect, it is useful to compare the feelings of helplessness expressed in Katerina's story with the resourcefulness exhibited by both Leonie and Simona (see 4.3 below).

4.3 *Simona's story*

Simona is a Romanian student, for whom German is a second language and English is a third language. Having made the decision to study in English to gain an international degree, she arrived in the Netherlands to follow a Business Studies programme. After one year, she switched to the CIF programme, and she was entering her final year at the university at the start of this research.

Simona was aware of the benefits of the learning community at CIF: "I think that's one of the main things I got in this school. I'm a bit structured now, and I can plan. That's more the school's influence." However, she also recognised the need to take the initiative when she felt that the formal curriculum did not meet her needs: "I think teachers can only give you an impulse. You have to do it yourself in your private time". She explicitly outlined the relevance to her of other communities beyond the university, explaining that "the community, for me at least, is really expanding outside of CIF". Also, she described several communities that she had participated in during her studies in the Netherlands alongside her CIF learning community. Firstly, she described the social community at the international student house:

One of the things that helped me a lot was living in an international student house when I came here. Because for the first time in my life, I

heard so many different people coming from really different corners of the world, talking really different English than I was talking.

Secondly, she described an academic community of internationally-oriented people beyond the CIF learning community. Simona took active steps to become involved with this community when she felt that CIF did not provide her with sufficient scope for her development.

It's quite like a small community outside CIF. And I feel the main thing that those people have in common is just that they're quite internationally orientated, or that they have strong connection with this city, which I also have.

Simona was also explicit about the value of role models to her language learning: "You need some clues or some examples. I always use examples. But not necessarily taking them as the ultimate truth." Simona described the way she learned from the performances of these role models, emphasising how she drew on a variety of sources from within and beyond the educational environment. For instance, she attributed her ability to ask questions to her observation of the techniques of CNN reporters:

I started asking questions on a regular basis. Somebody had to take the initiative. I got a lot of positive feedback. 'How do you come up with all those questions?' asked my classmate. I never knew I was good at that. But I like to watch CNN all the time and I have role models.

I had noticed that Simona often compared herself to others, so I decided to raise this point in the interview with her, referring directly to comments she had made in her LLH about 'speaking English weird'. She responded:

It's because people tell me, like this thing with the exotic accent, I have been hearing it so many times ... when I speak either Dutch or English, it's the same thing. And then of course I completely ignored it, but then I heard it too much.

Simona understood that others appeared to ascribe a certain 'exotic' status to her because of her accent in Dutch and English. This kind of feedback from peers may be a useful means by which individuals can measure the extent of their success in reconciling themselves with a community to which they feel affiliated. In this sense, Simona's awareness of her difference to others in terms of accent seemed to be a sign of her ongoing 'identity work'. However, in this case her use of role models became problematic because her choice of native-speakers as role models led her to set herself unrealistic goals in terms of her pronunciation of English. As a consequence, she was determined to do her internship in "a native English speaking environment: UK, Australia, Canada, USA, there are many choices", a goal which would ultimately prove unattainable for her.

The issue of accent represented for Simona the kind of unresolved tension that we have already seen in the cases of Leonie and Katerina. For Simona, the 'resolution' arrived only after she had finished her studies at CIF. When I sent

her an interpretive narrative that I had written about her case, she responded as follows:

I am still confronted with the accent issue and the 'ascribed status' that other people attach to my way of talking and writing as well! This [the interpretive narrative] is like a reminder of the thoughts I had more than a year ago to go to an English speaking country. In practice it is rather difficult right now. I was astonished at the energy I exhibit in your writing. The fact that I was looking for solutions when solutions are not provided.

Simona went on to explain how she had revised her language learning goals in the meantime. She had not succeeded in finding an internship in an English-speaking country. On the other hand, she had now succeeded in finding a role for herself as a part-time teacher of English:

I experienced that because I learned English as a so called 'second language', I find it very easy to understand others that speak English as a foreign language. This is actually a strength when you think that some native speakers find it harder to understand non-native English speakers. I gave a free of charge English lesson to a Russian girl I met and she complimented me on the fact that she could understand what I was saying because I speak clearly and am aware of simplifying phrases when talking to her (by still keeping a grammatically correct form) so that she can understand me.

In this case, despite her apparently 'unresolved' issue with her accent, Simona had succeeded in becoming a role model for others. While Simona's case demonstrates how the skilful use of a variety of role models might engender inclusion in the learning community, it also shows how important it is for students to receive realistic guidance in their study ambitions. Through an intervention such as mentoring, Simona might have been less inclined to see her non-standard accent as a complication in the first place and might have set herself more achievable goals in relation to both her language learning and her internship.

5 Discussion

The narratives which emerged from the analysis of this data demonstrate the extent to which individual language learners in the same programme may differ in their responses to the stimuli provided in the learning environment. Such differences are consistent with the different contexts of my participants' prior learning experiences, as well as their individual hopes and ambitions which are reflected in their developing and changing identities. This demonstrates the need for providers of language education to design educational structures that produce greater awareness of the differing learning needs and backgrounds of individual students in order to provide them with effective scaffolding. This would allow them to experience greater agency within the learning community, which in turn would result in fuller participation, as suggested in figure 3. This

participation would produce a more motivating learning experience not only for the individual learner but also for their peers within the learning community, making it less likely that students like Leonie would seek fulfilment elsewhere or that students like Katerina would feel so isolated.

