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Write the fear – autobiographical writing and (language) classroom anxiety

SETTING THE SCENE: SHATTERED DREAMS

As we all know, in today's world English is the global language for communication and the prevalent academic lingua franca. The majority of Finnish university students happily use English in study-related contexts. However, some students have overwhelming fears of speaking and writing English and of coping in the language classroom to the extent that it becomes "the language not of dreams come true but of dreams shattered" (Kramsch, 2013, 199).

I work as an English language counsellor at Helsinki University Language Centre. The Programme of Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS), a variety of English course offered to students from all faculties of Helsinki University taking a language course as part of their Bachelor's degree, has been my pedagogical and research landscape for more than 20 years. In this capacity I invite my students to write autobiographical texts in English, personal and intimate stories, as part of their course work. Their language learning

histories, or memoirs. In this capacity I invite my students to write autobiographical texts in English, their language learning histories or memoirs, as part of their course work. Kaplan (1994), started an interest in learning histories in applied linguistics, but it was quite a bit later that they were introduced to foreign language pedagogy. Kaplan had suggested that writing autobiographically about one's language learning touched on identity issues and the texts, unlike theoretical approaches to language learning, could give insights into what learners feel and think about learning. The lived experiences of language users as they emerge from published memoirs by e.g. Eva Hoffman (1989) definitely influenced my pedagogy: I drew from the experiential learning I went through as a reader of the wonderful *Lost in Translation* when I introduced language memoir writing to my students. The early entries in their learning diaries are often full of emotion; they are heart-felt tellings of expectations, worries, anxieties, even fears, doubts and uncertainties, but also of hopes and dreams. The texts make it clear that the beginning of the language course is a deeply autobiographical process by nature. In my experience, for many students writing these first autobiographical texts is a tentative reflection on memories of learning and teaching, mainly in language classrooms at school, in formal education contexts, that have been evoked and come back to them in the first meetings of their course. The memoir in particular motivates students to revisit their past learning experiences, and encourages them to re-create past moments in language classrooms: they go back to, for some of them, forgotten rhythms of the lessons, remembering achievements, successes and failures, as well as their

teachers and peers, for good and bad. There are those, however, who have not forgotten and who, in the writing process, seem to relive troubling events that they have carried with them as heavy personal and learning baggage. These memoirs echo unfortunate scenes in classrooms, clashes of wills, dramatic episodes, even power misused and dreams crushed. According to the testimonies of these learners, classrooms were not always safe places for them; power was used to humiliate or to trivialize them and their experiences and problems. These are students who stand outside the English classroom door even as university students and hesitate to open it. They feel anxious, their bodies and minds freeze when they worry about the teacher, the other students, certain classroom routines and their own coping in the classroom, the whole unpredictability of what awaits them beyond the door.

> OONA: *It's so seldom that other students understand. They cannot feel in their body what fear means. (memoir, unedited)*

The student voices in this text come from special peer-groups in ALMS: they are extracts from students' portfolio texts and my pedagogical/research documents. These students have given permission to use their texts in research. I have changed some of the names to protect their privacy.

In this article, I explore the power of autobiographical writing for anxious English learners and writers at higher education level. I hope to illuminate how writing autobiographical texts and sharing them with a language counsellor can help them to reflect on and benefit from the writing process as identity work. I suggest that engaging

in a pedagogy for autonomy, thinking ecologically about language learning, that is, appreciating experiential *lifewide* learning (e.g. Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011), and integrating language counselling with autobiographical writing can alleviate anxiety and offer meaningful learning experiences, even personal growth and fulfilment. I weave my recent understandings of therapeutic writing into the loom of my existing counselling pedagogy with its threads of narrative thinking and learner autonomy. These insights have an important place in helping anxious learners to find ways of telling their own story in English and to appreciate and value their own word.

OUTSIDE THE DOOR: WHY?

