

# Language Students and Emerging Identities

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*The aim of our article is to study written narratives as a way of expressing emerging identities as second language (L2) users. We compare narratives written by Finnish students of Swedish during their first semester (24 essays) with data collected after the third year of study (9 essays), thereby trying to figure out how the university context has affected the development of the students as L2 users. L2 learning is regarded as a complex project entailing constant identity formation as a plurilingual subject. We see identity as a process, as something flexible, hybrid and multifaceted. Identity evolves in participation and it always includes a temporal dimension. The language learning process can be seen as a construction of a new third place (Kramsch 1993) between the source language and the target language. For the purpose of this study we define this place as an abstract field containing all the ingredients that each student sees as part of his or her language learning narrative. The learning process can also be regarded as a process of becoming a more integral part of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) consisting of fellow students and target language users. Two main themes arise from our study. Firstly, during the studies students' dreams start turning into more concrete plans, like getting a job. Secondly, the narratives show that as students become a more integral part of their community, they start talking within (and not only about) the practice they are involved in.*

*Keywords:* second language (L2) learning, identity formation, written narratives, the third place, community of practice

## 1 Introduction

In this article our aim is to examine second language (L2) learning and the process of identity formation that L2 learners go through during their studies at the university. We hope this information will make us better equipped to support the students in their growth towards linguistic professionalism.

We compare narratives written by Finnish students of Swedish during their first semester with data collected from students after the third year of study, thereby trying to figure out how the university context has enhanced the development of each student's own individual *third place* (Kramsch 1993). The learning process can also be regarded as a process of becoming a more integral

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part of the *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger 1991) consisting of fellow students, teachers and target language users. As our general theoretical frame we have the sociocultural theory which emphasizes the inter-relationship of individuals and their sociocultural context and where all learning is seen as situated activity (Vygotsky 1972, 1978; Rogoff 1995; Säljö 2000). Because of the theme of the study and the narrative setting of the analysis, there is an apparent temporal dimension in our study.

In an earlier study (Huhtala & Lehti-Eklund 2010) we examined how Finnish university students of Swedish at the beginning of their studies tell about their reasons for choosing to study Swedish and about the expectations they have concerning their studies. During that process we started thinking about students who have already studied Swedish for several years and how their narratives might differ from those of first semester students. We became interested in the *identity process* that students go through during their studies in university context and how this development can be seen in the written narratives of these students.

## 2 Data and method

As our data we use narratives written by Finnish university students studying Swedish as L2. We compare narratives collected from students during their first semester (24 essays) with narratives collected after the third year of study (9 essays). The more advanced students were different from the ones who wrote their essays during the first semester. The narratives – all written in Swedish – were collected at the University of Helsinki between 2008 and 2010. The first semester students were asked to write about why they have chosen to study Swedish and what they expect from their studies at the university. The more advanced students were just asked to tell about the role of Swedish in their lives. The examples taken from the essays are translated from Swedish to English, and we naturally use pseudonyms when writing about these students and their narratives. As most of the writers – as well as of all L2 students of Swedish – are female, we use the pronoun *she* when talking about the students in general.

We regard L2 narratives as unique texts that can give relevant information on different aspects of language learning as well as on identity formation. This means that language learning narratives can be seen as building sites for identities: students try to find a balance between their actual selves and their possible selves (Markus & Nurius 1986; Higgins 1987; see Ushioda & Dörnyei 2009:1–8 for a theoretical overview). The possible selves may be of different kinds; they may be externally motivated (ought-to selves) or internally defined (ideal selves) or even feared selves (see Kubanyiova 2009).

When students write about their L2 studies they inevitably also write about themselves as language learners and in so doing (re)construct their identities as L2 users. Writing an L2 narrative can thereby be seen as an identity process where students use a foreign language in creating their own life story. We could also say that these students are involved in a dynamic process of generating new textual worlds in another language, and that these worlds contain references to the outside world. It is important to keep in mind that the identity thus

constructed is always a (more or less) temporary version of the language learner and her relationship with the language in question.

