Obscuring the Agent in L2 Finnish: A Dynamic Usage-Based Approach to Development

Kirsi Leskinen
Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä
kirsi.m.leskinen@jyu.fi
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2440-948X

Sirkku Lesonen (Kronholm)
South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences
sirkku.kronholm@xamk.fi
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5274-8518

Abstract
This study explored ways of describing human action without specifying the agent – that is, expressing impersonality – in learner language. By adopting an onomasiological approach, we sought to identify all such means employed by an adult, advanced Finnish L2 learner over time. Based on this investigation, we further analysed the development of the learner's passive construction in detail. The study drew on the dynamic usage-based approach to language learning, and the data comprised 29 spoken and 17 written samples of natural language use. These data were gathered during a nine-month training programme that emphasised academic skills and language in academic contexts, and they were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results indicate that the learner tried out and used various means of expression to obscure or hide the human agent of the action. The frequency of impersonal passives increased considerably during the study period, but the conventional means of expression only exceeded the non-conventional ones at the end of the study. This suggests that learners may have functioning and effective ways to convey meaning before learning all the prototypical constructions of the target language. The study demonstrates the dynamic process of learning to use a specific construction, during which the variability of non-conventional and conventional means of expression plays a central role. The study contributes to the still limited body of empirical research applying an onomasiological perspective to learner language and demonstrates the value of diversity and variability in language learning.

Keywords
Finnish as a L2, second language development, usage-based approach, passive

Introduction
Instead of using direct reference to people (*I collect the data*), speakers and writers sometimes prefer to leave the agent of human activity unnamed or blurred. Most languages have usage patterns that carry this specific meaning, often called impersonal constructions (e.g., Siewierska, 2008a). These include, for example, passive constructions. In addition, there are other forms, such as the generic you, that can convey the meaning, but the interpretation of which relies more on the context. By obscuring the agent (e.g., *the data are collected; when you collect / one collects the data…*), language users can reach a more abstract level (Martin et al., 2010, p. 71), which is generally considered a central characteristic of advanced language use (Council of Europe, 2020). However, learners on all skill levels often

need to express that what they are saying concerns everyone or that something happened without specifying agency. Before they know the conventional ways, learners may rely on non-conventional linguistic solutions in, for example, form or register, which, although deviating from conventional language use, do not cause a breakdown in communication. Seilonen (2013) and Reiman and Seilonen (2022, pp. 47–51) show that L2 learners of Finnish have a variety of conventional and non-conventional means of expression for conveying this specific meaning.

On the other hand, previous studies have observed that even advanced learners often have difficulties with some aspects of structures that allow for the obscuring or defocusing of the agent. For example, Varjo and Jokela (2020) found that L2 Finnish learners' challenges with zero constructions, in which the implied agent can be anyone (e.g., *sitä ei saa syödä* "one cannot eat it"), were related to the semantics of the verbs used in these constructions. Nyqvist and Lindström Tiedemann (2021), in turn, observed that Finnish immersion students' problems with Swedish passive constructions were mainly related to formal aspects, but were also evident in their choices of idiomatic passive construction. In addition, L2 users might not be familiar with every genre-related convention. In the case of Finnish, Ivaska (2015) found that advanced adult L2 writers used passive constructions less often in their academic essays than did L1 writers.

This study longitudinally explores the diversity of means of expression that obscure the agent in the linguistic repertoire of one adult L2 Finnish learner, Olga, whose first language is Russian. To identify Olga's impersonal expressions, we adopt an onomasiological approach, in which the investigation starts from the meaning, the aim being to identify the linguistic means used to express the meaning in natural language use (Fernández-Domínguez, 2019; Lesonen et al., 2021; Schmid, 2020). The approach thus searches for linguistic solutions for a certain communicative goal – as opposed to a semasiological approach that links a given linguistic form to its meaning (see Schmid, 2020, pp. 20–21). With the onomasiological approach, it is possible to get a comprehensive picture of a learner's repertoire of linguistic choices for conveying meanings, even if these choices are less frequent or less conventional in the target language. In addition, the approach allows for comparing the usage of different means of expression and the dynamics between them. In contrast, many previous studies have focused on specific linguistic forms of learner language, or on learners' skills or knowledge of particular impersonal constructions (e.g., Reiman, 2011; Seilonen, 2013; Varjo & Jokela, 2020).

However, in the field of second language acquisition there is a long tradition of taking the function or meaning the learner is trying to convey as a starting point for study (for a concept-oriented approach, see, e.g., Von Stutterheim & Klein, 1987; for a discussion on meaning-oriented and form-oriented approaches, see Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). For example, Eskildsen (2012) analysed two L2 English learners' inventories of target-like and non-target-like negation constructions and their development, while Horbowicz et al. (2020) focused on L2 Norwegian learners' epistemic constructions. To our knowledge, the onomasiological approach has not been adopted when studying the use of impersonal constructions in L2 development.

We use Olga's whole repertoire as a basis to further analyse the development of her passive construction. We start with the onomasiological approach – in other words, the function-to-form approach – and then analyse the passive construction in more detail. Our theoretical background is a dynamic usage-based approach (DUB) to language learning which enables the investigation of an individual learner's development on a micro scale (e.g., Lesonen et al., 2021; Roehr-Brackin, 2015; Verspoor et al., 2012). The data from Olga

were gathered during a nine-month training programme that focused on academic skills and language in academic contexts, which makes it interesting to trace the development of the passive – a construction typical to academic contexts (Ivaska, 2015; Luukka, 1995). Our longitudinal approach offers new insights into the findings of previous studies on L2 Finnish learners' passive constructions. These previous studies used texts from the CEFLING corpus that demonstrated the different CEFR proficiency levels of various L2 Finnish learners (Linguistic Basis of the Common European Framework for L2 English and L2 Finnish; see Martin et al., 2010). They showed that some learners already start using agent-obscuring passives on level A1, while the frequency and variability of these constructions as well as the abstractness of the verbs used in passives increases at each level up to C1 (Martin et al., 2010, pp. 72–73; Reiman, 2011; Seilonen, 2013). Reiman (2011), in her quantitative study, states that the use of passive constructions is a good indicator of language development in general.

Our overall aim was to expand understanding of the dynamicity of individual L2 repertoires and learning trajectories. The first research question had two aspects: What means of expression does Olga use to obscure agents of human action in her L2 Finnish, and how does her usage change over time? Based on the results of this question, the second research question asked the following: How does the impersonal passive construction develop in Olga's language use over time? In the analysis, we adopted the DUB approach to focus on change and variability in Olga's language system (see Nordanger & Horbowicz, 2021; van Dijk et al., 2011). In her use of the passive construction, we analysed both her lexical variability and the alternation of conventional and non-conventional expressions, for example how frequently she used the different passive expressions over time.

