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'I don't feel like I'm studying languages anymore'. Exploring change in higher education students' learner beliefs during multilingual language studies

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ABSTRACT

To educate multilingual global citizens and follow the multilingual turn in language education, universities are faced with the challenge of developing their language pedagogies. This article reports on a study conducted in the context of university language studies that take a multilingual perspective to learning languages for academic and professional purposes. Although multilingual pedagogies have been widely developed in what could be traditionally considered as bilingual education, practical implementations are rarer when considering students that generally have one home language but study multiple foreign languages. To assess the effects of multilingual teaching in this kind of context, the present longitudinal, discursive study examines changes in university students' beliefs about language learning during their studies. The findings show a shift towards perceiving language more as a means of communication rather than a school subject during the research period, although this shift was clearest for English. In addition, there were small signs of multilingual perspectives towards language learning. The study indicates that there are advantages to multilingual pedagogies in higher education. The article discusses challenges in university language pedagogies and gives suggestions for further development of multilingual teaching.

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Introduction

As the demands of the rapidly evolving knowledge economy (The Douglas Fir Group 2016; OECD 2018; Gunnarsson 2014) and the multilingual turn in language education (Gorter and Cenoz 2017; Meier 2017; Ushioda 2017; Henry 2017; Busse 2017; The Douglas Fir Group 2016) highlight themes of multilingualism and internationalisation, universities are faced with the challenge of developing their language pedagogies. University graduates should possess multilingual competencies to operate in transnational and superdiverse environments (The Douglas Fir Group 2016; The Council of the European Union 2018), which could be supported by adopting a holistic approach to multilingualism, promoting the use of the students' whole linguistic repertoire (Henry 2017). This means shifting the focus of language teaching towards translingual competencies, integrating languages rather than seeing them as separate entities (Gorter and Cenoz 2017). Such changes in language pedagogies could help to foster students' multilingual skills as well as cultural sensitivity, flexibility, and resilience, all of which are beneficial for a global citizen (cf. Critchley and Wyburd 2021).

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Although multilingual pedagogies have been widely examined in SLA literature, practical implementations remain scarce (Gorter and Cenoz 2017), especially when it comes to academic contexts outside of what could be traditionally considered bilingual education. Contemporary research considers an individual with resources in more than one language multilingual (Meier 2017), which has implications both for how we conceptualise and educate students whose home and school languages are the same but who study one or more foreign language(s). Developing multilingual pedagogies for these students is likely to be different to those bi- or multilingual contexts where the learners are in close contact with all the studied languages in their everyday lives. This paper reports on a study conducted in the context of a pedagogical development project in which university students' compulsory communication and language courses were restructured to create translingual teaching practises promoting the development of students' multilingual competencies (Jalkanen 2017). To the students of these courses, most of the target languages were purely 'foreign' languages, often only existing inside the classroom. During their bachelor's degree studies, the students took part in four multilingual courses that replaced traditional, separate courses on mother tongue and foreign languages for academic and professional purposes.

Moving from traditional to multilingual language learning is likely to cause negotiations of meaning, or changes in beliefs, between the teachers and the students, both of whom have been educated in a system that perceives languages as separate school subjects (cf. Haukäs 2016). Beliefs are here understood as learners' discursively constructed views and opinions about languages, language learning and themselves as language learners (Kalaja, Barcelos, and Aro 2018; Mercer 2011). It is important to examine learners' beliefs in connection to new pedagogical implementations, as they can strongly influence language learning (Kalaja, Barcelos, and Aro 2018). For instance, discrepancies between learner beliefs and the teaching style can lead to less investment in learning, while on the other hand, beliefs can have an affirmative quality when they are consistent with the teaching ideology (cf. Peng 2011). In this study, the interest lies on the learners' adjustment to a multilingual teaching style and its effects on learner beliefs. The study examines if and how this kind of teaching results in changes in beliefs and subsequently contemplates the nature of these changes: It asks whether the multilingual approach affects the participants' beliefs in a way that could be favourable towards a more multilingual understanding of and an increasing investment in language learning. On the other hand, it considers which beliefs remain stable, and whether multilingual language teaching can negatively affect learners' beliefs.

To explore change in students' learner beliefs during the multilingual language courses, this article examines data collected at the beginning and end of social science students' bachelor's degree studies at a Finnish university. Situated within higher education language pedagogies and the discursive understanding of learner beliefs, the study aims to create a new understanding on multilingual teaching from the perspective of students whose home and school languages are the same but who study multiple foreign languages. Pedagogically, the purpose is to provide information that can be used to develop pedagogical practices to better foster students' beliefs about themselves as multilinguals operating in transcultural and -national environments.

Literature review

Developing multilingual pedagogies in university

To answer to the demands of increasingly multilingual, -cultural and -disciplinary job markets, universities aim to prepare students in becoming global citizens that can operate in international contexts (Critchley and Wyburd 2021). Multilingualism and internationalisation are central themes in development projects on institutional, national, and international levels, as universities work towards goals such as better student and staff mobility and employability, social inclusion, diversification and decolonialisation of academic content, and integration and employability of international students and staff. Such extensive development work is not without its tensions, as

different discourses on language needs for these goals can simultaneously promote multilingualism and English as a lingua franca (cf. Huhtala, Kursiša, and Vesalainen 2021; Darling 2021).