In this article the language learning narratives are studied through a thematic analysis concentrating on the process that takes place during the studies. In our analysis, we concentrate on themes that arise when the students describe their past experiences, their present feelings and their expectations regarding the future. We also examine how the students describe themselves in relation to their university context, i.e. to what extent they regard themselves as a part of this context and of the Swedish speaking community at large. Our research questions are as follows: How do the narratives of first year L2 students of Swedish differ from those of students that have studied the language for more than three years? This question is closely linked to another: How does activity in the practices of the university affect the identity process of L2 learners?

### 3 Theoretical background of the study

In this socioculturally oriented study we lean on three theoretical constructions that can be seen to complement each other. Firstly, learning as situated activity (Vygotsky 1972, 1978; Rogoff 1995; Säljö 2000; van Lier 2004); secondly, the connection between identity formation and participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998); and thirdly, the concept of the third place (Kramsch 1993, 1996).

In our opinion, trying to understand a phenomenon as complicated as the construction of an L2 identity by means of narratives in a university context is possible only through dialogue between different theoretical perspectives.

According to the sociocultural theory, learning does not occur in a vacuum. Learning as participation, engagement in interactions and activities, is always situated and linked to its context (Wenger 1998). Human activities are mediated: people interact with other people and the outside world with the help of different tools, the most important of which is language (see e.g. Vygotsky 1972, 1978; Säljö 2000: 74-103); in their interactions people use language for negotiating meanings in their social, cultural and historical context. Learning can therefore only be understood in its context.

As Gibbons (2006: 9) states, also

language development interacts dynamically with the sociocultural contexts in which it occurs and cannot be analysed or understood apart from its situational and cultural contexts.

From a social constructionist point of view (Berger & Luckmann 1966), our identities are constructed as narratives. Every time we tell about our lives we present a certain version of our life story, at the same time constructing and reconstructing our personal and social identities (Johansson 2005: 83). According to this view, identity formation is a lifelong process. Identity can thereby be seen as something flexible, hybrid and multifaceted; it evolves in participation and always includes a temporal dimension.

Lave and Wenger (1991) build up their theory on the idea of legitimate peripheral participation. According to this theory, learning takes place through

participation in socio-cultural practices. This applies also to the development of a professional identity: a person wanting to learn a new profession goes through a process where she initially participates in (more or less) peripheral activities. A marginal position in the beginning makes it possible for the person to partake in different activities of the community as a legitimately peripheral participant, engaging in fewer and less demanding duties than the 'old' members. Gradually the learner will become involved in more and more central and meaningful activities in the community (see also Wells & Claxton 2002: 8), which in the end can lead to full participation. According to Lave and Wenger, the members of the group do not necessarily have to be present at the same time, and the group need not have clear, well-defined boundaries. Instead, members of the group have to have a shared understanding as to the central elements of the community, e.g., what the members of the group are supposed to be engaged in. Nor is homogeneity a requirement for a community of practice (Wenger 1998: 76).

Rogoff (1995) uses the term *participatory appropriation* when referring to the individual process of *becoming*, a transformative process by which people constantly change through participation in certain kinds of activities and at the same time become prepared for similar subsequent activities. She points out, however, that individual processes are inseparable from the other levels of sociocultural activity, i.e. the interpersonal level (guided participation) and the community level (apprenticeship).

Narratives – especially first person narratives – can be regarded as places of transformation. Analyzing first person narratives of L2 learners can give valuable information on the identity process of the writers. Kramsch (1993) has come up with the theoretical construction of *the third place* (the third culture), a place that allows the formation of hybrid identities in the linguistic and cultural borderland between the native language (L1) and the L2. As her starting point she has the idea that culture is 'linguistically mediated membership into a discourse community, that is both real and imagined' (Kramsch 1996: 3). She points out that language learning is a 'personal creative act of 'linguistic identity'' (Kramsch 2007: 118); through autobiographical writing learners construct their subjectivities as plurilingual individuals. This process entails a change in a person's relationship to herself and an orientation towards the future, towards what she wants to become.