Most Finnish students have studied English as their first foreign language and started their studies at a relative early age, often already in grade one but at the latest in grade three. English-medium subject teaching, immersion programmes and bilingual education are all part of the Finnish educational landscape, opportunities offered to and taken by parents. Learning and mastering the language is a very competitive process indeed, and the level of skills at the end of upper-secondary education is high. There is a lot of external pressure to succeed in formal education, both from institutions, parents and peers. But English is a very prevalent language in Finnish young people's lives also outside the classroom: since an early age, they have watched films and listened to music in English, they have had active and meaningful digital lives in English, some

have lived and gone to school abroad. They have used, and subsequently, learnt English outside the classroom through various informal and non-formal encounters with the language; in the memoirs some write about these encounters as their most meaningful learning experiences. It could be said that in Finland, English is not just a foreign language to be learnt at school like, say, French or German but a life skill, and that it is an integral part of Finnish university students' bilingual or bicultural identities. The memoirs, however, are also testimonies of how some learners suffer in the competitive classrooms and are left with an identity of a failure, who remains silent not only in the classroom but outside it.

> TUULIA: *It was, as if, knowledge or skills [in English] would have been directly comparable to what I was as a human being: I didn't speak like a native speaker of English like my classmates. (memoir, unedited)*

Reading hundreds of undergraduate students' memoirs over the years opened my eyes to all the worrying, fears, anxiety, shame and panic experienced by university students at the face of their obligatory foreign language studies. Students in higher education have dreams that will only come true through English, and many had felt so far that there were obstacles on their way to realizing them. They felt that ALMS with its pedagogy for autonomy and freedom to choose was a good alternative way to do the language studies needed for their degree. There were some, though, who felt that even more was needed. The power gained from the very writing of the memoir was tangible in

the students' texts, and the stories told resonated strongly with me as a reader. They gave me the push to set up a special group in ALMS for students who have classroom fears, language anxiety, learning problems and/or social fears. When they apply to the group, students are asked to write a short application letter. In these letters, they often mention how merely hearing about the possibility of joining a peer-group brought them positive hope of one day getting the degree and how it, if not eliminated, at least weakened the anxiety-inducing worries.

> JOHANNA: *For me classroom situations are absolutely distressing and I have postponed taking a course in English until now. Now I need to do it if I want my Bachelor's degree out. I am so grateful that this course is now offered at the university. (application letter, my translation from Finnish)*

They are also asked about their reasons for wanting a place in this group. I have wanted to work with students' lived and felt experiences, not a diagnosis, as the starting point. Students often mention and specify the diagnosis if there is one but it is not asked for. The reasons mentioned include: fear of speaking, weak skills in speaking, dyslexia, social fears or anxiety, panic attacks, fear of peer judgment of skills, fear of specific classroom routines such as presentations or reading out loud, teacher memories, being shy and silent, having experienced bullying at school, problems in hearing or seeing, Asperger's, ADHD and/or a trauma or a physical long-term illness. These anxiety-inducing factors form a multitude of fragments in the students' kaleidoscope of emotions, different for each and every student. It is a true

complexity of emotions the letters talk about, and the relationship between the felt emotions and classroom events and memories is complicated to say the least.

> OUTI: *I cope with foreign languages relatively well but my experiences from language classrooms have been traumatic ever since primary school due to my shyness. When this is combined with embarrassing situations, being laughed at and insensitive teachers, all this makes me feel physically bad when I think of language classes. The presence of others, in particular people I know, paralyzes my brain and I cannot get a word out of my mouth. I suffer from social phobia time and again and these kinds of stress factors make it worse. However, I speak when I travel and find it even fun. (application letter, my translation from Finnish)*

In the letters, students write about their lived and felt experiences in a way that almost always suggests suffering from (language) *classroom* anxiety; they have experienced distress in previous classrooms and fear the possibility of having to be in one again. They often express the wish to be with peers, meaning other students who share their fears.

> VEERA: *I have language anxiety and dyslexia, and when I started my studies at the university the biggest fear was English both on the language course and in my textbooks for psychology. I don't think I could manage on a normal course. I want to be on a course with people who feel the same about studying English. Some people have a fear of heights; I have a fear of studying English. (application letter, my translation from Finnish)*

University language courses are meant to put a final touch

to students' skills in terms of academic and professional uses of English and involve having discussions in topics from their fields, reading and reacting to journal articles and textbooks in their majors or minors, and writing study-related essays, summaries and other texts. They are expected to work in pairs and small groups, explain and present, lead discussions, give each other feedback and, potentially, give a presentation to the whole class of peers and the teacher. These are the classrooms that some students cannot see themselves entering because they fear having to speak English in front of their classmates, which is by far the biggest worry before entering the course although they occasionally mention (academic) writing in English as potentially too demanding.