Dynamic Usage-Based Approach to Language Learning

In a DUB approach, which is a combination of the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST; e.g., Fogal & Verspoor, 2020) and a usage-based perspective on L2 development (e.g., Eskildsen, 2012; Tomasello, 2003), learner language expressions are understood to emerge from the usage events that an L2 learner participates in. Over time, as the learner uses the language for the purposes of interaction, conventional constructions emerge in learner language (Eskildsen, 2012; Lesonen et al., 2022; Roehr-Brackin, 2015; Verspoor et al., 2012). Constructions are symbolic units that consist of two poles: form (also called the phonological pole) and meaning (also called the semantic pole; Goldberg, 2003). Conventional constructions are frequently used in speech communities since speakers expect other members of the same community to use and understand the specific meanings tied to these linguistic forms. The use of conventional constructions can therefore be defined as "a mutually known regularity of behaviour which the members of a community conform to because they mutually expect each other to conform to it" (Schmid, 2020, p. 88). By participating in such usage events, language users acquire the preferred ways of saying things and conform to these mutually known behavioural regularities. In usage-based approaches, it is assumed that at the beginning of the learning process, learners repeatedly use the same lexical items within the construction; it is only later that new lexical items emerge in language production (e.g., Eskildsen, 2012; Mellow, 2006). However, it has also been shown that L2 learners' constructions may already be relatively variable at the beginning of their language use (Eskildsen, 2015; Lesonen et al., 2020).

In the DUB approach, the process of acquiring conventional constructions is seen as individual, since each learner and their usage events are unique. As shown in several longitudinal studies, individual learners vary widely in, for example, their development of

syntactic complexity (Lowie & Verspoor, 2019). Variation – differences in learning trajectories between learners – has also been observed when the starting point has been the meanings the L2 learners are trying to convey – that is, when an onomasiological approach has been applied. Lesonen et al. (2022) found that four beginner learners of Finnish had individual linguistic solutions when expressing existentiality ("There is something somewhere") in their developing L2 Finnish, and that their trajectories towards more conventional use of the Finnish existential construction differed substantially. When we want to understand the process of development, longitudinal, case study, time-series approaches are useful, because in these approaches, learning is seen as inseparable from the learner (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 245).

In DUB, it is assumed that the learning process is influenced and shaped by various factors, rendering the process dynamic and complex. Because of the complex interactions between the learner's linguistic system and external (e.g., other speakers, textbooks) and internal (e.g., age, motivation) factors, learning paths are often non-linear (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The development of a certain construction can often be characterised by peaks and dips (Cancino et al., 1978; Lesonen et al., 2021). Especially at the beginning of the learning process, when learners are trying out different ways to convey meanings in social interaction, learner language contains both conventional and non-conventional expressions. For example, Ellis (1985) found that an L2 English learner used two negative forms, *No look my card* and *Don't look my card,* in close proximity to each other during a classroom activity. Similarly, Lesonen et al. (2022) show that in one dialogue, an L2 Finnish learner used three different strategies to convey meaning that is conventionally expressed with the Finnish existential construction. In the CDST context, it has been argued that this initial diversity, meaning the use of different kinds of conventional and non-conventional constructions in the L2, is important for further development because it provides material for choosing the most effective expressions in later use (Lesonen et al., 2021; van Dijk et al., 2011). The use of non-conventional constructions may also give a learner valuable chances to participate in the interaction (Horbowicz & Nordanger, 2024), which in turn provides new opportunities for learning.

One factor affecting the learner's linguistic repertoire is knowledge of other languages, including but not limited to their L1 (see e.g., De Angelis & Selinker, 2001, on interlanguage transfer). Therefore, we now review the literature on impersonal constructions, focusing primarily on Finnish but also touching on Russian and English, as these were languages already known by the participant.

Describing Human Action Without Specifying the Agent

Describing action without specifying agency – that is, expressing impersonality – has been of interest in various linguistic fields. Here, to define our target meaning, we adopt Siewierska's (2008b) semantic characterisation, according to which impersonal constructions "depict situations and events which may be brought about by a human agent but crucially one which is not specified" (p. 4). This non-specificity refers to both situations in which no concrete individual or group of individuals is explicitly referred to and to situations in which the agent can be anyone and/or everyone (Siewierska, 2008b, p. 4). The function or intention for obscuring the human agent might be to reach a more general or abstract level (Martin et al., 2010, p. 71), or the speaker or writer might want to leave the agent hidden or unnamed for other reasons, such as not knowing who the agent is. The specific function for conveying the meaning depends on the context. In addition, the scale of specificity or non-specificity of the implied agent varies. The agent of an expression can

be completely omitted or hidden (e.g., *the bicycle was stolen*) or the agent's identity can be partially blurred (e.g., *they gave me the wrong documents in the office)*. Sometimes the impersonal interpretation relies on the context, as in *you have to be there on time*. Since we were interested in how the meaning is conveyed, this section gives an overview of some typical linguistic means to express impersonality, which the focal learner also used. Finnish, as an agglutinating language, provides not only lexical means to express impersonality, but also morphosyntactic ones.

The 2nd person singular can have an open reference that can extend to anyone or everyone in a similar position. An open reference is common in the colloquial spoken register and everyday conversations in Finnish (Suomalainen & Varjo, 2020), as in many other languages (for an overview, see De Cock, 2016, pp. 364–368), including English and Slavic languages such as Russian (Malamud, 2006; Siewierska, 2004, p. 212). In Finnish, the so-called zero construction carries the same basic meaning (VISK = Ison suomen kieliopin verkkoversio [Comprehensive grammar of Finnish online] § 1347; Laitinen, 2006) but is used both in spoken and written registers in various contexts (e.g., Suomalainen & Varjo, 2020). Syntactically, in the most frequent case, the zero construction lacks an overt subject, the verb is in the 3rd person singular, and usually does not begin a clause (VISK § 1349, § 1350; Laitinen, 2006). These constructions are sometimes translated as "one" constructions in English (see the translation of the second phrase below), and "man" constructions in languages such as Swedish (e.g., *man kan skriva essän på finska eller engelska*).

Sä	voi-t	kirjoittaa	essee-n	suome-ksi	tai
You	can-2SG	write.INF	essay-ACC	Finnish-TRANSL	or

englanni-ksi.
English-TRANSL
"You can write the essay in Finnish or English."

Essee-n	voi	kirjoittaa	suome-ksi		tai	englanni-ksi.
Essay-ACC	can.3SG	write.INF	Finnish-TRANSL		or	English-TRANSL

"One can write the essay in Finnish or in English."

When compared with the open 2nd person singular, the zero construction has certain semantico-grammatical restrictions. For example, it is typically used with modal verbs (e.g., *voi* "can"), whereas the open 2nd person singular can be used more freely (Laitinen, 2006, pp. 212, 219). The open 1st person singular has been less frequently studied. Helasvuo (2008) has, however, shown that it can be compared with the open 2nd person references or passive construction, and it is used, for example, when emphasising the implied agent's different choices.

Other pronouns can also be used to express impersonality, for example *everyone* and *many* in English. In the case of personal pronouns, Posio and Vilkuna (2013) point out that plural forms "as such provide considerable potential for vague reference" (p. 182). The 1st person plural refers to a group of people including the speaker and can comprise anything from two persons to all humankind (Posio & Vilkuna, 2013, p. 182), as in *we are responsible for our planet*. The 3rd person plural, in turn, is widely used across languages, including in Russian, to blur the agent (Siewierska, 2008b, p. 11–14), although it is very rare in Finnish. In Russian, the pronoun is usually omitted, and thus the 3rd person plural verb alone indicates the obscuring of the agent (Malamud, 2006). Generic statements (e.g., *kids learn*

languages quickly) are also vague, in that they refer to anyone or everyone in a group which is not specified (see Behrens, 2005).