The third place (the third culture) according to Kramsch (1996) is a dynamic hybrid space in the language learners themselves. It emerges between the native language/culture and the target language/culture, but cannot be reduced to either of these. It is a transformative construction of the individual learners, an attempt by them to position themselves in the discourse community using the language. For the purpose of this study we define the third place as an abstract field containing all the ingredients that each student sees as part of her language learning narrative. We see the third place as a zone for de- and reconstructing both the native language and the target language, a possibility for learners to position themselves in the discourse community to which they want to belong. As Swedish is a pluricentric language spoken by the majority in Sweden and by a 5.5 % minority in Finland, it is possible for learners of Swedish to identify themselves with either or both cultural communities (Clyne 1992: 1).

The students studying Swedish as their L2 at university gradually become more involved in the community of practice of the Swedish speaking section of

their language department where the common language of all interaction is Swedish. Little by little, as their language skills get better, the students find it easier to take part in different activities at the department. Their identities as Swedish speakers develop dynamically in the course of everyday interaction. As they communicate with their fellow students and staff, students get socialized into their new group and engage in its activities. Step by step they also get more skilled in using their L2 outside of the university, in other contexts where the target language is used. The process of identity formation is naturally affected by their own feelings and attitudes, as well as the attitudes of their friends and relatives. Identity construction takes place in an intricate context that involves much more than the language to be learnt.

Feeling, thought and action are interdependent (Vygotsky 1995, 1978: 27, 92-104; 1972: 1-8; Bruner 1986: 106-118); all these are inseparably linked to each other also in the construction of L2 narratives. When a person studies a foreign language, and a foreign culture, she has to create a third place (Kramsch 1993) for integrating the native language and the foreign language; thirdness in this case can be seen as a process of intercultural meaning making, a cognitive as well as affective reconstruction and an attempt to become a member of a new community of practice. When we learn a new language, we work on the language in question, using our emotions as well as our cognition. The development is also affected by our interpretation of the learning process and of the learning context. According to van Lier (2002: 157, 147) language learning should be experiential, contextualized (situated), activity-based and developmental; we use the language to relate the self to the outside world (see also van Lier 2004: ch. 5).

Wenger (1998: ch. 6) describes the close connection between identity formation and practice. Participation in different communities of practice entails a life-long negotiation of the self. This means that identity is essentially temporal. As we live our lives, participate in various activities and interact with different people, we simultaneously do identity work. Although we change all the time, we experience ourselves as the same person. There is continuity and coherence through time: when we negotiate the present, we incorporate the past as a part of our identity while simultaneously orienting towards the future. Learning as a process of participation is at the same time a continuous process of identity construction.

It is evident that some processes (e.g. identity formation) take longer than others (i.e. interacting with one's peers during one lesson). These processes can be interdependent: recurring interactions can have an effect on identity construction. Lemke (2000: 280) uses the word *heterochrony* to refer to 'the interdependence of processes at very different timescale or rate-scale levels of an organizational hierarchy in a complex self-organizing system'. A human being can be seen as such a system.

Also Rogoff (1995) sees identity formation as a temporal phenomenon, but she does not like the idea of separating the past, the present and the future from each other. For her, the present 'extends through the past and future and cannot be separated from them'. When people act on the basis of earlier experiences, the past is present; when they orient towards future activities, the future is present. In this way, learning (i.e. participatory appropriation in Rogoff's words) is not a process of accumulation (of knowledge, experiences etc.) but of dynamic transformation, ongoing development.

We understand the concept of time in much the same way as Rogoff does, but have chosen to use the concepts of the past, the present and the future in this article. We do so for three reasons: firstly, these concepts are commonly used also in academic studies on identity construction; secondly, they are used in the essays we have as our data, and thirdly, they make it easier for us to refer to the different dimensions of time when analyzing the identity process that is visible in the narratives. Neither Rogoff nor the writers of this article regard past experiences as *stored* in a person at any given moment. As we see it, a person is as she is at a certain moment due to a dynamic developmental process, a creative transformational process that continues till the end of our lives.

## **4 Development from a dreamer to a practitioner**

### *4.1 The dreamy vagueness of narratives by first semester students*

There is a strong temporal element in the narratives of all the writers. What is evident, however, is that students at the beginning of their studies tell very differently about the dimensions of time (the past, the present and the future) compared with students who have studied longer.