> IDA: *When I heard that we need to give a presentation on the English course, I got into a panic. It would mean that the anxiety and nightmares induced by the presentation would interfere with all of my other studies during the term. (application letter, my translation from Finnish)*

> INKERI: *I have been afraid of speaking English and been anxious about the lessons to the extent of feeling nausea before the lessons. (application letter, my translation from Finnish]*

> ELLA: *I started a [normal] English course last spring but had to quit after the first lesson because it was overwhelmingly distressing (application letter, my translation from Finnish)*

AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ANXIETY

Learners' lived and felt experiences, the tangible but elusive web of factors and influences behind them, produce a challenge when a counsellor wants to appreciate diversity yet notice every flesh and blood human being with their unique experiences. This challenge has guided me to an *ecological* view of language learning as a dynamic interaction between the learner and her environment (van Lier, 2004). I conceptualise learning as a subjective experience that happens in time and space and is deeply grounded in its context, socially, culturally and historically (Kramsch, 2009). (Language) classroom anxiety then could be seen as an expression of the learner's view of her relationship to her environment (see Karlsson, 2015). The reality of life in classrooms makes up a complex context, full of intertwining details, both personal and environmental, which is not always recognised in more traditional classrooms. A pedagogy for autonomy strives to recognise and appreciate learners' complex ecological realities (Casanave, 2012), the tangled networks of contextual, personal, emotional and social factors that surround and interact with learning. In the case of anxious learners their ecological reality contains any combination of the anxiety-inducing factors mentioned in their application letters, say being shy, having dyslexia and problems with writing and spelling. A concern for learner autonomy in pedagogy means that students are encouraged to "speak as themselves" (Legenhausen, as cited in Ushioda, 2011, 14), as the *people* they are, not as mere language learners who practice and perform the language.

These real people have a need and right to express their identity in the foreign language, in speaking and in writing, even if they struggle doing it. Individual differences like dyslexia or anxiety are inseparable of identity and, in this view, become part of the process of the learner herself shaping and being shaped by her own context.

> SAARA: *I have used to be afraid of languages, but I have managed to bring English in to my life. But the writing is still a problem: it feels so funny and frustrating that you can't see your own mistakes or correct them. For me it is always been like there are two different languages: the one you speak and the other you write. I'm speaking aloud all the time when I'm writing. I can easily say the things I want to write aloud but sometimes I don't even know what letter the word starts whit. In this history I don't feel the need to really write how I felt in school and how bad things were. That is because I don't feel that way anymore, I have already come a long way whit my English. (memoir, unedited)*

In ALMS, learning outside and beyond the classroom is encouraged. Students can make use of all their other studies, hobbies, travels, and passions in life as sources for learning English. One fundamental pedagogical goal is helping students to realise the value and potential of experiential *life-wide* learning (e.g. Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011); we learn, after all, in all parts of our life, not only through formal education. Any English course the students take only forms a fragment of the totality of their learning experiences at that particular point in time. Anxious students should open their eyes, ears and minds to all the possibilities of encountering

and using English in their environment, making use of the ambient language around them. There are numerous possibilities of engaging in low-pressure speaking and writing in the students' lives, say, using English with friends, playing games in English, using English in social media, or keeping a personal diary in English. Acknowledging and appreciating such lifewide learning is closely related to van Lier's (2004) suggestion that different contexts of students' learning are inseparable from their emotional and experiential responses.

> HEIKKI: *After my [serious physical illness] it has been more difficult to handle with unfomfortable social situations. Sometimes I forget everything I was going to say and it's very uncomfortable [...] I really hope this all wouldn't make my studying too complicated. This kind of course really makes me happy because I can study hundred percent without any fear of social situations. At home it's way more comfortable to study. Of course there is also my wife. She has been helping me much. She has always energy to talk English with me and correct my grammar. (diary entry, unedited)*

For anxious learners, new contexts for learning and using English can make it possible to re-think the story of learning English that they keep telling, a story that focuses on problems, failure, mistakes and shame.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN ALMS