In Finnish, the passive construction is frequently used to express impersonality, for example, in many academic contexts (e.g., Ivaska, 2015; Luukka, 1995). The Finnish passive construction differs from the passives of many Indo-European languages, such as English, in two ways (see, e.g., Kelomäki, 2019). First, the construction is agentless, which means that while the phrase *the bicycle was stolen* can be translated into Finnish using the passive (*polkupyörä varastettiin*), adding the agent, for example *by my neighbour* in English, is not conventional in Finnish. Second, in many languages, passive constructions are only used with transitive verbs, whereas in Finnish, this is also possible with intransitive verbs (e.g., *Suomessa saunotaan paljon* "In Finland, people go to the sauna a lot"). Russian has a few impersonal passive constructions, such as short verbal passives (with perfect verbs) and -ся (-SJA) passives (with imperfect verbs), but they are lexically restricted (Babby, 2010, p. 33; see also Malamud, 2006).

Syntactically, the Finnish passive construction is subjectless and the verb is always in the same passive form (VISK, definitions). It is generated by adding a passive marker to the stem of the verb. Most often, the passive marker is -(t)tA-, -dA- or -(l)lA- and a vowel+n in the simple present (e.g., *sano-taan* "it is said"). In the simple past, -A- is replaced with -i- (e.g., *sano-ttiin* "it was said"; VISK § 110). In participles used, for example, in the present perfect, the passive marker is -(t)tU (e.g., *on sano-ttu* "it has been said"; VISK § 110). Word order in Finnish is generally relatively free, but in a passive clause either the object of the clause, location or time is frequently placed before the verb (VISK § 1316). The omitted agent is usually interpreted as plural, as in the following examples (VISK § 1323).

Kurssi-lla	puhu-taan	suome-a.
Course-ADE	speak-PASS	Finnish-PAR

"Finnish is spoken in the course."

Kurssi-lla	on	puhu-ttu	suome-a.
Course-ADE	be.3SG	speak-PASS.PTCP	Finnish-PAR

"Finnish has been spoken in the course."

In addition to the impersonal passive construction, the passive as a morphological form is colloquially widely used as a personal form instead of the 1st person plural (VISK § 1326). In standard language, the verbal 1st person plural ending is -mme, as in *me puhu-mme suomea* ("we speak Finnish"). This verb form is often replaced with a passive form *me puhutaan* ("we speak"). However, it is not always easy to distinguish between these uses. In the personal use, the referent (*me* "we") is often omitted (VISK § 1326), even if it refers to a clearly specified group. The pronoun *me* can also refer to a non-specified group of people, as explained above, and thus render the clause semantically impersonal. Moreover, passive forms are sometimes used in imperative clauses, as in *Puhutaan suomea!* ("Let's speak Finnish!"; VISK § 889).

Data and Methods
Participant and Context of the Study
The present participant, Olga (a pseudonym), is from Russia and her L1 is Russian. Before the longitudinal data collection, she had lived in Finland for between four and five years

and had taken a few intensive Finnish courses lasting about one year altogether. Based on her interview and reflection data, in which she described learning Finnish in a variety of ways in her free time, Olga seemed to be an active learner. For this study, seven samples (3 oral, 4 written) of Olga's language use from various points during the data gathering period were assessed by three qualified language assessors. Based on these assessments, Olga's overall Finnish proficiency was CEFR B2. On average her written samples remained at the same CEFR level across the study, whereas the level of her oral samples rose (see Appendix A for further information).

Olga attended an intensive nine-month full-time training programme during which the data were collected. The programme was designed for migrants who had completed some higher education studies or gained a higher education degree prior to migration and who wanted to continue their studies or find a job in their field in Finland. The training pro-gramme was organised in the latter half of the 2010s and comprised Finnish and English language studies intertwined with field-specific courses in Finnish. Participation in the research project was completely voluntary and the research followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2023).

The concept of the passive construction was introduced to the students and practised during the first third of the Finnish language instruction included in the training pro-gramme. Other impersonal constructions were not explicitly introduced as major learning content. A few years after the data collection, the first author informed Olga of some of the preliminary findings, and she commented on learning the passive construction as follows: "It was really a thing that I wanted to learn myself and maybe even when we were asked what we want to learn I think I wrote these passives" (translated from Finnish). This indi-cates that learning the passive constructions was important for her, and she might have consciously directed her learning towards it.

Data Gathering

The first author of this paper was one of several Finnish L2 teachers in the 40-week training programme and gathered the present longitudinal data on 46 occasions. The aim was to collect a comprehensive set of samples that represent authentic language use that include various situations and genres, both spoken and written. Therefore, most of the data (38/46) were gathered from Olga's language usage events in the training programme by record-ing discussions (e.g., tutor group meetings) and oral assignments (e.g., oral presentations), gathering hand-written and computer-typed assignments (e.g., learning journals) as well as oral assignments that the learner herself had recorded (e.g., video blogs; see Appendix B for further information). These data from the training programme were supplemented by five informal interviews, three writing tasks and one videoblog performed solely for this study and a wider research project. This approach resulted in both monological and dialogical spoken data with both L1 and L2 speakers of Finnish. As shown in Eskildsen (2012), the local interaction context influences L2 development, and we consider this as part of a nat-ural, usage-based learning path (see Eskildsen, 2015, p. 57). The spoken data were gathered on 29 occasions, and the written data were gathered on 17 occasions. Sample length varied widely, with a median of written 206 words and 487 spoken words per occasion. Data for this study were transcribed as needed.

Data Selection and Analysis

The point of departure was onomasiological (see Schmid, 2020, pp. 20–21), hence we were interested in all the lexical choices and grammatical forms Olga used to describe human

action without specifying agency. Using CLAN (Computerized Language Analysis, in CHILDES: Child Language Data Exchange System; see MacWhinney, 2000) and MS Excel software, the first author identified, coded, and categorised all Olga's impersonal expressions irrespective of their conventionality. Interpretation was often context-dependent. For example, passive forms and other verb forms with the 1st person plural pronoun (*me* "we") were interpreted as impersonal when, based on the context, *me* did not refer to any concrete and specified group of people (e.g., group of students), and they were coded as impersonal 1st person plurals. A separate category was impersonal passive constructions. These omitted the human agent and took a passive form, but not the 1st person plural pronoun.

A simple test was also used to choose the expressions for analysis. We considered whether the basic meaning of the sentence remained unchanged if the impersonal expression was replaced with one of the three typical impersonal Finnish constructions, namely the passive, zero and generic you constructions. In addition, we drew on research literature in order to determine the impersonality of expressions. For example, all the zero constructions and those 2nd person singular expressions that did not refer directly to the speaking partner were categorised as impersonal, because there is always an aspect of shared or generalised experiences involved in these expressions, even if they mainly refer to the speaker (see Suomalainen & Varjo, 2020). The first author perused the data set five times, elaborating the coding and data selection after each round. Borderline cases were negotiated with the second author, and other linguists were occasionally consulted. However, impersonality is a scale rather than a fixed category, so we acknowledge that in a few borderline cases someone else might have interpreted the impersonality of Olga's expressions in a different way.

