6 Agency in L2 Academic Literacies: Immigrant Students' Lived Experiences in Focus

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Introduction

Reading and writing in academic contexts is often challenging for students using their second or additional language to do so. Furthermore, academic literacy practices vary across cultures and disciplines, which means that even students with a background in higher education have to appropriate new ways of making meaning in new academic environments (Kim & Belcher, 2018; Wette & Furneaux, 2018). These perspectives intersect in this chapter, which approaches the experiences of immigrant students in Finland who had already completed some university studies before emigrating. They wanted to develop their language and literacy skills in Finnish to get access to and succeed in academic life and professional careers in their new home country, and they took part in a tailored training programme that integrated language and content studies in different disciplines. Such a setting is significantly different from previous research on learning academic reading and writing in a second or additional language, which has focused on advanced second language users, mainly English language users, who already have access to academia, such as exchange students (e.g. Kim & Belcher, 2018) or international degree students (e.g. Lee & Maguire, 2011).

Morrice (2013) emphasizes the importance of understanding past experiences when exploring the experiences of highly educated refugee professionals who enter higher education in their new country to find employment and re-establish their professional identity. However, hardly any research on adult immigrant students in the context of academic literacies has paid attention to students' lived experiences. This study therefore aims to explore how students experience, perceive and negotiate new reading and writing

practices and academic genres in their L2 Finnish, allowing for their relevant life experience and previous knowledge. To understand how they experience the new literacy practices, the study draws on a dialogical view of agency (Dufva & Aro, 2014; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004; Vitanova, 2005, 2010), which is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's work (e.g. 1981, 1986). In a broad, sociocultural definition, agency refers to an individual's 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001: 112), and, in the dialogical approach, the emphasis is especially on the individual's lived and felt experience (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). In this view, agency is seen from a holistic perspective, as dynamic but also continuous and semi-permanent (Dufva & Aro, 2014). This means that, to understand an individual's sense of agency, one has to understand the role of earlier experience and future hopes, as well as the current social context.

In this study, academic literacy practices are considered as a wide range of language-using situations in academic settings, from writing emails to reading scientific articles. In addition to basic reading and writing skills, also digital, numerical and visual literacies are to be employed to accomplish these tasks. Therefore, literacies are understood in a broad sense and conceptualized as multiliteracies, which means that the multimodal and multilingual aspects of meaning-making are taken into account (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). The focus is on three literacy practices that are commonly used in higher education courses in Finland, namely summary writing, participating in a discussion forum in an online learning environment, and writing a learning journal. Participants' agency with these three practices is approached through their spoken narratives. In line with the small-stories perspective (Georgakopoulou, 2015), narratives are seen as tellings of past, ongoing or future events in an interactive environment. The research questions are:

> How is agency displayed in immigrant students' spoken narratives on academic literacy practices in L2 Finnish?
>
> How are immigrant students' beliefs and lived experiences reflected in the spoken narratives displaying agency?

The chapter is structured as follows. First, there is a discussion of prior research relevant to the current study. Then, the theoretical framework, the analytical concepts, and the

methodology of the current study are introduced. This is followed by an analysis of the narratives of six focal participants, in order to explore their experiences of agency in the three literacy practices. Finally, the findings are discussed in the framework of academic literacies, and their pedagogical, theoretical and policy implications are explored.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Prior research on academic literacies in a second language

In this study, the notion of literacy practice is used to conceptualize the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures surrounding them (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). The study draws on the academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007) which, in line with New Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 1998), sees reading and writing as social practices. The approach is interested in meaning making, power relations, identities and institutional practices in academic settings, and therefore sees literacy practices as situated, dynamic and complex (Lea & Street, 1998). It is also transformative in nature; this means, for example, that new ways have to be found of meaning making in academic contexts, using students' own resources as tools (Lillis & Scott, 2007: 13).

Academic reading and writing in a second language have been studied intensively in various frameworks. Based on a synthesis of previous research, Hyland (2011: 31) identified five kinds of knowledge involved in learning second language writing. These are (1) content knowledge; (2) system knowledge, which refers to language and the surface level of the text; (3) knowledge of the writing process; (4) genre knowledge; and (5) context knowledge, such as readers' expectations and cultural preferences. In a new academic setting, writers actively repurpose and reconstruct their prior knowledge and combine it with new knowledge (Kim & Belcher, 2018). The more socially emphasized research has focused on students' experiences and perceptions. For example, Lee and Maguire (2011) found that their research participants, two South Korean students in a Canadian university, were struggling with the new writing norms because these norms conflicted with their identities.

In Anglo-Western academic contexts, the majority of writing activities are of the 'reading-to-write' type (Nesi & Gardner, 2012), such as the three literacy practices analysed in this study. However, students with prior university-level studies from non-Western countries are not always familiar with this kind of writing and may find it challenging (Wette & Furneaux, 2018: 190–192). Writing from sources is a complex cognitive process which at different stages involves a variety of reading and writing strategies (e.g. McCulloch, 2013). Interestingly, Bhowmik (2016) found that the conscious use of different strategies throughout the writing process was a major component in L2 writers' agency. He suggested that the enactment of agency allows writers to choose among different ways to complete a task. Wette and Furneaux (2018) did not apply the concept of agency in their study, but their research participants, who were international students, reported using a variety of resources, such as their supervisors or websites, to assist them with their writing and in their studies in general. Finally, Jeffery and Wilcox (2016) investigated adolescent L2 English writers' authorial agency, which they conceptualized as 'the socially mediated inclination to write, sense of purpose in writing, and perceived ability to write well', and argued that such agency is related to writing development.