On the ALMS course, the roles, duties and responsibilities of learners and teachers are different from traditional envi-

ronments. The learner makes the decisions on the planning, monitoring and evaluating learning, that is, she *owns* her learning and thus takes control of it. Students take part in two group awareness sessions at the beginning, and I meet them in three individual *counselling* sessions during the course. We call ourselves 'counsellors' and our work language 'counselling'. When we started to plan ALMS, we wanted to develop our new role and skills and make a clear break from the role of the teacher. We believe that counselling needs to account for certain psychological factors, affect, motivation, even language anxiety, in other words, the whole person and her autobiography, experiences and memories. In contrast, in the book on advising in language learning (2012), the editors, Mynard and Carson, prefer the term *advising* because they find the term counselling problematic, due to its therapy orientation. They, however, see the need for advisers to learn counselling skills from humanistic counselling (see also Mozzon-McPherson, 2012, who highlights the importance of *counselling* skills like empathy, respect, and genuineness in language advising). The course does not involve any other classroom sessions unless the student decides to join some of the small support groups offered. At the beginning of the course they make a detailed plan of their independent studies, and the memoir they write is meant to help them to plan with personally meaningful goals in mind. In the instructions, I encourage them to think about their previous experiences and, subsequently, to use their autobiographical insights and imagination in planning the learning outside the classroom with a future-orientation.

Consequently, diverse activities appear on the plans: watching movies, reading textbooks, taking part in a yoga

class in English, Skyping with a foreign friend, reading fiction, writing an essay for a course in English instead of going for the option of writing it in Finnish, writing unsent letters, working on pronunciation with movies, videos and recorders, playing board-games, having English breakfasts and lunches, casual talking with other course participants; the list is absolutely endless.

> OUTI: *I have been reading Comet in Moominland aloud. This is a book that is never angry at me. Sometimes I only whisper, though. (counselling notes)*

The autobiographical writing that starts in the memoir continues in the diary that students write on the course. I have been influenced by ideas from therapeutic writing (e.g. Hunt, 2010): writing as a process of personal growth, wellbeing, even healing and transformation has inspired me to encourage students to use their narrative capacity and engage in diary writing in English. For a learner who feels troubled by her experiences in previous formal learning situations diary writing, when done without linguistic pressures, can alleviate this burden. Anxious students will "write the fear"; in the very writing process they work towards solving the problem of their fears of English. When a *learning* diary thus becomes the site for telling about learning as a part of one's whole life, it can be compared to a personal diary: writing in the diary is about developing autobiographical knowledge, which is emotionally-charged, experience-based and creative, a form of narrative knowing (Jokinen, 2004). Such autobiographical knowledge can lead students to rethink their learning approaches and their learner selves. Au-

tobiographical writing will also help the students to engage in *lifedeep* realizations during their learning (Karlsson and Kjisik, 2011), that is, to ponder their feelings, beliefs, values and orientations to life in and through English. Moreover, they will engage their feelings without detaching them from the cognitive side of learning a language.

Students are also invited to create portfolios of their language work, in which they write personally meaningful texts of different genres arising from their lifewide interests, that is, they are free to ground the writing in the personal, social, study-related and professional aspects of their lives. I have conceptualised them as a way of engaging in narrative identity work (cf. Heikkinen, 2001) as the basic idea is to create and re-create oneself through telling stories about one's life. Just like the memoirs and diaries they should be understood more as personal, emotional and experiential than as linguistic and cognitive (Karlsson 2008; Benson & Nunan, 2005). Very importantly, they are tools for reflection on learning and self-evaluation but also spaces for reflecting on one's language identity as part of one's self.

> HEIDI: *Time flies and it's been almost four months since I went to my first university English class. A lot has changed. I remember myself being so scared and shy in our first meeting. Now when I'm writing this I feel myself strong. I'm not scared to do mistakes and I'm not thinking what others might think about me. I feel comfortable with my English. The most important thing I have learnt during this journey is that we all have our own English. It is my way to express myself with foreign language and it doesn't have to be perfect. (final reflection, unedited)*

The portfolios range from simple recordings of hours done and a couple of brief texts to thick, possibly illustrated, diaries and various personally meaningful texts, e.g. letters to former teachers. They all include a learning history or memoir, learning diary/journal or log and a final reflection; many also include reflective and free writing exercises and visualizations of the future, different creative, autobiographical or even autofictional texts.