After the data selection, the data were visualised with a bar graph to observe the diversity of the expressions as well as general trends in Olga's language development (see Lesonen et al., 2020; Verspoor & van Dijk, 2011). Based on the visual interpretation, the data were then divided into three phases and the proportions of different linguistic means used to obscure the agent were calculated. The diversity of Olga's linguistic choices was also analysed qualitatively in the DUB framework: We were especially interested in the alternation of conventional and non-conventional constructions within single data points or even utterances since these may indicate a moment of potential development (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Based on the analysis of all of Olga's impersonal means of expression, we chose to investigate in detail the development of her passive construction. First, we used a line graph to visualise the change over time of usage frequency of passive constructions, as well as a trend-line to observe the general trend (see Figure 3). Frequencies were calculated for 1000 words (see Seilonen, 2013). After that, we focused on the variability of the data, because in the DUB approach, variability is seen as a meaningful phenomenon (see Nordanger & Horbowicz, 2021; van Dijk et al., 2011). The longitudinal data were divided into 10 periods of four weeks each, and the frequencies of the selected expressions were calculated based on all data collected for each four-week period. First, lexical diversity of the passive constructions was investigated by counting the frequencies of different verbs used in passive constructions. After that, we focused on the alternation between conventional and non-conventional expressions as suggested by Nordanger and Horbowicz (2021) and investigated their frequencies. We categorised the impersonal passive constructions into conventional and non-conventional constructions. To analyse the dynamicity of development further, we included two other kinds of non-conventional expressions in the same analysis: one where

the passive form was used non-conventionally instead of an active personal form, and one where Olga had used non-conventional verb forms instead of passive forms in impersonal expressions (e.g., 3rd person plural when a passive would have been a conventional choice). The first author made the initial categorisation, which was later checked and elaborated together with the second author.

Finally, we reapplied the onomasiological approach in exploring Olga's linguistic choices when referring to something she had read, because a passive construction is a conventional choice in Finnish. The purpose of this was to bring together the two phases of analyses and reveal the usage-based process of conventional means of expression overtaking other means of expression.

In this article, the examples represent different data types and demonstrate the diversity of Olga's impersonal expressions and the variability of her conventional and non-conventional expressions.

Olga's Repertoire in Obscuring the Agent

Here, we present Olga's developing repertoire of expressions of impersonality over the course of the study. Figures 1 (spoken data, 819 expressions in total) and 2 (written data, 117 expressions in total) show that Olga's repertoire was extensive, containing a wide variety of means of expression to blur or hide the human agent of the action. All the expressions of each data type (written/spoken) were chronologically ordered in the figures, with each bar representing 10 expressions. In some but not all cases, the 10 expressions were from the same week (e.g., bars from week 40). Because we had more data from the second half of the data gathering period, the temporal midpoint (week 20) is not the same as the quantitative midpoint. The last category, "combined / non-conventional" refers to expressions that were interpreted as impersonal, but which did not fall into any other category.
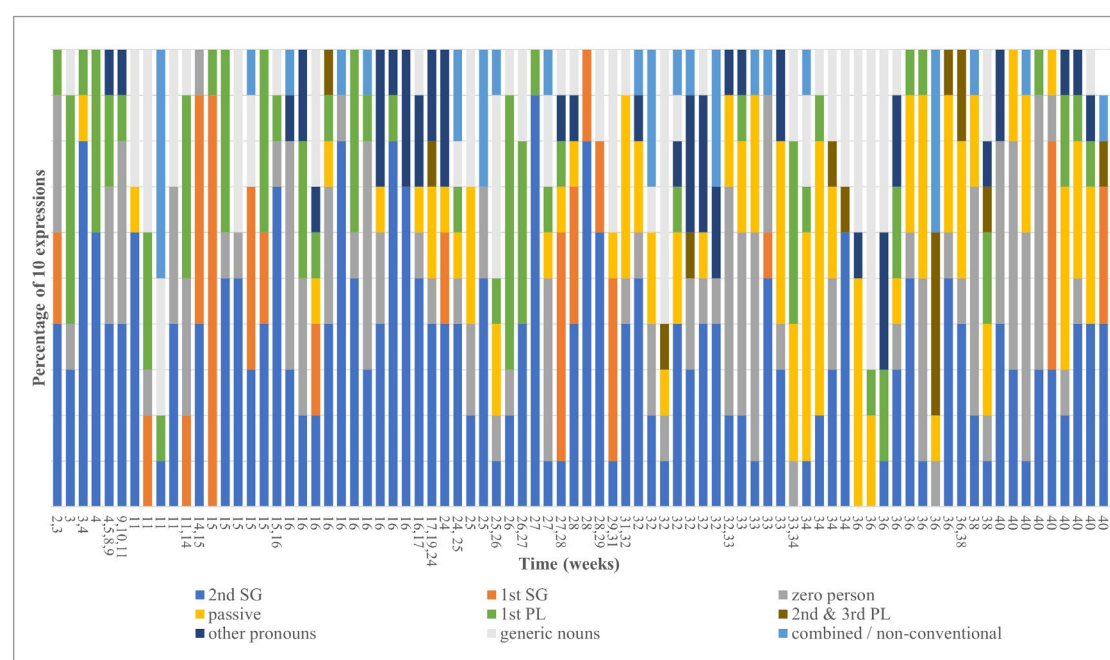
Figure 1. Proportions of all means of expressing impersonality in the spoken data over time (100% = 10 expressions).
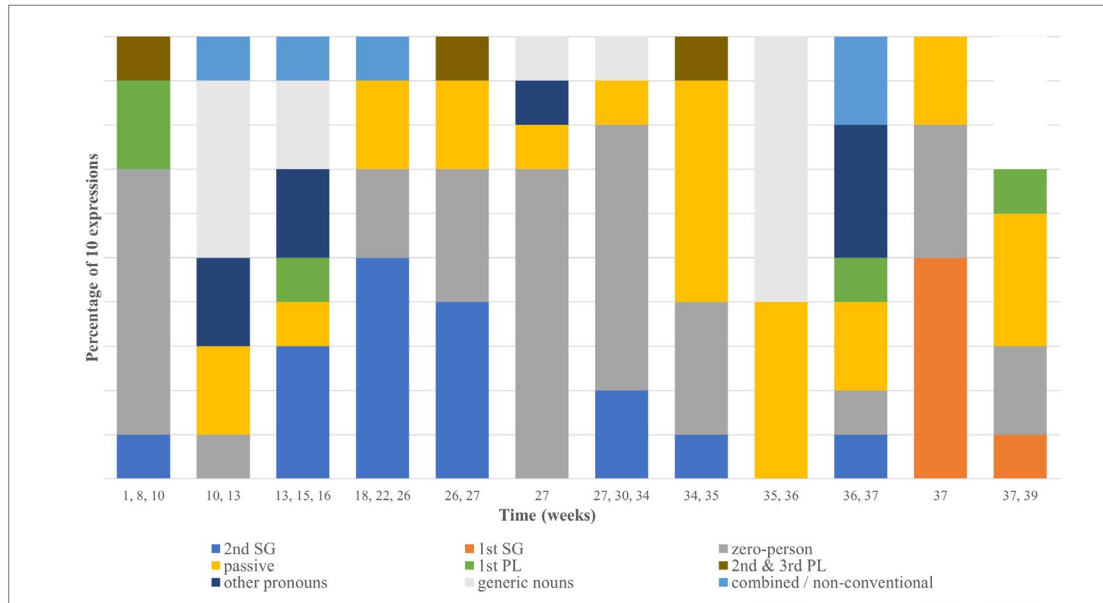
Figure 2. Proportions of all means of expressing impersonality in the written data over time (100% = 10 expressions).