It could be argued that a university student is almost always multilingual. In non-Anglophone countries, students must learn to process academic information through their national language and English to ensure both local and global academic communication (Kaufhold and Yencken 2021). Higher education policies in Europe are also guided by the European Union that promotes learning of at least two foreign languages and names multilingual competence as one of the key competencies of a European citizen (The Council of the European Union 2018). In addition to accessing and contributing to international research, English is often used within the home institution with the increasingly international staff and student population (Kaufhold and Yencken 2021). However, discourses on internationalisation have been criticised for simply promoting English (Fabricius, Mortensen, and Haberland 2017) rather than more socially inclusive uses of multilingualism. Recent research indicates that the taken-for-granted status of English in many countries can lead towards little interest to develop competencies in languages other than English (LOTEs) (Henry 2017; Busse 2017). For example, in Finland, this means that while students' English-skills are generally high, they study fewer languages than before (The Matriculation Examination Board 2021). Taking all this into account, universities are faced with a challenge of developing language teaching that is socially inclusive and globally responsible, which requires new multilingual pedagogies.

The multilingual turn has encouraged language education to adopt a holistic approach to multilingualism, encouraging students to utilise their resources across languages (Henry 2017). This constitutive view on language learning challenges the traditional dichotomy of a native vis-à-vis non-native speaker as well as concerns the whole range of semiotic resources of the individual instead of focusing on languages as separate systems (Ushioda 2017; Cook 2016). Language education should stress translingual and transcultural competencies enabling the learner to 'operate between languages and cultures as informed and educated speakers and mediators' (Ushioda 2017, 474). Gorter and Cenoz (2017) note that although holistic multilingual pedagogies are discussed widely at a theoretical level, there are fewer implementations. The authors review recent advances in multilingual teaching practises that involve translanguaging as well as supporting students' cross-linguistic awareness and metalinguistic skills. However, it seems still more common to implement such practices in bilingual education rather than within language education of students from 'monolingual' backgrounds studying multiple foreign languages, such as is the case in the context of the present article.

Examining change in students' language learner beliefs through positioning

This study explores the change in university students' learner beliefs. The research into learner beliefs since its emergence in the 1980s can be broadly divided into traditional and contextual approaches, the latter encompassing various perspectives on understanding this concept (Kalaja, Barcelos, and Aro 2018). In this article, I draw from the discursive approach (Kalaja, Barcelos, and Aro 2018; Mercer 2011) and define learner beliefs as learners' views and opinions about languages, language learning and themselves as language learners, that are discursively constructed, complex and dynamic, shared in specific contexts and affected by macro-contextual factors such as values and language ideologies. The emic perspective highlights the discursive nature of beliefs in contrast to etic approaches viewing beliefs as cognitive constructs in the learner's mind (Kalaja 2016). Beliefs have been studied in different contexts and during various lengths of time. However, Kalaja, Barcelos, and Aro (2018) call for studies related to the status of the learnt language(s), about being a learner of language(s), and the process and outcomes of learning the language(s). In addition, the authors note that longitudinal studies over several years are scarce. This article contributes to these research tasks by examining university students' beliefs about different languages,

language learning and themselves as language learners over the course of three years during which they take part in a pedagogical development project in multilingual language education.

Previous longitudinal studies show that beliefs have a significant impact on language learning and that university students' beliefs can be both stable and subject to change. Aragão (2011) showed that students were able to change their self-perceptions as language learners through languaging about their beliefs and emotions, suggesting that reflective practices can affect change in beliefs. Mercer's (2011) case study illustrated the simultaneously stable and dynamic nature of self-beliefs, challenging 'simplistic models of cause-and-effect and change/stability dichotomies' of belief development (343). Yang and Kim (2011) showed the significance of beliefs in engagement in language learning, as the participants in their study utilised their L2 environment to various degrees depending on their learner beliefs. Kalaja (2016) found that university students of English mostly viewed the 'language as system' and 'as discourse', and little 'as ideology', which is likely a reflection of the ubiquitous and relatively uncriticised role English has in Finland (see also Pirhonen 2021; Huhtala, Kursiša, and Vesalainen 2021). During their studies, English became a more everyday language to the students, and they started describing themselves as users rather than learners of English. Aro's (2016) findings suggest that while children relied heavily on institutional discourses on language learning, as young adults the participants drew more from their own experiences as well as societal and cultural voices. Peng's (2011) study demonstrated how university students' learner beliefs were affected by affordances, that had an affirmative quality when in line with the learner's beliefs. Conversely, if affordances were unavailable or inconsistent with the learner's beliefs, the learner was more likely to question their value. Peng (2011) notes that university students can adjust to the educational ideology they are surrounded by, but contextual factors such as stressful testing and monotonous teaching can impair attempts to promote informed learner beliefs. While illustrating the complex and dynamic nature of beliefs from different perspectives and in different contexts, most of these studies focus on beliefs about L2 English, thus leaving a gap for an exploration of university students' beliefs of all languages they study and use.