> ANNA-MAIJA: *I wrote a letter to my primary school English teacher. I told my negative experiences during the English lessons. I told her I have hated talking English since I was forced to say "Arthur" and other words I couldn't spell right. In high school I was still avoiding English lessons and especially talking. I took only compulsory courses and sometimes I ran out of the classroom. I told her I was trying to get over my fear of speaking English. I will never send that letter. Nevertheless, I felt much better after writing the letter. (diary entry, unedited)*

In my counselling and research work I have been relying on the potential of narrative for a number of years (Karlsson, 2008, 2012 and 2013). Learning, teaching, counselling and research are all lived experience, autobiographical processes, and stories are personal interpretations of experience, both constructions and expressions of identity. The complex and often ambiguous web of experiences coming together in a counselling encounter can be difficult to untangle. A narrative approach, however, allows an appreciation of the whole when meaningful stories are told, read and/or listened to, that is, shared and even co-constructed during the counselling process (cf. Ihanus, 2005). Narrative

and sharing stories as an integral part of language counselling and, as a pedagogical and learning tool, has proven to be therapeutic and transformative because it captures self-experience and personal memories, and gives positive hope in that it strives for empathy and unique interpretations of lived experiences. It also helps students to realise the value and potential of experiential lifewide learning and, with this understanding, to build a realistic vision of their English self (Casanave, 2012) beyond the classroom.

In the counselling meeting then, students bring the writing process and the story created in the text, memoir or diary, into the discussion. They talk about their autobiographical understandings, dreams, passions, and the meaning of these for their language learning. Significantly, stories, the autobiographical texts and their interpretations, have their experiential contexts and particular meanings for the teller. The counsellor-listener or reader should never trivialise them by reducing them to a series of anecdotal events. Nor should she separate the foreign language from the human being and her autobiography and thus crush dreams. As a counsellor listening to their account, I aim at establishing rapport, showing respect and empathy, but also at suspending judgement, especially of the language used. I hope to thus ease the tension that the fear of making mistakes brings out.

> SAARA: *Mistakes are also a funny thing. I don't notice other people's mistakes and I don't pay attention to them. But sometimes I have felt that there are those language policemen, who think if you can not write without mistakes, you are not smart enough to write at all. Sometimes I feel that those people think:*

> *If you make spelling and grammar mistakes you can't be clever and then everything you write can be diminished. (a text in portfolio, her own editing based on counsellor comments)*

A WRITTEN VOICE AS AN EXPRESSIOM OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

For many anxious students any writing in English is as big a problem as speaking.

> SAARA: *My writing has always been bad. My handwriting looks like a ten-year-old boy's writing. During school I felt envy about my friends' elegant hand writing. I made also a lot of spelling mistakes (which I still do) and I was just ashamed of writing anything that I should give to somebody: essays, tests, birthday cards, letters and so on. My friends and family use to laugh at my mistakes and found it hard to understand how I could not write any better. (a text in portfolio, her own editing based on counsellor comments)*

Writing means leaving incriminating footprints on paper, fearing making mistakes and the teacher's red pen, because they have a long history of performing as writers. Saarnivaara, Vainikkala and van Delft (2004, 156) use a telling metaphor "writing as a gift for the teacher". This is often the attitude towards the practice of writing in formal education that students have adopted: they fear failure and feel joy for being praised, but these experiences are reactions to external feedback, not something emerging in writing the text. There seems to be a fundamental lack of valuing and

owning one's writing. I have a deep belief in appreciating and convincing the learners that they own their of their texts and the processes of creating them. This can happen when students unlearn to perform as writers and, instead, relearn to experiment and write *from* their own experience. This is where the power of autobiographical writing lies; students will write, not as a gift for the teacher, but through a process of searching for their *own* words in English for their inner expression. I am always struck by how, from the very beginning, students' autobiographical writing strives to make sense of the lived and felt experiences; how the writing seems to become a reflection tool, even a route to transformation (cf. Kosonen, 2015).