Effective scaffolding requires awareness of the previous learning experiences of students, which can be brought to light through the use of reflective tools such as LLHs. This also requires a greater understanding of the way that learners structure their learning beyond the classroom, using language in a variety of situations across a network of overlapping communities or affiliations, as discussed in this article in relation to role models. Such knowledge can be produced through greater interaction between curriculum developers and students, for instance through interviews, student panels, journals, and through the use of online blogs or forums. To ensure that all students are involved, there is also a need to provide forms of negotiation that break down the informal power structures within and alongside the curriculum. Such mechanisms should be transparent and accessible to all stakeholders within the learning community. One example of such a method for facilitating and scaffolding discussion in the context of programme evaluations is Nominal Group Technique (Kiely & Rea-Dickins 2005: 210).

The individual experiences of Leonie, Katerina and Simona, as outlined in the above narratives, also confirm the need “to understand second language learners as people, and as people who are necessarily located in particular cultural and historical contexts” (Ushioda 2009: 216). These stories also highlight the value of carrying out longitudinal research which records the development of ‘language learners as people’ over a period of time. This allows us to study the way that individuals test and adapt their language learning strategies as they move into new environments such as study placements or internships. Ivanič discusses the way in which new ‘activities’ lead to greater awareness regarding the subjectivity of identification. She argues that “the capacity to examine critically their own processes of identification gives people agency and control over the contribution they are making to the circulation of discourses, and ultimately to the potential transformation of their social world” (Ivanič 2006: 26). Simona demonstrates this process of transformation as she becomes a role model for other learners of English. Interestingly, during this process, she has also moderated her expectations, transforming her imagined ‘ideal L2 self’ (Ushioda 2009: 225) so that she no longer aspires to speak English like a native speaker.

Finally, these stories provide evidence of the transformative role of ‘research conversations’ in narrative inquiry. According to Speedy (2008), narrative inquiry may induce new understandings by looking into the spaces between culture and agency and “excavating the traces of other discourses contained therein” (Speedy 2008: 32, following Derrida). At the end of this article, I am led to consider what such narratives might mean in the lives of research participants. Both Katerina, in her consideration of the concept of ‘no-man’s land’, and Simona, in her contemplation of accents, offer some clues as to the potentially transformative nature of the research process at a personal level. I conclude that narrative inquiry has much to offer researchers who are interested in deconstructing language learning experiences across multiple communities or fragmented environments in order to gain a fuller understanding of the tensions experienced by learners.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the support of Professor Pauline Rea-Dickins, Professor Jane Speedy, Dr Sheila Trahar, and Dr Irit Cohen

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Appendix 1. Research Participants (fully developed cases)

Of the seven original participants, the following five cases were developed into full narratives. I have used the cases of Leonie, Simona and Katerina (pseudonyms) for this article because of the data they provided in relation to role models and status.

Participant	Gender	Nationality	First Language(s)
1 Mark	M	Dutch	Dutch
2 Ilana	F	Israeli/Dutch	Hebrew/Dutch
3 Leonie	F	German	German
4 Simona	F	Romanian	Romanian
5 Katerina	F	Russian/German	Russian/German

Appendix 2. Initial coding categories (for the LLHs)

Node number	Node name
1	complications
2_1	resolutions/self-initiated resolution
2_2	resolutions/other resolutions
2_3	resolutions/provided resolutions
2_5_1	future intentions/self-initiated future intentions
2_5_2	future intentions /other future intentions
2_5_3	future intentions /provided future intentions
4_1	communities/inclusion
4_2	communities/exclusion
4_3	communities/problematic
5_1	emotion/positive emotion
5_2	emotion/negative emotion

Appendix 3. Document Coding Report for Simona's LLH

The data below is presented as an example of my use of NVivo2, which I have described in the article as functioning as my codebook.

Node 7 of 22 (4 1) /communities/inclusion
Passage 1 of 3 Section 0, Para 18, 289 chars.

18: I met an American girl with whom I shared a kitchen and who taught me, while speaking to me, many words I did not know. I was living in an international student house for a year and she was the student manager as well. In this period of time I met people that spoke English very different,

Passage 2 of 3 Section 0, Para 23, 108 chars.

23: I continued speaking with international students, speaking but also more interacting with different people.

Passage 3 of 3 Section 0, Para 30, 114 chars.

30: what helped me in school to improve my English were: the discussions in class, giving and observing presentations,

Node 8 of 22 (4 3) /communities/problematic
Passage 1 of 4 Section 0, Para 5, 104 chars.

5: English was my third language already, Romanian being the mother language and German, as first language.

Passage 2 of 4 Section 0, Para 32, 276 chars.

32: Outside of class I learned what Dutch-English was! I mean English spoken by Dutch people. I actually learned the common mistakes they make or what phrases or expressions they translate from Dutch! I started learning Dutch as well, so maybe it was useful in this area as well.

Passage 3 of 4 Section 0, Para 38, 134 chars.

38: but for me I can hardly wait to get in a real English native speaking environment. (UK, Australia, Canada, US there are many choices!)

Passage 4 of 4 Section 0, Para 40, 71 chars.

40: Thus, I will do my internships in a native English speaking environment

Node 9 of 22 (5 1) /emotions/positive emotion
Passage 1 of 1 Section 0, Para 11, 136 chars.

11: I had very good teachers n English, who were also very friendly and nice people in general, so I started liking learning English a lot.

Node 10 of 22 (5 2) /emotions/negative emotion
Passage 1 of 3 Section 0, Para 14, 25 chars.

14: I thought it was unfair,

Passage 2 of 3 Section 0, Para 14, 149 chars.

14: And I was disappointed, because it was my favorite subject, and t seamed that for some unknown reason, I could not be better than I was at that time.

Passage 3 of 3 Section 0, Para 38, 122 chars.

38: I was astonished, that compared to the British she was speaking English in a German way, and I was speaking English weird.

Received 4 November, 2011
Revision received 28 May, 2012
Accepted 18 September, 2012