From various possibilities for examining beliefs discursively, this article takes a positioning perspective. Positioning is an agentive process where individuals construct their beliefs by choosing positions available to them and then speaking from those positions. Positioning can mean adopting, accepting, or resisting available positions. Accordingly, discourses both impact individuals and are impacted by these agentive actions (Davies and Harré 1990). Using the term position rather than the more static idea of a role, we can focus on the dynamic nature of interaction (Kayi-Aydar and Miller 2018). Kayi-Aydar and Miller (2018, 81) conclude that positioning theory 'draws attention to the ways in which people are constantly changing as their circumstances and contexts change'. Positioning theory is, therefore, useful when analysing learner beliefs which are known to be dynamic; it can help to understand the moment-to-moment emergence of positions through which the learners construct their beliefs. The focus of this study is on learners' self-positioning, in other words, how individuals position themselves in their discourses (van Langenhove and Harré 1999).

The study

This study examines the evolution of social science students' learner beliefs during their bachelor's degree studies. The data was collected at the beginning of the studies' first and at the end of the last semester.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

RQ1: How do the students position themselves towards languages and language learning in the data?

RQ2: What kinds of language learner beliefs do the students construct through these positionings?

RQ3: How do the beliefs change during the research period?

Context of the study

The context of this study is a development project at a Finnish university aiming to educate professionals who can operate in multilingual and international settings. All Finnish university degrees contain compulsory studies in the students’ mother tongue, second national language and first foreign language, which for the majority are Finnish, Swedish and English, respectively. In addition, students are encouraged to study L3s but these studies tend to be optional. While both European and national level policies emphasise the importance of learning at least two foreign languages¹, the strong status of English in Finland seems to have led to sceptical attitudes towards the need for LOTEs (cf. Henry 2017; Busse 2017). The unit in charge of compulsory communication and language studies at the university presented in this article has restructured its teaching by adopting the holistic approach to multilingualism (cf. Gorter and Cenoz 2017). Instead of traditional language-specific courses, students take part in multilingual teaching exploring phenomena in academic and professional communication, utilising purposeful translanguaging. Although the courses are multilingual, the students’ Finnish, Swedish and English are assessed separately.² Figure 1 summarises the content of the four courses, illustrating the multilingual and phenomenon-based nature of the studied themes.

The present study was conducted during the first pilot of these studies. As a part of a larger teacher team, I collected data alongside the teaching. Rather than conducting action research, I started examining the change when it was being implemented and I was assigned as a teacher in these courses. I am a teacher of two languages and as such, found translanguaging natural (cf. Haukås 2016). However, I wanted to investigate the students’ perspective. Before university, they had been learning their mother tongue and foreign languages as separate school subjects, and I,

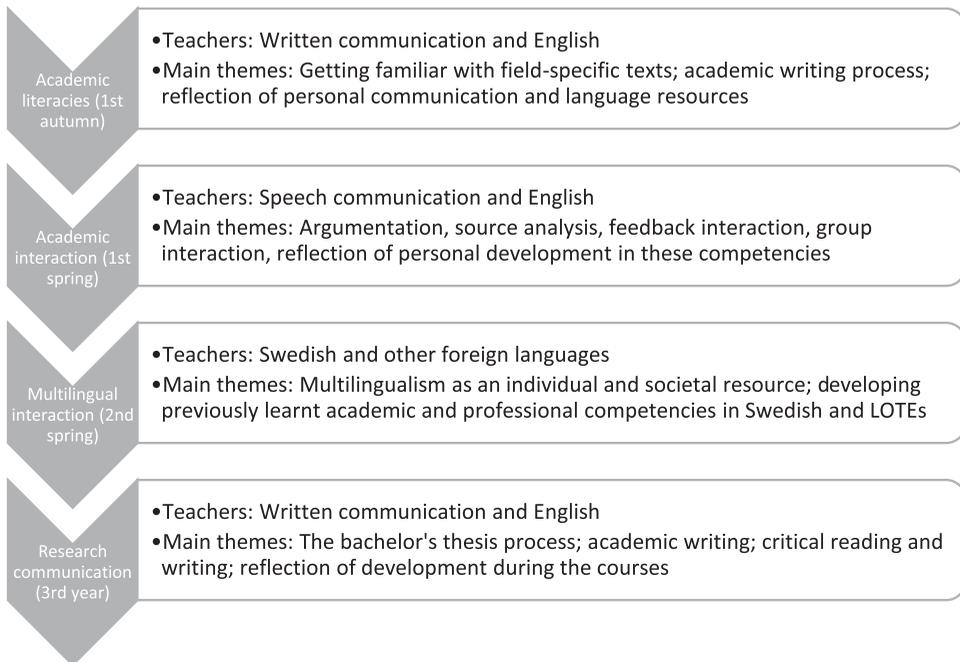


Figure 1. Structure and themes of the restructured multilingual courses for social science students.

therefore, expected that moving to multilingual teaching would affect the students' learner beliefs. Accordingly, I began to examine whether changes in their beliefs occurred.