Overall, Olga's repertoire for obscuring or blurring the agent of human action is already wide and diverse, with a CEFR level of B2. However, her language system is also developing. This is visible in Figures 1 and 2, which show an increasing proportion of passives in both speech and writing towards the end the of the study. During the first 15 weeks of the study period, the proportion of passive constructions was 3% of all the means of expressing impersonality, whereas during weeks 16–30 the proportion was 8%. Finally, during the last 10 weeks, the proportion was 23%, which indicates that the passive construction had replaced other means of expression and become more frequent. The development of Olga's passive construction is analysed in more detail in the next sub-section.

On a micro scale, both the diversity and instability of Olga's repertoire are visible at a single data point, or even in a single utterance. The diversity of expressions is not always completely conventional, as the next two examples illustrate. In the examples, Olga uses her most frequent means of expressing impersonality, and they are also the prototypical impersonal constructions of Finnish. In example 1 (week 17, pair interview), Olga uses a variety of ways to describe a Finnish magic Midsummer ritual on a general level.

(1)

kun	*joku*	*kerää*	*seitsemän*	*kukka-a*
when	someone	pick.3SG	seven	flower-PAR

"when someone picks seven flowers

sitten	*laita*	*tyyny-n*	*alle*
then	put.IMP	pillow-GEN	below.ALL

then put them under the pillow

sä	*voi-t*	*nähdä*	*sun*	*tuleva-nsa*
you	can-2SG	see.INF	you.GEN	future-3POSS

you can see your future

kaveri-nsa	joo	miehe-n	miehe-nsä
friend-3POSS	yeah	husband-ACC	husband-3POSS

friend yeah husband."

In example 1, Olga uses the generic pronoun in *joku kerää* ("someone collects"). She continues with *laita tyynyn alle* ("put below your pillow"), and the verb *laita* ("put") is in the imperative (singular). The referent could be the same as in the next expression, in which Olga uses the open 2nd person singular in *sä voit nähdä* ("you can see"). Another interpretation for *laita* is that Olga mispronounces the word and wants to use the form *laittaa* instead to refer to the same subject as she earlier used with "picks" (i.e., *joku laittaa* "someone puts"). Finally, when Olga talks about the implied agent's future friend with *sun* (your), she mixes it with the possessive suffix *-nsa*, which is used with the 3rd person singular and would be an accurate form with the zero construction or the subject *joku* ("someone"). The utterance would be conventional, if only one means of expression (the pronoun *joku*, generic you or the zero construction) was consistently used in referring to the same implied agent.

In example 2 (week 27, writing task), a homework assignment for her Finnish class, Olga describes her favourite place using zero person constructions (lines 2, 3 and 5) and passive constructions (lines 3 and 6) both conventionally and non-conventionally.

(2)
Se on semmonen paikka,
"it is the kind of place

johon	*voi*	*mennä,*
to.which	can.3SG	go.INF

where one can go

kun	*ei*	*tiede-tä,*	*mitä*	**halua*	*ja*	*mihin. - -*
when	NEG.3SG	know-PASS	what	want.3SG	and	to.where

when they don't know what they want and where. - -

Erityisesti järvi nyt on jääpeiton alla ja
Especially now when the lake is frozen and

voi	*vapaasti*	*harrastaa*
can.3SG	freely	practice.INF

one can freely do

ihan mitä vaan	*talve-lla*	*harraste-taan.*
anything	winter-ADE	practice-PASS

anything that people usually do in wintertime."

As she explains that a person can go to this place even if they don't know what they want to do, Olga starts with a zero construction *voi mennä* ("one can go"), but then switches to passive in *ei tiedetä* ("it is not known"). The implied but omitted agent is the same, so using both a zero construction and a passive is not conventional. Later in the same text as displayed in example 2 (lines 5 and 6), Olga describes what a person can do (*harrastaa* "to do/practice something as a hobby") in wintertime in her favourite place. This time, she mixes these two constructions in a conventional way, because the implied agent is not the same. The zero person construction (*voi vapaasti harrastaa*) refers to anyone who visits the place, and the passive construction (*harrastetaan*) refers to people in general. After the last line of example 2, Olga then describes these wintertime activities, such as skiing and skating, in her text. Next, we will analyse the development of Olga's passive construction in more detail.

Development of the Passive Construction

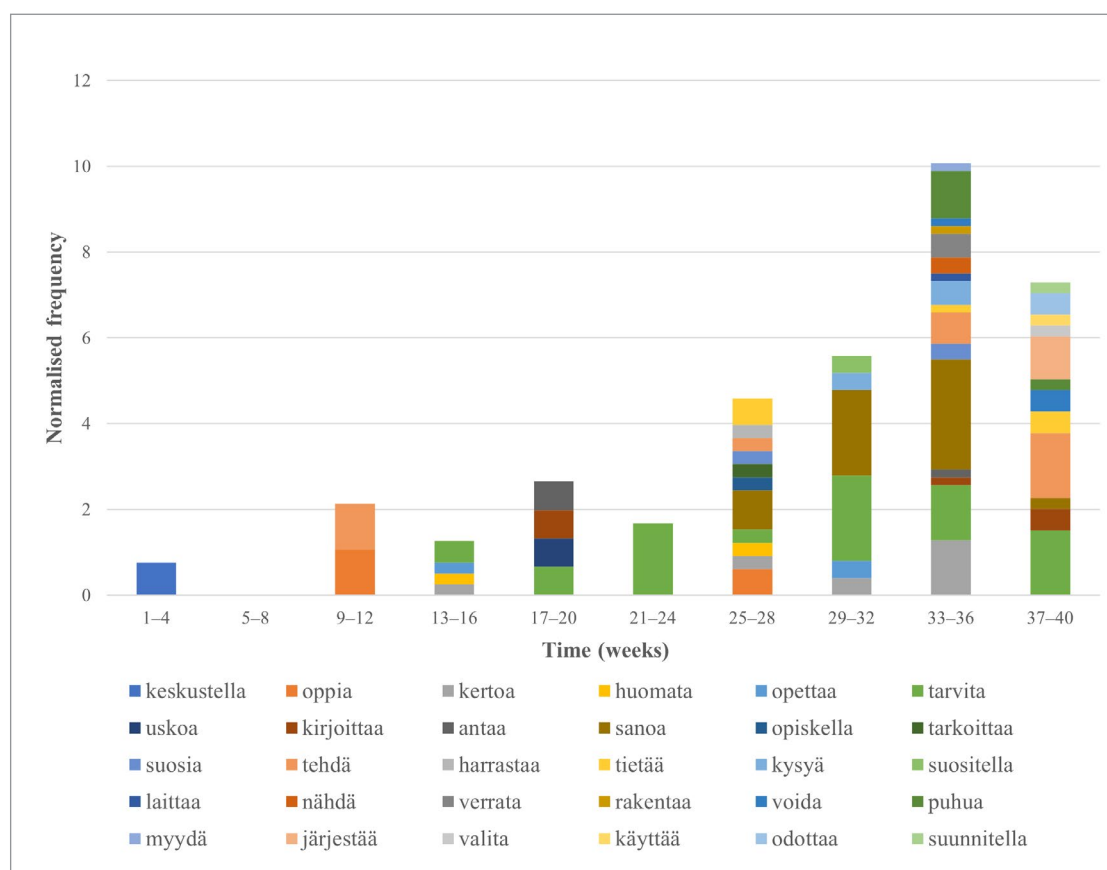### Frequency of Impersonal Passive Constructions