> ANNA-MAIJA: *I started my ALMS. I was little nervous when I stepped into the classroom for the first meeting. I knew there was people who are not so "perfect" what it goes to learning English. Somewhere deep in my mind I was still thinking: "You can now just disappear and try to forget what you just did". But instead of that, I was sitting restfully. After all, the meeting was very good. For the first time, I walked out of a classroom feeling happy after English lesson. It sounds maybe stupid, but I was proud I didn't run away. I also did my ALMS plan this week. I am not sure if it will go exactly like I planned. I am the kind of person who constantly get new ideas. (first reflective entry in diary, unedited)*

For a number of years, I have been introducing various personal genres of writing into my teaching and used them in my own academic and professional writing. Starting as "a result of a vague impulse" (McCormack, 2014, 165) I

have used writing from experience as introduced e.g. by Elbow (1981), Goldberg (1986) and Hunt (2010) in order to help students to unlearn suppressive writing practices from school, and to relearn to focus on the process, not the product, and to imagine themselves a supportive reader, fictional or real. Most importantly, they have been used as self-supportive activities (Wright & Bolton, 2012) that would potentially help students to appreciate their own writing acts and find the experience rewarding.

Initially, my concern for the *written* voice of learners rose from the need to support learner autonomy on the ALMS courses: finding a voice through writing could be considered an expression of learner autonomy and teachers promoting a pedagogy for autonomy should exercise their pedagogical voices to develop learners' written voices. For this end, we should support our learners in finding ways for generating discourse, not focus extensively on grammar and accuracy. In the role of a language counsellor I ground my work firmly in the link between learning and conscious reflection on learning: the language to be learnt needs to be taken into both internal (metacognition and meta-emotion) and external use (Little, 2010). Anxious students should have opportunities for communicating in English in a safe environment, both in speaking and writing but English should also become the language of reflection on learning so that the important metacognitive and metalinguistic skills will develop; ownership of one's learning and writing is strengthened through the internal use of the language. Autobiographical writing offers a way for doing this.

WRITING THE BORDER COUNTRY BETWEEN EDUCATION AND THERAPY

As Carson & Mynard (2012) note, advising/counselling in language learning is informed by discourses and practices from other professional fields. Being an emerging field, it is open to innovation and contributions from other fields. Bibliotherapy in my own case has given insights to my counselling work with troubled learners. On a course I took in 2015 I became aware of the parallels and similarities in the pedagogical and ethical principles of ALMS counselling and bibliotherapy as a professional activity. A language counsellor, in my understanding, gives support, inspires, ploughs the road, encourages and appreciates the ecological realities surrounding the learner and creates a safe environment in which the learner can be herself, use her whole potential for learning and experience positive hope.

> SAARA: *I would never have done it had we not made the contact. You managed to give me the wings by making me feel safe. Without that feeling I would never have had the courage to join [a writing group]. (research discussion, my translation)*

My training brought the therapeutic and self-supportive effects of writing into the foreground and, although I do not work with fears and phobias directly, I take a holistic, caring approach to a person's life and life story, in which anxiety forms a part. I want to describe a recent writing experience of my own, the final paper for the bibliotherapy course. This was a process in which I turned an eth-

nographic gaze on my writing self and on the writing that arose partly from reading literature, partly from my living pedagogy but also from all the rich contextual effects of "sleep, health, weather, and work conflicts" (Casanave, 2012, p. 645). During the course, I had been creating a writing ecology, in which various contextual, personal and emotional factors influenced the writing process and the texts being created. Moreover, the different texts were in dialogue together, shaping and being shaped by the other texts: I was writing various diaries: a pedagogical counselling diary, a learning diary (and a notebook devoted to creative writing exercises and self-supportive free writing) for the bibliotherapy course, a research journal and a personal diary. These became my "narrative portfolio" for the time of writing, counselling my students and engaging in my own course work; in many ways, a parallel to my students ALMS portfolios.

Writing the final work then was a metacognitive and metaemotional process, in which I ended up reflecting on, analysing, exploring and commenting all of my "creative life writing" (Hunt, 2013), the diverse texts written for various purposes and with different intentions. Reading Hunt (2013) on transformative learning and reflexivity inspired me and nudged my thinking, helped me experience a "breakthrough" in how to approach and continue writing and, finally, write a different text from what I had originally planned. It was clear to me that, as a participant on the bibliotherapy course, I was going through a learning process whilst engaging in writing that was personally meaningful to me. Hunt writes about "a less cognitively-driven, more spontaneous, and bodily-felt approach" to learning