Data collection

The data consisted of two reflective essays ($n = 14$) that the participants ($n = 7$) wrote at the beginning and at the end of their language courses (Figure 1). Beliefs are affected by experiences from the course of a lifetime, so to minimise variability, the seven participants were chosen based on their age. All of them started university directly after their graduation from upper secondary school,³ which meant that they had not spent years in working life or possibly abroad. The participants granted me a research permission and I stressed that their texts would be anonymised and that the research would not affect their course assessment.

The first essay was a language biography (Williams, Mercer, and Ryan 2015) in which the students discussed memorable events and insights related to their language learning experiences. In the second essay, the students discussed their language learning experiences in university and reflected on possible changes that had happened since the initial language biography essay which they revisited during the writing process. The essays were course assignments as well as a data collection method, which was considered in the analysis process. However, the assessment criteria were loose, encouraging the students to write freely about their feelings before and after their language studies. As a teacher-researcher, I had to focus on my biases, since by the time of the analysis I had taught the participants for three years and knew them well. I utilised the background knowledge, I had on the students as a strength in the analysis process, while continuously examining my positioning of the students as well as their self-positionings.

Methods of analysis

The analysis was informed by positioning theory and the discursive approach to learner beliefs (Davies and Harré 1990; Kalaja, Barcelos, and Aro 2018). Learner beliefs are possible to observe through learners' positioning in which individuals locate themselves and others in discourse (Davies and Harré 1990). The analysis with the Atlas.ti software process began by thematically exerting every utterance, such as a small story or claim, relevant to the research questions. To explore how the participants positioned themselves in these utterances, I coded them using the following questions:

- What is the context of this utterance (e.g. language class, a situation related to language use, general discussion about language learning)? Which language or languages are discussed in it (English, Swedish, other LOTEs)?
- How is the learner positioned in relation to the context and possible other characters (e.g. an agentive/passive student, a learner receiving/resisting the teaching)? Which discursive features are used in these positions (e.g. recurring expressions, evaluative or affective vocabulary)?

The coding occurred in several rounds, moving from open to refined coding. The codes and their discursive features led to six distinct ways of positioning which were used to discuss several beliefs about languages and language learning in the data. When coding, I examined the whole data-keeping an open mind to the possibility that the participants would adopt different and new positions in the final year reflection. However, all the six positions occurred in both data sets and there were no new positions in the second one.

Despite the positions remaining the same, their densities varied, and it was evident that the best way to examine change was to assess the extent to which the positions occurred in the two essays. Accordingly, I examined which learner positions and languages co-occurred, and how the two data

sets differed in terms of these co-occurrences. Through this process, it was possible to analyse how the participants' positionings between the two data sets indicated changes in their beliefs.

Results and discussion

The participants adopted six different positions to discuss their learner beliefs. The positions portray two main beliefs about the nature of language: language as a subject and language as a means of communication. There were differences in beliefs about English and LOTEs including Swedish. In addition, both changes and stable beliefs occurred in the participants' positionings between the two data sets. The next sections will first present the six positions associated with the two main beliefs, and then discuss how positionings revealed changes in beliefs about English, LOTEs and language learning in general.

Two beliefs about the nature of language

Language as a subject

The participants positioned themselves as **receivers of teaching**, **good learners** and **opponents** to discuss language as a (school) subject. Speaking from these positions, the participants expressed beliefs about the formal nature of language learning: Language learning was measured with grades and languages were subjects among other subjects. Language learning was portrayed as receiving of teaching, emphasising the role of the teacher or educational circumstances such as timetables. Learning was also discussed as being strongly dependent on motivation. In addition, the participants could stress that languages are generally important, but this belief seemed to be directed at the receiver of the essay, the teacher. [Table 1](#) presents the three positions, their discursive features, and an example excerpt.

Table 1. Receiver of teaching, good learner, and opponent positions.

Language as a subject		
Position	Discursive features	Example
Receiver of teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive or negative statements describing the teaching conditions or the teacher • expressions of gaining or receiving • descriptions of the learner's motivation • evaluations of the learner's skills • expressions of receiving grades • descriptions of 'completing' a language 	<i>I completed the academic Swedish surprisingly easily – I passed both the oral and the written part on my first try and the latter even with quite good points.</i>
Good learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • claims highlighting that languages are beneficial • statements portraying a motivated learner • evaluative statements of their previous lack of effort being disappointing 	<i>There are considerable benefits for knowing both of these languages in career opportunities [in my field].</i>
Opponent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expressions of purposeful opposing of language learning • expressions of negative attitudes resulting in opposing learning • statements of problems in teaching • doubtful expressions related to future language learning 	<i>I could even claim that I have in some way rebelled against the idea of 'compulsory internationalisation'</i>