As already demonstrated, the frequency of Olga's passive constructions that obscure the agent of human action increased over time (see Figure 3). During the last 10 weeks of the study period, the frequency of the impersonal passive constructions was 8.6 per 1000 words, which is close to the frequency of passives in Seilonen's (2013) written data from adults with B2-level Finnish (8.1/1000 words).
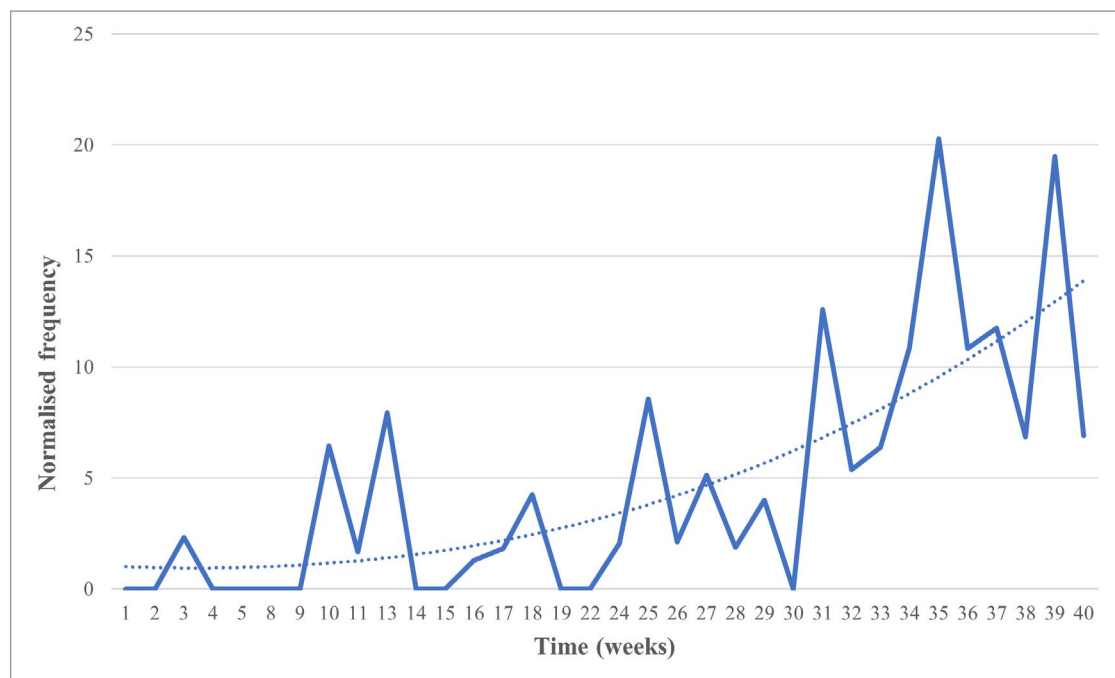
Figure 3. Frequency of impersonal passive constructions per 1000 words over time.

Variability

From the point of view of lexical variability, Olga used the passive construction with a variety of verbs from the beginning of the study period, as Figure 4 demonstrates.

Figure 4. Proportions of different verbs used in impersonal passive constructions.

Olga's most frequent verbs were *sanoa* ("to say"; 20 expressions), which Olga mainly used to refer to texts she had read (see also the next sub-section "The case of referring to a text"), and *tarvita* ("to need"; 18 expressions; see examples 3 and 4). Interestingly, Olga used many verbs that describe mental or cognitive processes or are otherwise commonly used in academic contexts, such as *oppia* ("to learn"), *huomata* ("to notice/realise"), *uskoa* ("to believe"), *tietää* ("to know") and *verrata* ("to compare"; see Appendix C for translations of all the verbs). This might be related to her language learning and usage environment, that is, the training programme aimed at facilitating the skills needed in academic contexts and the topics of conversations in these contexts.

Throughout the study period, Olga used passive constructions to obscure the agent in both conventional and other ways. Sometimes a whole expression was conventional or very close to conventional (see examples 2, 4 and 5). However, some of her agent-obscuring passive constructions were not conventional in, for example, verb choice, the whole structure of the sentence or utterance (see example 2) or passive form. The data also include other non-conventional expressions that reflect Olga's still-developing use of the passive construction, but these are either not impersonal or do not have a recognizable passive form. These are cases where a passive form is used when an active form would be conventional (see example 3) or cases where other verb forms are used when a passive form would be conventional (see example 5). Figure 5 shows the frequency of the expressions falling into these four categories and illustrates the variability of conventional and non-conventional expressions over time.
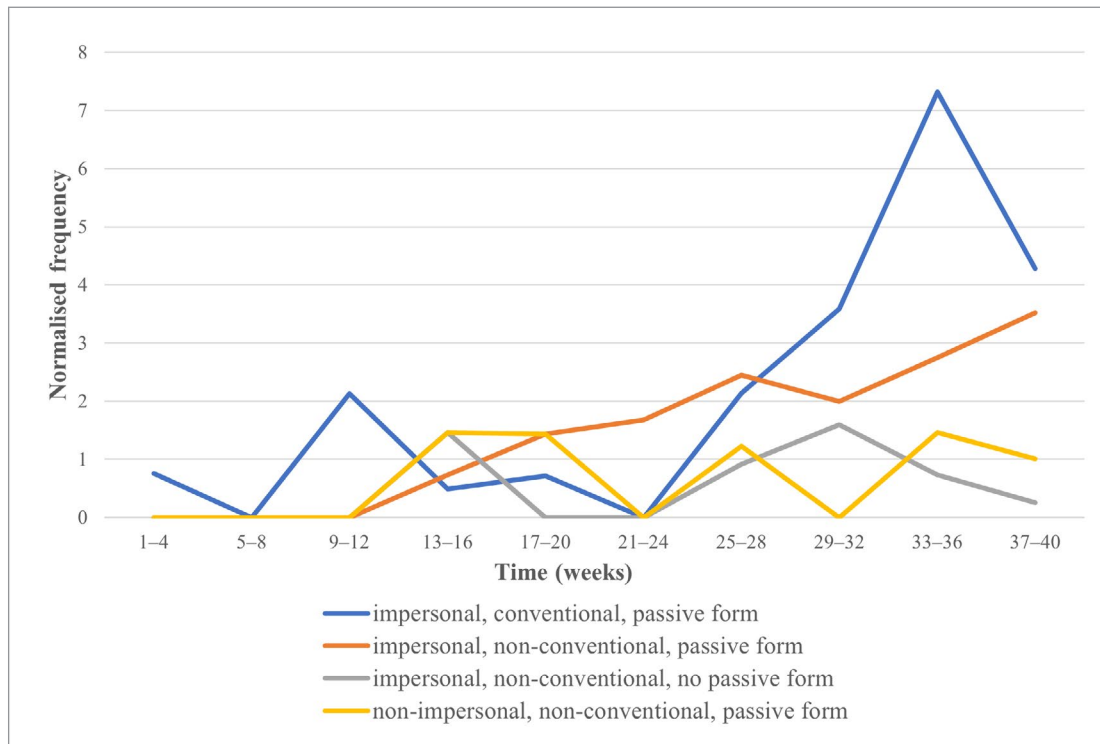
Figure 5. Frequencies of conventional and non-conventional use of passives.