Students who have just started their studies at the university describe the past, for example their earlier studies, travels abroad and job experiences, in a very concrete and detailed way. One of the students writes:

In the summer of 2005 I wanted to work abroad and got a job as an assistant nurse in [a small town] near Stockholm. The job was not so nice but I liked to communicate in Swedish. (Meeri)

When these students start writing about the present, however, the tone gets different. As they have just started their studies, they know hardly anything about what studying at university level entails. At this stage it is not really possible to describe how things *are*, instead one can fantasize about how things *could* or *might* be; as yet there are no concrete experiences that could be used in constructing detailed narratives. Students sometimes refer to what their family members or friends have said about this kind of education, or just write that they do not know enough to be able to tell anything more specific.

At the moment I don't really know what to expect of my studies. I have just started, so everything feels a bit hazy just now. (Jatta)

This kind of vagueness can be seen as very natural. The writers of these narratives have only been studying for a couple of weeks. They have come to a new context, met dozens of new people and attended only a few lectures. For most of them, university is a completely new environment, fascinating but also a bit frightening. Getting used to a new milieu takes time, just like forming an informed opinion about the studies. The same vagueness is evident when these students mention their own future.

I hope we'll have an interesting and useful curriculum here. It is difficult to tell what an interesting course would be like, but it might have something to do with different types of activities and my own interest. (Leena)

I hope my studies will give me information that is useful to know. (Inka)

I naturally hope to get to know new people and to have the best time of my life. (Siru)

As new students do not have a detailed picture of what their curriculum will be like - even if they naturally have been given information by their department and their faculty - they feel they need a lot more information about different aspects that have to do with their studies and their future as professionals.

I hope they will tell us more about the different alternatives we have when we get an exam in Scandinavian languages. I think I would be a good teacher and I also think it would be easy to get a job as a teacher, but I still want to hear more about different alternatives. (Veera)

Many of these first semester students use the word *dream* when writing about their studies or pondering on their future profession. However, it seems to be difficult for them to explain what these dreams could mean in practice.

To study Scandinavian languages has been my dream for a long time. (Ada)

I hope I can combine my Swedish studies with such minor subjects that help me in finding my dream job. (Liina)

In 2008 I was finally admitted to the university, and I am now starting to live my dream. (Siru)

The text fragments above are very typical of the narratives we have studied. The writers tell a lot - and in a detailed way - about their past experiences, but when they start writing about their present studies at the university, their narratives get more obscure and vague. We got the impression that they would love to tell about their situation, but do not really find words to describe it. The narratives get even hazier when they start telling what they would like to do after their studies and what their future profession (as experts on Scandinavian languages) could be like. There are many things in their new learning environment that are completely new to them, which makes it challenging for them to visualize how life after a few years at the university could look like.

Using Lave and Wenger's (1991) terminology, we could say that someone who is still a legitimate peripheral participant in a community of practice cannot possibly describe the practice - or herself as a part of that practice - from within. Instead, she is forced to look at it from the outside, trying to figure out what it might mean in practice. It is only possible to talk *about* the practice, not *within* it (Lave & Wenger 1991: 107-109).

#### 4.2 The practical orientation of narratives by more advanced students

The writers who have already studied a few years at the university write about their studies and their lives in general in a very different way. They describe both their past and their present situation in a detailed and concrete way, commenting on their peers, teachers and practical arrangements, books they have read, courses they have taken and things they have learnt. In many cases they comment on their language learning process in an analytical way, using relevant linguistic concepts; this can be regarded as an example of their growing expertise.

When I speak Swedish I've got problems in pronunciation (especially in prosody), in morphology, syntax and lexicon. (...) I also want to develop my interaction which means that I want to take the others into consideration and to relax when I speak Swedish. (Piia)

Now I feel that this language has become a tool also for many other things [than communication]. When you use a foreign language in your studies, the language becomes an important part of learning, education and information searching. (Kaisu)

This concreteness seems to come from personal experiences gained during several years of study at the university, from certain repeating patterns, routines and traditions that the students have learnt to know and have participated in. It could be said that they now talk *within practice* (Lave & Wenger 1991); they feel they are more competent members of the community consisting of L2 learners and teachers as well as of the Swedish speaking community at large.