The receiver of teaching, good learner and opponent positions depicted beliefs about formal language learning. In the receiver of teaching position, the learner portrays their learning as being dependent on teaching. The learner expects to ‘gain’ skills from teaching. Learning is also influenced by motivational factors or the learner’s inherent language skills. The learner is thus an actor dependent on the learning conditions (cf. Peng 2011). In many cases, the learner’s motivation is described in a positive manner, expressing the learner’s interest to learn. However, the learner is still non-agentive, not taking responsibility in learning. While the receiver of teaching position is about the learner’s dependence on gaining skills from teaching, the good learner position is adopted when the student wants to make claims about language learning that seem to echo societal and institutional discourses on the benefits of language learning (cf. Aro 2016). Here the student describes themselves as a learner that knows what is expected of them. For example, they can stress their motivation but on the other hand, give a justification for why they have not studied a language despite the motivation, or the statements are evasive, using conditionals to highlight that something would be ‘nice’ but might not happen. This suggests that they want to depict themselves more motivated than they perhaps are. In contrast, the opponent positions themselves against language learning, teaching or discourses suggesting they should study more languages. The positioning is an active process of questioning or refusing a position (e.g. Davies 2000) they feel is placed on them by society, the university, or the language teacher. Overall, the use of the receiver of language, good learner and opponent positions were adopted less in the second data. This indicated a shift towards perceiving language more as means of communication, which will be discussed next.

Language as a means of communication

Through positioning themselves as **language users, receivers of language** and **skilful learners**, the participants discussed language as a means of communication. As they spoke from these positions, they expressed the need for languages in their free time or studies. In addition, learning was evidenced through descriptions of successful encounters the participants had had with the language, in contrast to the beliefs associated with language as a subject, where the participants described success with grades. The positions, their discursive features and examples are described in Table 2.

The language user, skilful learner and receiver of language positions highlighted communicational contexts of language learning and use. The language user uses languages in their studies or free time, or describes how they will use them in the future. The focus here is on language use and what language enables them to do. While learning is a by-product of doing, the learner is still agentive in the sense that they are actively choosing to do something in the target language.

Table 2. Language user, skilful learner, and receiver of language positions.

Language as a means of communication		
Position	Discursive features	Example
Language user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> descriptions of situations where the learner has used, uses or will use the language in their studies or their free time, such as in connection to culture, entertainment, friends or travel 	<i>English has especially found its way into my world through compulsory courses, interesting articles and podcast lectures.</i>
Receiver of language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> descriptions of language use situations and their effect on the learner descriptions of situations implying learning or lack thereof. 	<i>I believe that the best way for me to learn languages would be [in a country of the target language] so that there would be continuously input that would activate and quicken the language learning process.</i>
Skilful learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> expressions of development and success expressions of heightened sense of confidence 	<i>Last summer I was in France [with friends], and to my surprise I managed surprisingly well in French despite all these years [when I hadn’t used it].</i>

In contrast, the receiver of language positions their learning solely dependent on outside factors. Compared to the receiver of teaching position, here the learner expects to acquire language skills due to outside factors forcing them to use the language, rather than expecting someone to formally teach them. The factor is either explicitly described as something that ‘transfers’ skills to the learner or there is a clear implication that a certain situation would make the learner use the language. Importantly, the learner is non-agentive, which distinguishes it from the language user position. This position is most often used in connection to future aspirations, for example, when expressing hope that the learner would ‘gain’ language during exchange. The communicative element of language use is also present in the skilful learner position in which the student evaluates their language learning based on what they can do with the language, discussing their progress in the language or their heightened sense of confidence. This contrasts with the receiver of teaching position highlighting grades as evidence of learning. All these three positions were adopted more frequently in the second data. The next section will describe the beliefs that were depicted with different positions.

Change in beliefs about languages and language learning

By exploring how the different positions were used in the data, it was possible to examine change in the learner’s beliefs about language learning. The next sub-sections will discuss change and stability in beliefs about English, LOTEs, and language learning in general.

Change in beliefs about English

There were already significant differences between how the participants discussed English and LOTEs when entering university. English was not only a school subject but also a language they used in their free time in contrast to LOTEs including Swedish that rarely existed outside of school. However, the participants started recognising their informal English learning in greater quantities during university. In fact, they rarely used the receiver of teaching position in relation to English in the second data, stressing that they had learned it in other contexts than formal language teaching. Examples 1 and 2 illustrate this shift.

Example 1⁴

Naturally, because I had developed my English skills [by playing video games] already before we started learning it in school, I was ahead of most pupils (-) In fact, my English grade was 10⁵ throughout primary school. (-) English was still so easy for me [in secondary school] that I never received a lower mark than a 9 for a test but my grade remained a 9 because I never put my hand up in class. (Student 2, Data 1)

Example 2

The one thing that I have developed in [when it comes to languages during university] is using English. Situations in which I have ended up using it have been e.g. helping out exchange students (-), political debate on the internet and generally following things [in the world]. Because I have had the chance to use it more also orally during my studies, my pronunciation and my confidence related to it have grown a lot. Because of that, using English is now a lot easier for me than before. (Student 2, Data 2)

In Example 1, the student positions themselves as a language user by mentioning their use of English in their free time, but the main point of this story is located in the classroom where the student positions themselves as a receiver of teaching. They highlight their grades and do not discuss any active studying – rather, they stress their inactivity in class. Example 1 illustrates the way English was commonly discussed in the first data: It was both a language of free time and a school subject, but those two aspects seemed separate from one another (cf. Aro 2016). While the participants positioned themselves primarily as receivers of teaching and to a smaller extent as language users when discussing English in the first data, in the second data they shifted to speaking from the language user and the skilful learner positions. In Example 2, the student positions themselves as a

language user describing their use of English in different, everyday situations, and as a skilful learner as they assess their skills based on their feelings and confidence. This contrasts with discussing grades like in the receiver of teaching position and highlights the strengthening of the language as means of communication belief.