and writing (2013, 15). My strong lived and felt experience of therapeutic writing, particularly the one in my learning diary for the course, was that it actually reduced cognitive control, increased spontaneity and made it possible for me to move between different spaces of learning. Moreover, writing became a way of building a bridge between experience and reflectivity, which was a very important insight for a writer and, even more importantly, a facilitator of student writing. I was "thinking feelingly" and, also, "shifting away from a narrow attitude to learning", which then was "updated by one's surroundings and circumstances"(Hunt, 2013,15). This kind of transformative learning arose from the therapeutic writing I was doing and meant noticing and willingly using new contexts and opportunities to learn. Here I see a parallel to the ecological approach to language learning that I have found helpful in understanding the role of anxiety in language learning.

During the writing I almost ended up "sitting *in* the feelings" of frustration when writing the work, or more precisely, when the expected outcome became a challenge. McCormack (2014) describes a similar researcher's process during his dissertation work. He writes about discovering his negative capability: he managed to write into his experiences of the disorientation and confusion of learning. This was a way of recognizing his vulnerability and a way of learning to contain feelings of distress related to learning, and trusting the process to get into grips with this confusion. "Sitting *with* the feelings rather than *in* them" (Ibid, p. 6) also became my "route" to therapeutic writing; I discovered the power of therapeutic writing in the diary and free writing exercises having known the potential for

years. I transformed experience into writing by taking time to write and using writing as a method for immersing in the experience but at the same time looking at it from the outside (cf. Hunt, 2013). This is what Hunt calls *reflexivity*, a different process from how it is normally understood in adult education by e.g. Mezirov, as conscious reflection on reflection.

This personal experience in diary writing as an emotional self-support process has inspired me to, even more wholeheartedly, promote diaries as a tool in language learning for anxious learners. Diaries provide a safe space for anxious learners to "feel held". Writing in the diary *is* learning; no narrow learning outcomes should be expected as they would be too simplified; instead, doing the very writing is learning. For the anxious learner a heavy emphasis on goal-orientation and demand for clear outcomes in learning can be a challenge.

> OUTI: *My goal was to face my fears and overcome them, to work with my self-esteem in a safe place, write a diary and speak. I also wanted to do grammar and vocabulary exercises and join a group. I didn't reach my goals because of a hard time in my personal life. However, something has happened: I don't avoid using English words when I speak out loud, say, names of bands, I read in English on a daily basis and have even spoken it at work. English is a part of my everyday life in a small way (final reflection, backed up by counselling notes).*

WRITING FROM EXPERIENCE, HOPING AND DREAMING

I have become convinced that autobiographical writing, a form of writing *from* experience, can enrich foreign language pedagogy by offering soft, experiential ways of alleviating (language) classroom anxiety. In this paper I have shared a few understandings of how to gain and use a written voice as an expression of one's autonomy and agency: I suggest that first a "safe space" needs to be created for the troubled writer; only then is an appreciation and valuing of her own written word possible. Using my own experience, parallel to the students, I have explored how autobiographical writing can be and become a writing ecology in which the writer has "a space for psychic movement between different sites of learning" (Hunt, 2013, 133). I hope to have illustrated how autobiographical writing experiences can be therapeutic and help the hesitant writer take distance from the past experiences in classrooms and feel empowered. In a new experiential learning context outside the classroom autobiographical writing can become an exploration of the self and a hopeful dialogue with the text, in which the writing self is looking for answers and finds them.

I want to end my paper with Saara's words. Hers is one of the many stories by troubled writers that have touched me deeply and my work as her language counsellor has empowered me beyond any measure. I know that by now her dreams, and her writing dreams, are coming true, such dreams that English is very much a part of.

SAARA: … *it was a great process because you got support but at the same time you did a lot on your own and the doing felt light because it was never pressing, there was never a pressure but you could practise and work freely you could be bad and didn't need to pretend didn't need to hide and use your resources to perform as someone bolder and more beautiful than you were and that was liberating, in particular for me with my dyslexia… I have this love of art, of entertainment, that has opened up worlds for me, and that links English and wanting to study English. I have read novels in English and watched hours and hours of epoch drama, they have become also learning strategies for me*… *After the marvellous ALMS process, though, I'm still me, I want you to see the real me. (research discussion in Finnish, my translation, in which she showed me a small text from the portfolio with her handwritten, unedited English writing)*

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