Being able to talk *within practice* is not something that happens all of a sudden. Becoming a more integral part of a community of practice is at the same time a continuous discursive process whereby new members gradually learn a certain way of discussing, negotiating and debating about different issues. During this process they become experts not only on the subject matter, but also on the discursive practices of the community. As Lave and Wenger (1991: 109) point out,

[t]alking within itself includes both talking within (e.g., exchanging information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities) and talking about (e.g., stories, community lore). (...) For newcomers then the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation.

Shared practices between old and new members offer a natural forum for 'learning to talk', a forum for expressing opinions, discussing practical matters and telling stories about the practice.

In their essays, many students tell about important discussions they have had in different situations in the course of their studies and how these interactions have affected them. Some of them comment on the relaxed atmosphere between students and personnel at their department, which has

made it easier for them to discuss all kinds of matters with their teachers and the rest of the staff.

There is no gap between the teachers and us students, so it feels easy to go and talk to someone in case there is something one wonders about. (Helmi)

What is interesting about the narratives is that the students no longer write about their dreams or that they hardly use the word in their narratives. Instead, the essays contain concrete plans for the future, including e.g. a future job or moving abroad. It is now relatively easy for them to describe what their future profession as L2 experts could entail. At this moment they already have the tools (linguistic, cognitive, narrative etc.) to explicate what they expect of their future profession. It is also possible for them to regard themselves as experts in the field of linguistics, as plurilingual subjects who can work and function in another language (Kalliokoski 2009: 437–438) – their apprenticeship is now almost over. Of course this does not mean that they now know everything; there are many things that they cannot be sure about, but they are much more confident and convinced that everything will be all right.

I have studied pedagogy in order to become a teacher of Swedish one day if I choose to do that, but I'm not quite sure about it yet. (...) Anyway, I know that Swedish is going to be an important part of my life, probably as a part of the job I'll choose in the future, but in any case – and that is most important – Swedish will be a resource and a source of happiness to me. (Anna)

These students also seem to feel more confident in their *third place*, commenting on their L2 usage and their own development as L2 users. The third place seems to have become richer, more nuanced and dense, which also gives these students a certain kind of security and flexibility in their plans for the future. They now identify themselves as L2 professionals, at the same time acknowledging that one never gets 'ready': there are always new things to learn, new experiences to gain, new problems to solve. But they now feel they have the tools to tackle these challenges.

If I now try to summarize what I have written so far, I'd like to say that even if it [studying Swedish] was a bit difficult in the beginning, I think I have developed enormously in using Swedish. (...) Just now I plan to practice my grammar so that I could talk Swedish more correctly; I should also practice my pronunciation a bit more. Of course it's never possible to become perfect, but if you have the right attitude and motivation, you'll go quite far anyway. (Kati)

Many of the students comment on their experiences of student exchange or some longer stay abroad which they regard as an important phase in their professional development towards linguistic competence and expertise.

I want to point out that the most important moments as far as the development of my Swedish is concerned, is my stay in Sweden. I have

become more courageous and I'm no longer so afraid of making mistakes. I hope I'll be able to talk Swedish more correctly in the future. (Taina)

Staying abroad has given this student – like many other students – a highly appreciated opportunity to get immersed in their L2, to communicate with native speakers of Swedish and to take part in different activities in L2 surroundings. After such a sojourn students often feel more comfortable using the language and feel they are part of the L2 community in a way that was not possible for them before the stay. Much has also happened in the abstract mental space between the L1 and the L2 that Kramersch calls the third place. It has become richer and more detailed. This can be seen in the narratives written by these students.

The general picture of the development of students' self-confidence and professional self-respect as well as of their deeper involvement in the community of practice of L2 speakers during their studies is relatively bright and encouraging. There seems to be a balance between their actual selves and their possible selves, which in this case appear to be internally defined, i.e. ideal selves (see Ushioda & Dörnyei 2009; Kubanyiova 2009). But there usually is an exception to every rule, so also in this case.