It seems that already when entering university, the participants knew of the many uses of English in their free time. However, by the end of their bachelor's studies, it had also become their everyday study language. Student 1 illustrates this development in Examples 3 and 4, describing English-language entertainment in the first essay and field-specific language use in the second.

Example 3

At the same time my English skills developed and improved. Most of the entertainment I consumed was in English. (Student 1, Data 1)

Example 4

English has especially found its way into my world through compulsory courses, interesting articles and podcast lectures. (Student 1, Data 2)

In both examples above, the student positions themselves as a language user but the uses of the language become more versatile in the second data set as the student discusses their use of English as a natural part of their studies. This development happened even to those who struggled with English in school and solely portrayed themselves as receivers of language in the first data. Student 4's journey is an example of this.

Example 5

The level of English teaching was already quite high and as at the same time I was studying two new, interesting languages, (-) I had problems with studying English. (Student 4, Data 1)

Example 6

I feel like I've got a lot better at English compared to my freshman autumn. The biggest reason for this development is the large amount of English material in my studies. Getting familiar with these texts, finding the main ideas, and summarising the texts has developed my English skills (-). (Student 4, Data 2)

In Example 5, the student depicts English as a school subject and describes their difficulties with it, speaking from the position of a receiver of teaching. In Example 6, they position themselves as a language user who has become accustomed to studying through the language. The participants spoke about English a great deal in their second essay and acknowledged the changes that had happened due to English becoming a part of their academic study skill set. The language user position illustrated the natural part the language had in the participants' lives and the skilful learner position depicted an increasing confidence in their competencies.

Change in beliefs about LOTEs

While English became an increasingly natural part of the students' lives, there were less of such developments in discourses on LOTEs. Both data sets depicted LOTEs as school subjects, although in the second data, it was increasingly acknowledged that a LOTE can be learned by living in a country where that language is spoken. Common to both beliefs was that the students positioned themselves as relatively non-agentive receivers, of either teaching or language. Despite Swedish having a different status than other LOTEs in Finland, there were no noteworthy differences between them in this analysis. This sub-section will, therefore, discuss Swedish and other LOTEs together.

Many participants positioned themselves as receivers of teaching at the beginning and end of their studies, maintaining the belief that LOTEs were mainly (school) subjects. Examples 7 and 8 illustrate this from Student 1's perspective.

Example 7

In Swedish, I did pretty well despite my lack of interest. (Student 1, Data 1)

Example 8

I completed the academic Swedish surprisingly easily – I passed both the oral and the written part on my first try and the latter even with quite good points. (Student 1, Data 2)

In both examples, Swedish is a subject in which the student succeeds, but this is not due to the students' actions. Rather, the student positions themselves as someone to whom success in Swedish is happening, even if they are not motivated, or not expecting it. The frequent use of this position in the first data is likely to reflect language teaching in the Finnish school system which, despite conscious efforts to highlight communicative aspects of language, must support students in passing national exams. The belief that language is a subject that can be 'completed' is particularly evident in Example 8, where the student discusses the academic Swedish studies. It is noteworthy that although the students had to pass certain assignments also in Finnish and English during their multilingual language courses, only Swedish was discussed in the data as something that had to be passed. English was never portrayed as a completed subject but rather a skill that would continue to develop.

At the end of the participants' studies, LOTEs mostly remained to be subjects that existed in the classroom, or in the target country, in which the student would have to live to learn them. In Example 9, Student 10 positions themselves as a receiver of language when they discuss how they would learn language best, expecting their environment to force them to learn.

Example 9

From the future, I hope that I end up learning languages more and more in for example working life or in some other "practical way" (-). I believe that the best way for me to learn languages would be [in a country of the target language] so that there would be continuously input that would activate and accelerate the language learning process. (Student 10, Data 2)

The use of the receiver of language position was minimal in the first data, which suggests that at that point the participants saw language as a skill to be gained in class. Although still not invested in placing much responsibility on themselves to learn LOTEs in the second data, the use of the receiver of language position displays the belief that languages are learned through use in informal contexts. This position was mostly used in relation to Swedish, which may imply that there was a wish to learn it more, but the learning would have to happen during exchange. In Example 10, Student 1 discusses their cancelled exchange in Sweden, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Example 10

The Swedish language is still there at the back of my mind and my thoughts about exchange in Sweden remind me that this year has been globally very strange. The Covid restrictions took away my exchange [in Sweden] (-). Despite Covid I dream of an exchange semester or a master's programme in the neighbour country once the world calms down. (Student 1, Data 2)

The implication seems to be that to learn Swedish, the student should spend time in Sweden. Although the students had found English in their free time, they did not seem to have knowledge or motivation to find affordances in other languages.