As Figure 5 illustrates, Olga's first passive expressions were conventional. Thereafter, during weeks 13–28, Olga used many more non-conventional expressions (35) than conventional expressions (10). Finally, during the last 12 weeks the frequency of conventional expressions increased considerably. Overall, Olga's use of passives became more conventional, but she continued using non-conventional expressions until the end of the study period.

The following three examples illustrate Olga's developing language system regarding the impersonal passive construction. In examples 3 (pair interview, week 16) and 4 (group discussion, week 29), Olga uses the verb *tarvita* ("to need"), which is one of her most frequent verbs in impersonal passive constructions in the data set (see Figure 4).

(3)

*ensin	*mitä*	***mun***	***tarvi-taan***	*kieli*
first	what	I.GEN	need-PASS	language

"first what I need is language

koska ilman kieltä en voi päästä yliopistoon
because without the language, I cannot get to university"

(4)

sulla voi olla kaikki
"you can have everything

mitä	***tarvi-taan***
what	need-PASS

that is needed

sun ammatissa mutta jos sä itse epävarma - - kaikki epäonnistuu
for your profession, but if you are unsure of yourself - - everything will fail"

Example 3 is from the data point in which Olga uses this verb in the passive form for the first time. However, Olga's sentence has a named agent – herself – and therefore the phrase is non-conventional. In explaining that to get into university she needs to learn the language better, she combines the passive form *tarvitaan* ("is needed") with *mun*, which is an informal genitive form of the 1st singular. Example 4, in turn, is from 13 weeks later, and it is the first time in the data set that Olga uses this verb in a conventional way in an impersonal passive construction. After this and until the last data point, Olga uses this *tarvitaan* verb form both in conventional and non-conventional ways.

Example 5 illustrates that the conventionality of the learner language may vary within even a single utterance and a single lexical item. Here, in an oral presentation (week 34), Olga talks about statistics comparing people with a Finnish background and migrants.

(5)

kun	***verra-taan***	*suomalai-seen*
when	compare-PASS	Finn-ILL

"when compared to a Finnish person

joku ikä sama ikäinen suomalaisia ja sitten maahanmuuttajia ja
Finnish people and migrants of the same age and

ne	*verrat-*	****verratta-vat*** - -
they		compare-3PL

and when they are compared - -

suomalaiset enemmän menevät opiskelemaan korkeakouluihin
Finnish people go to study in higher education more often"

At first, Olga uses the verb *verrata* ("compare") in an impersonal passive construction in a conventional way (*verrataan* "are compared", present tense) when explaining that the two groups are compared. Then she adds that people of the same age are compared but this time uses a non-conventional verb form (*verrattavat*) that has the ending of the 3rd person plural form -*vat*. This might be related to her linguistic background, as 3rd person plural forms are used in Russian to obscure the agent (e.g., Malamud, 2006).

The Case of Referring to a Text

In Olga's case, learning to use passive constructions was intertwined with academic literacies. This is particularly evident in the ways she refers to written texts that she has read, as passive constructions became Olga's most frequent means for doing this during the data-gathering period. In the data set, Olga explicitly referred to external literature or other written information at 14 out of 46 data points, and 62 times altogether.

During the first half of the data gathering period, Olga referred to texts 22 times, but did so using a passive construction on only three occasions. Her most frequent references (12) were to an author or expert. Olga's first reference to texts came in a pair discussion in week 11, during which Olga told her partner about an article reporting an interview with a researcher about language learning. Olga referred to the text using phrases such as *tää*

tutkimuksen mukaan ("according to this study") and *hänellä oli tutkimus ja tää on no mä puhun hänen tutkimuksesta* ("she had a study and well I am talking about her study").

During the last half of the data collection period, Olga used the passive construction more when talking about external sources, altogether 27/40 times. In Finnish, in general, using passives for this specific function is conventional, especially in speech. In a tutor group meeting in week 36, Olga talks about a book she has read, and the interactional situation resembles that from week 11. However, Olga now mainly uses the passive construction (6/8), such as in *tässä kerrotaan aika vahvasti tää mielipide* ("their opinion is stated quite strongly here"), *ja sanotaan että* ("and it is said that"). Passives have thus become Olga's most frequent means of expression to convey this specific meaning, and, as a result, her linguistic repertoire starts to resemble the conventions of the speech community.

Discussion and Implications

In this study, we explored means of expression for obscuring the agent of a human action (i.e., impersonality) in the developing linguistic repertoire of an L2 Finnish learner, Olga, with a CEFR level of B2. Our first research task was to map Olga's ways of expressing impersonality in the whole data set. The results suggest that Olga's repertoire was extensive, as she was able to convey this meaning in multiple ways in Finnish. She used constructions that blur or conceal the agent, along with other linguistic choices.

The diversity of Olga's repertoire was also analysed in single data points. During a usage event or even in single utterances, Olga used both conventional and non-conventional expressions to convey the chosen meaning (see Lesonen et al., 2022 for similar results). In addition, she combined different means of expressing impersonality (zero construction and passive) in conventional as well as non-conventional ways. It has been suggested, especially in the context of CDST, that when a certain aspect of a learner's language is developing, forms can vary widely because the learner is trying out different ways of expressing the target meaning, while later on, when the most effective linguistic forms (presumably conventional ones) have been found, the degree of diversity decreases (van Dijk et al., 2011). A pedagogical intervention at this stage of variability may be especially effective, because a learner's language system may be more responsive to adjusting towards more conventional language use (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Frequent linguistic choices that Olga relied on were expressions containing personal pronouns and/or verb forms. In these expressions the impersonal interpretation is context-dependent (e.g., *sä voit nähdä* "you can see"). From a usage-based perspective, this is reasonable, as active forms are generally more frequent than constructions that carry the meaning of impersonality as such. Frequent expressions in the community easily become entrenched in the individual language user's linguistic system and are therefore more readily available (Schmid, 2020). In addition to the generic you and impersonal 1st and 3rd person plurals, which are used across many languages, Olga used other personal forms with a vague or general reference.

The onomasiological approach applied in the present data comprising natural language use allowed us to explore the learner's whole linguistic repertoire for expressing impersonality. This approach is unique in comparison to previous studies on the topic. If the starting point is language as a system and the focus is solely on constructions that are prototypical in the target language (such as the passives), other means of expression that convey the meaning and are comprehensible in the context may remain invisible. The case of referring to texts such as newspaper articles in speech or writing illustrates that if the analysis is not limited to specific structures, we can gain insights into learners' actual language use. By

using less common expressions when referring to texts she had read, Olga could participate in the interaction and be part of the academic community, even before she had more conventional means of expression in her repertoire to express this meaning. Participation with less- or non-conventional constructions can also be seen as valuable because it creates opportunities for learning (e.g., Horbowicz & Nordanger, 2024; Van Lier, 2004).