One of the students wrote in her narrative that she has been studying a couple of years longer than the five years that is the recommended time for getting a master's degree in Finland. She is still struggling with her studies and feels confused and insecure about her future. We started calling this student, Ida, 'the negative student', because she wrote her narrative through negations, telling what she had *not* done or accomplished, what she could *not* do and what she certainly could *not* become. Here are some examples from her narrative.

I still don't know what my future job could be like.

I don't think I could become a researcher.

I don't think it is necessary for me to find a job that these studies usually lead to.

It seems as if there was an imbalance between the actual self and the possible selves of this student (see Higgins 1987). Besides, she seems to be in a state of deep bewilderment – even panic – concerning her professional future. She seems to comfort herself by stating that it is not even necessary for her to find a job that has to do with her L2. This statement leaves also other doors open, if she happens to find a job that has nothing to do with her present studies.

In this kind of a situation it is natural that a person tries to find reasons for her confused feelings and for something she sees as a failure of some sort. Ida's explanation is that she has never been abroad as an exchange student.

It is my own fault I haven't developed so well – I haven't been in exchange.

Even if this explanation may sound a bit hollow to an outsider – considering her prolonged studies and the general insecurity concerning the studies – for her it seems to be a completely viable explanation. *If* she had been in exchange, her life situation at the moment would be totally different.

## 5 Discussion

Identity formation can be seen as a holistic life-long process that involves not only the individual but also her environment. It could be said that the process is about constant transformation resulting from the individual's interaction with other people and the rest of her environment. Also the contexts of identity construction (for example the repeating cultural patterns and the typical ways of teaching and learning at the university) are dynamic and go through changes of different kinds, but the changes usually happen more slowly than the changes in an individual; what is central, however, is that a human becomes a person only through social interaction within a community (see Lemke 2000: 276, 283).

For an L2 student the university context, the community of fellow students and teachers, as well as that of target language users are some of the contexts where students interact with others and go through identity development. Lemke (2000: 285) states:

In this participation we learn to do differently and to be different. We engage with a person or an artifact in a particular way, typical of that activity, and now the system in which our persona exists and functions changes.

The identity process of a person goes on at many levels at the same time, and the outcome of the process is always temporary, fluctuating and more or less unforeseeable.

In this article we have discussed one aspect of the identity process of 33 Finnish speaking students of Swedish, their (narrative) identity as L2 users. When comparing narratives by first semester students with narratives by students who had studied for longer than three years, we found a couple of interesting differences. We noticed that at the beginning of their studies, students wrote a lot about their dreams, but the descriptions were vague and hazy, whereas the students who had studied longer wrote detailed descriptions about their plans for the future. Another difference we found was that the first semester students wrote their narratives from a peripheral perspective: they told about the practices of their own department almost as outsiders do, whereas the students who had studied longer, showed a deep involvement and engagement in the practices of their community, and wrote their narratives within that practice.

Our interpretation is that for most L2 students the years they spend in university context entail a process of becoming a more integral part of their community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). This process, however, is not automatic. It requires that a student regards this context as meaningful for her development as a person and can feel her participation in it as emotionally fulfilling and important to her (see also Lemke 2000: 286). This is something that Ida, the student who wrote her narrative through negations, is an interesting example of. For her the long stay in university context had not resulted in a successful integration and engagement in the community. She did not feel part of it, but rather positioned herself as an outsider.

Compared with the students who had just started their studies, the students who had studied longer seemed to feel more confident in their *third place*. They

commented in a very detailed and well-informed way on their L2 usage. They took up things they were already good at, but also things at which they wanted to get better. The picture they had of their own development as L2 users seemed realistic; it also showed that these students now have the tools to continue developing their language skills in other contexts as well. The third place – the abstract hybrid place between the L1 and the L2 – seemed to have become richer, more nuanced and even more flexible, thereby giving the students a more relaxed attitude towards their possibilities of getting a job as an expert of L2, and towards their future as a whole. They had concrete plans for the future, but they also left the door open for new and unexpected opportunities. They identified themselves as L2 professionals, but also acknowledged the fact that it is impossible to speak or write a foreign language perfectly and that there is always something new to learn. The identity process is by definition a process – it goes on as long as we live.

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