Although their beliefs about learning LOTEs did not change a great deal, the participants started voicing their thoughts about it more strongly, indicating more agentive positioning than before. Examples 11 and 12 illustrate the shift from the good learner to the opponent position. In Example 11, Student 10 discusses their future university studies from the perspective of language learning and the importance of internationalisation, positioning themselves as a good learner. When revisiting this theme while writing the second essay, they choose not to hedge their problem with language learning expectations in university, adopting the opponent position.

Example 11

Studying foreign languages still isn't a passion for me, but I know that in the field of social sciences knowing languages and internationalisation are especially important qualities when applying for jobs, for example. In fact, I dream of starting German studies. In addition, I have started to dream of going on exchange to e.g. Europe. So, during my university studies, I hope to learn a new language (-). In addition, I of course hope to deepen my skills in English and Swedish. (Student 10, Data 1)

Example 12

From the first day of my studies, I have had a clear understanding about how important language skills and internationalisation are in the field of social sciences. I could even claim that I have in some way rebelled against the idea of "compulsory internationalisation" because foreign languages have never been my strong point and I haven't been very passionate about them (-). According to my own experience, many students (including me) find the expectations of internationalisation even pressuring and language learning should be an internal skill the student should have already at the first year of their studies. (Student 10, Data 2)

In Example 12, the student uses strong vocabulary to highlight their opposing view on 'compulsory internationalisation' that they 'rebel' against, also stressing the 'pressure' they feel. This illustrates the agentive shift in vocalising learner beliefs during their university studies. However, it can be concluded that LOTEs remained mostly as subjects to be learned in class or abroad. In other words, the students did not seem to incorporate these languages into their everyday lives the way they had done with English.

Change in beliefs about language learning

Although the previous sections discussing beliefs about English and LOTEs have already touched upon language learning, the data analysis revealed three key changes in beliefs about language learning that were not language-bound: evidencing language learning, the place and nature of language learning, and the emergence of multilingual perspectives.

During their studies, the participants started assessing their learning based on their confidence about their language competencies, which was a significant change to the belief that learning is evidenced in grades. Student 5 in Example 13 positions themselves as a receiver of teaching, describing their French skills by referring to their grades. In Example 14, they speak from the skilful learner position, assessing their skills based on their observation that they were able to use the language.

Example 13

Studying French was fun at the beginning, but the excitement died down a bit – even though I got 9s all the time (-). In ninth grade, I experienced a strong sense of success: even though I didn't feel I knew very good French, I surprisingly received full grades for an oral French exam. (Student 5, Data 1)

Example 14

Last summer I was in France [with friends], and (-) managed surprisingly well in French despite all these years [when I hadn't used it]. Pronunciation and especially conjugating words of course didn't go quite right but mostly I was understood in everyday situations. I also understood surprisingly well a (-) chat my friend had with the taxi driver. (Student 5, Data 2)

When discussing evidence of learning, the change from the receiver of teaching position to the skilful learner was even in connection to English and LOTEs. This suggests that the belief was not language-dependent.

The data indicates a shift in beliefs about the nature of language learning. Although it did not occur to the same extent with LOTEs compared to English, the participants increasingly discussed languages as a means of communication, stressing that they are learned in informal contexts. Student 1 explicitly expresses the shift in their beliefs in Example 15.

Example 15

In my language biography languages are separate school subjects. This is the biggest change that I can see in how my relationship with foreign languages has changed during the three years. I don't feel like I'm studying

languages anymore. I use multilingual communication naturally and continuously in my studies, so the experience of studying languages is left in the past. (Student 1, Data 2)

Although many other participants did not express the shift in beliefs this explicitly, the decrease of positions associated with the language as a school subject perspective – and the increase of the other three – shows that language *learning* had somewhat been replaced by language *use*. This could be a natural progression due to the use of English in social science studies: even for those students to whom the language had been strictly a school subject, had started using it for academic purposes. English had thus become an everyday language that they could use confidently (cf. Kalaja 2016).

Finally, there were some signs of a more multilingual perspective to language learning. Example 15 reflects the discourses and practises related to the holistic multilingual teaching the participants had taken part in, as the student discusses the uses of ‘multilingual communication’ that have taken over languages as ‘separate school subjects’. The language studies had emphasised the use of the students’ whole linguistic repertoire and encouraged them to utilise also their receptive multilingual skills. Student 11 in Example 16 tells a story from the position of a skilful learner about how they were able to put this teaching into practice.

Example 16

While writing my bachelor’s thesis I looked for sources for my topic and (-) I ended up using a Spanish source. It was nice to notice that I understood the text so well that I could use it as a source, even though it’s been quite a while since I studied the language. I am sure that knowing French supports understanding Spanish, which was nice to notice also like this in practise, because you often hear about languages supporting one another but you don’t understand yourself how true that is. (Student 11, Data 2)

Apart from being another example of evidencing learning in language use, Example 16 illustrates traces of multilingual competencies that the participants had gained and were, to a small extent, able to reflect on. Although the participants rarely discussed LOTE as languages that could be used in practise in their studies, this example is an exception that suggests that at least on an individual level, the multilingual teaching could affect the students’ beliefs and possibly guide them towards more multilingual thinking.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to examine change in university students’ language learner beliefs during degree-specific multilingual courses. The results indicate a clear shift towards perceiving language as a means of communication as well as some signs of multilingual perspectives, but also provide points to contemplate for further development of higher education language pedagogies.