Although the onomasiological approach provides valuable insights into the learner's whole linguistic repertoire, it can create challenges when investigating learner language. When the inclusion criteria emphasise meaning rather than form, non-conventional expressions can sometimes be difficult to interpret, whether the expression conveys the targeted meaning or not. However, with learner language, the same problem could be faced even when the starting point of the analysis is a form such as the passive. Moreover, it is not possible to know whether the learner also uses the same linguistic choices in contexts outside of the research context. To address this challenge as well as obtain a rich picture of the learner's repertoire, we collected various data types.

Our second research question addressed the development of Olga's passive constructions. Not surprisingly, Olga's use of impersonal passive constructions increased over time. Using the passive voice is a central characteristic of language usage in academic contexts (Ivaska, 2015; Luukka, 1995) and it has been shown that the frequency of passive constructions increases as a learner's proficiency level increases (Martin et al., 2010, pp. 72–73; Reiman, 2011; Seilonen, 2013).

Another prominent feature in the development of Olga's passive construction is the high degree of variability in how often she alternated between conventional and non-conventional forms. A significant amount of lexical variability could also be observed. In contrast to some earlier findings on L2 learning (e.g., Eskildsen, 2012; Mellow, 2006), Olga was not using the same verbs repeatedly within the construction, but she was actively broadening her verb repertoire. From the start, Olga used passive verb forms as personal verb forms. For example, she described a group project as follows: *Me etsittiin* (passive form) *kotona ensin ja sitten viikon kuluttua me kokoonnuttiin* (passive form; "We first searched [for material] at home and then after a week we got together"; week 8). This use of passive verb forms is frequent and conventional in colloquial Finnish, and Olga seemed to be more familiar with this colloquial use than the more abstract use. For Olga, this colloquial use of passive form likely paved the way for her use of passive forms in other, more formal usage events. Once the form is familiar, it is easier to use the verbs in various contexts. This finding suggests that in the educational contexts of L2 Finnish, the familiarity of the colloquial use of the passive with the *me* ("we") pronoun (e.g., *me etsittiin* "we searched for") could be utilised when teaching the abstract use of passive verbs.

In addition to her lexical variability, we observed how Olga alternated between conventional and non-conventional passive constructions. Although the number of conventional constructions Olga used increased over time, she continued using non-conventional constructions (see Figure 5). This is in line with, for example, Lesonen et al. (2022), who showed that non-conventional existential constructions remain in use by L2 Finnish learners' language even when the conventional construction has been already acquired. Moreover, many non-conventional passive forms emerged in Olga's language when she actively attempted to use the passive construction with new verbs. This kind of non-linear development can be expected, especially from the CDST point of view, where learner language is seen as consisting of different components (subsystems) that continuously interact with each other (Verspoor & van Dijk, 2011). As new verbs are used and the complexity and diversity of the learner language increase, accuracy may decrease. Using new verbs in the

passive form thus shows that Olga actively expanded her linguistic repertoire, which can be seen as a supportive factor in her language development although momentarily it makes her language non-conventional. Huang et al. (2021) have argued that the high degree of variability in holistic ratings of a text may indicate that a learner is striving for excellent language production that they can attain at one time but not at another. Acknowledging variability in learner language is crucial, because language learners benefit if they themselves and their teachers understand the value of diversity and non-conventional expressions in language development.

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Appendix A: Olga's Finnish language proficiency on CEFR

Three qualified assessors rated three spoken and four written samples of Olga's language use according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (see Council of Europe, 2020). Olga produced these either in a controlled setting without any external resources or, in the case of two video blogs, spontaneously with no visible reliance on external resources. Not all the tasks required covering the topics on a more abstract level, one feature that distinguishes B2 from B1. Assessor 1's focus on the abstractness of Olga's texts might explain this assessor's overall lower ratings. The ratings are shown below.

Text type	Week		Assessor 1	Assessor 2	Assessor 3
Task in language test: email to a teacher	1	Written	B1	B2	B2
Video blog: a week in the training programme	3	Spoken/video	B1	B2	B2
Writing task: What do you think about the length of the midterm break?	16	Written	B1	B1	B1
Video blog: learning outcomes of a course	26	Spoken/video	B2	B2	C1
Learning journal	37	Written	B1	B2	B2
Task in language test: email to a teacher	39	Written	B1	B2	B2
Interview extract (5 minutes)	40	Spoken/audio	B2	C1	C1

Appendix B: Study data

Week	Word count	Spoken	Written	Sample type
1	118		x	language test
2	459	x		video blog (dialogical with an L2 speaker)
3	432	x		video blog (monological)
4	317	x		video blog (monological)
5	146	x		video blog (monological)
8	212		x	writing task (assignment in class)
8	379	x		video blog (monological)
9	191	x		video blog (dialogical with an L2 speaker)
10	27	x		oral task (monological)
10	128		x	reflection paper
11	595	x		pair discussion (with an L2 speaker)
13	252		x	summary
14	482	x		pair discussion (with an L2 speakers)
15	954	x		oral presentation (monological)
15	98		x	reflection paper
16	2200	x		pair interview (with an L2 and an L1 speaker)
16	118		x	writing task (for the purpose of this study)
17	1097	x		pair interview (with an L2 and an L1 speaker)
18	235		x	writing task (for the purpose of this study)
19	61	x		video blog (monological, for the purpose of this study)
22	109		x	writing task (for the purpose of this study)
24	487	x		oral task (dialogical with L2 speakers)
25	509	x		group discussion (with L2 speakers)
25	309	x		video blog (monological)
26	295		x	writing task (homework assignment)
26	653	x		video blog (monological)
27	213	x		video blog (dialogical with L2 speakers)
27	437	x		individual interview (with an L1 speaker)
27	213		x	writing task (homework assignment)
28	533	x		oral presentation (with an L2 speaker)
29	250	x		group discussion (with L2 speakers)
30	52		x	writing task (assignment in class)
31	159	x		oral task (with an L2 speaker)
32	2049	x		tutor group meeting (with L2 speakers and an L1 speaker)
33	1568	x		individual interview (with an L1 speaker)
34	529	x		oral presentation (monological)
34	295		x	reflection paper
34	650	x		group discussion (with L2 speakers)
35	296		x	learning journal
36	1800	x		tutor group meeting (with L2 speakers and an L1 speaker)
36	324		x	learning journal
37	134		x	learning journal
37	206		x	learning journal
38	874	x		tutor group meeting (with L2 speakers and an L1 speaker)
39	154		x	language test
40	2605	x		individual interview (with an L1 speaker)

Appendix C: Translations of the verbs used in Olga's passive constructions

keskustella = to discuss
oppia   = to learn
kertoa   = to tell
huomata   = to notice, to realise
opettaa   = to teach
tarvita   = to need
uskoa   = to believe
kirjoittaa   = to write
antaa   = to give
sanoa   = to say
opiskella   = to study
tarkoittaa   = to mean
suosia   = to favour
tehdä   = to do, to make
harrastaa   = to practice, to be interested in, to do something as a hobby
tietää   = to know
kysyä   = to ask
suositella   = to recommend
laittaa   = to put
nähdä   = to see
verrata   = to compare
rakentaa   = to build
voida   = can
puhua   = to speak
myydä   = to sell
järjestää   = to organise
valita   = to choose
käyttää   = to use
odottaa   = to wait
suunnitella = to plan