Although the participants recognised the many uses of English in their first essays, over the years it evolved into a language that was an essential part of not only their free time but also their studies. The same change was not detectable in the participants’ LOTE discussions, the competence to use English in different situations seldom transferring to their use of LOTEs. For example, the students rarely mentioned using LOTEs in their studies, even though it could be fruitful in social sciences. Conversely, there were some signs of multilingual competencies, as some of the participants explicitly discussed phenomena related to them. These stories were connected to discussions about multilingualism we had had in class and it could be, therefore, suggested that the language teacher in university can support learners in recognising multilingual phenomena and developing their multilingual and metalinguistic competencies. As LOTEs remained mostly as school or target country languages, it would be important for teachers to help students in finding interesting and purposeful ways to use those languages. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many students’ exchange programmes were cancelled. The participants

expressed a belief that LOTEs are learned in the target country, which could mean that they would not seek opportunities to learn those languages while in Finland. It would, therefore, be important for language teachers to help students find ways to incorporate LOTEs in their daily lives. As Aro (2016, 47) concludes, '[t]he walls of the classroom need not constitute a barrier, separating the language inside from the language outside'.

Another sign of languages becoming increasingly understood as means of communication was the decrease in stories involving grades. In the second essay, the participants expressed their successes in language learning by describing situations in which they had successfully used the language, which could also signify that the learners were invested in language learning for other reasons than for receiving good grades. This could have been affected by the fact that their language courses were assessed with a pass/fail scale which forced them to assess their own learning based on something else. However, due to the official status of Swedish, the students received separate grades for the Swedish part of their studies although they were embedded into the multilingual courses. The Swedish part included an exam, which could have affected the way the participants discussed the language as something that is 'completed'. English and Finnish skills were not assessed with a formal exam, and there was no discussion of 'completing' those competencies. It could, therefore, be concluded that examinations can affect learner beliefs, possibly unfavourably (cf. Peng 2011). In the future, Swedish examination practices should be reassessed; if we as language educators want the students to change their beliefs about Swedish, we should show them how to use it naturally and give less value to examinations.

The language courses discussed in this study utilised translanguaging to illustrate and get the students used to 'real-life' multilingual practices (Ushioda 2017). While there were some traces of this work in some of the students' essays, the small amount of these stories did not reflect the classroom practices from the teacher-researcher's perspective. I had observed the students as they had become used to a flexible use of their multilingual competencies in class and believed that these actions also became natural for them after the first few weeks of their studies. Future research should include classroom observation with stimulated recall interviews to better understand multilingual processes in the classroom. However, the fact that these practices featured somewhat in the reflective essays, suggests that the students were aware of them. In addition, the final essays did not involve criticism towards or wonder about translanguaging courses, which could be taken as a sign of at least being used to these new practices.

During their studies, the students took part in multilingual language courses, but they had also studied social sciences and used languages in their free time, all of which could have affected their beliefs. However, it is in the language courses where the students were taught to pay attention to their language repertoires as well as develop their reflective skills. It could be, therefore, argued that the metalinguistic competencies they had gained in these courses helped them to observe and reflect on their language journey, and without this support, the second essays could have looked different. It is also possible that without prompting them to think about their language learning, they would have not reflected on it to this extent, which could have resulted in less changes in beliefs (cf. Aragão 2011).

This article adds to previous longitudinal studies on learner beliefs by exploring them in a multilingual context. The results suggest that learner beliefs are complex, dynamic, and subject to change, and in line with Mercer (2011), their nature is even more complex when examining beliefs about multiple languages. The most important pedagogical implications of this study are that, at least in a context where English has a strong role, LOTE teaching should emphasise real-life uses of different languages and support learners in adoption of those languages as natural parts of their everyday lives. In university, LOTE teachers could work closely with the students' department to find ways to purposefully utilise languages for academic and professional purposes. This should be done to ensure that learners acquire multilingual competencies and subsequently cultural sensitivity, adaptability and other qualities that are required of them in working life. The future is multilingual, and we must prepare our students to operate in it.

Notes

1. Swedish for most Finnish students is taught as a foreign language despite it being a national language. Finnish schools are normally either Finnish- or Swedish-speaking, which could be argued to foster parallel monolingualism rather than bilingualism (Repo 2020). The second national language is a compulsory school subject and is a required skill for e.g. civil servants. While the south and west coasts of Finland even have areas where the majority language is Swedish, for a large part of the citizens it remains a school subject as English dominates the media, for example.
2. This is due to the degree requirements. Finnish and English are evaluated through continuous assessment, but Swedish has been traditionally assessed with exams. There are ongoing discussions on how to modernise assessment of Swedish in higher education in Finland.
3. Although measures have recently been made to ensure that more students would get a place in university directly after graduating from school, many do not receive a study place with the first try; so-called gap years are thus very common in Finland.
4. The examples are translated from Finnish.
5. The grading scale in Finnish schools is 4–10, 10 being the highest grade and 4 fail.

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