Common to almost all previous research is that it has focused on academic literacy practices in English, which is a global lingua franca and is often taught in schools around the world as a foreign language. Finnish, in contrast, is a less widely taught language and has majority language status only in Finland. Typically, migrants do not start learning the language until they arrive in the country. However, Finnish language skills are considered essential for succeeding in working life in Finland, and even many academics working in English in a Finnish university agree that one needs Finnish skills to be able to participate fully in society generally and in working life (Nikulin, 2019). Previous research on writing in L2 Finnish has often taken a usage-based approach to language. For example, Ivaska (2015) has explored constructions in academic essays that were part of the Corpus of Advanced Learner Finnish, and he highlights the context-based nature of language learning. Mustonen (2015), in turn, used the CEFLING (Linguistic Basis of the Common European Framework for L2 English and L2 Finnish) corpus, and she notes that the idiomatic use of constructions in written texts reflects the active language use in everyday learning environments. In the current research setting, the students were participating in new academic literacy practices in Finnish, a language they had started to learn in

adulthood and in which they were not yet advanced. In the following section, I will introduce how the concept of agency is understood in this study.

Dialogical approach: Agency as lived, experienced and embodied

This study draws on a dialogical approach to agency, which is based on the ideas of Bakhtin (e.g. 1981, 1986) and has been further developed by Vitanova (2005, 2010), Dufva and Aro (2014) and Sullivan and McCarthy (2004), among others. Similar to other sociocultural perspectives, the dialogical approach understands agency as situated between the individual and the environment, but the emphasis is on the individual's views and experiences, and understanding small, personal stories (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). From a dialogical perspective, agency is examined 'as both subjectively experienced and as collectively emergent' (Dufva & Aro, 2014: 38). In other words, agency is constructed in dialogue with other people and the environment.

From a dialogical perspective, gaining agency means finding one's own voice (Vitanova, 2005, 2010). In Bakhtin's philosophy, life is understood as dialogic in nature (see, for example, Bakhtin, 1986), and in dialogue with others, people encounter various worldviews, beliefs and ways of acting, which Bakhtin (1981, 1986) refers to as 'voices'. Individuals can choose how they perceive and react to these voices that they encounter. According to Bakhtin (1981), the voices of others can be dealt with in three ways: individuals can ignore them as irrelevant, perceive them as internally persuasive and start using them as their own, or regard them as authoritative, which means that the individuals need to totally accept or totally reject them. Bakhtin also uses the concept of 'word' to describe how the language that we use is never neutral. Words are used to convey meaning and they are laden with intentions and worldviews (Bakhtin, 1981: 293–294). They are always 'half someone else's' (Bakhtin, 1981: 293), which means that the speaker recycles others' ideas and intentions and also adds something of his or her own. The process of making words one's own, that is to say using words with one's own intention, is called appropriation. Second language development as a whole can also be seen as appropriation: learners recycle the words of others to express themselves and to make them their own (Dufva *et. al*, 2014; Suni, 2008). Language learning is thus part of finding one's own voice and gaining agency, in the context of migration in particular (Vitanova, 2005).

According to Dufva and Aro (2014) agency is dynamic: it often changes over time and from one situation to another. However, agency is also seen as continuous, as people regard their life 'as an ongoing narrative' rather than a sequence of random events (Dufva & Aro, 2014: 38). New situations constantly bring new possibilities for change and new possibilities for new interpretations of ourselves (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). Sullivan and McCarthy (2004: 296) point out that, in the present, an agentive individual looks in two directions: back to the past and 'their responsibility for their actions' and 'forward towards the potential of the future'. So, agency is part of the continuum of an individual's life but at the same time it is experienced in a particular time and place (see Dufva, 2004). Language-related lived experiences are understood here in line with Busch (2017), who draws on Merleau-Ponty's (e.g. 2009) philosophy. She emphasizes the bodily–emotional dimensions of experience and argues: 'it is the emotionally charged experience of outstanding or repeated situations of interaction with others that keeps alive the process of inscribing language experience into body memory' (Busch, 2017: 352).

To better understand the life experiences of learners as constructing their sense of agency, I adapt the concept of the historical body from the nexus analytical framework (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Nexus analysis sees social action as an intersection of participants' life trajectories and capacities (the historical body), the participants' interaction order, and those wider discourses that are present in the action (Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 19–20). In the nexus analytical framework, the social action in focus in this study can be defined as participation in a literacy practice, namely, writing an academic text in an L2. The historical body refers to people's 'life experiences, their goals and purposes, and their unconscious ways of behaving and thinking' (Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 46), and these historical bodies have been shaped in particular social spaces (Blommaert & Huang, 2009: 7); in the context of language learning, this could mean classrooms, supermarkets, libraries and so on. Finally, both frameworks applied in this study share a similar socio-cognitive understanding of embodiment: from a dialogical perspective, agency is embodied (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004), and in nexus analysis the individual's lived experience is located in the body (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; see also Busch, 2017; Dufva, 2004).

Data and Methods

The context of the study is a 9-month training programme that was designed for migrants who have completed university-level studies before migration and who aim to work in their own field or continue their studies in Finland. The programme was conducted in a higher education institution in the latter half of the 2010s and language studies were integrated with studies on civic and working life skills as well as content studies. This meant that the students mainly studied Finnish in language classes that were focused on the most common academic literacy practices and academic language and, in addition, they could select and complete some university-level content studies in their own or other relevant disciplines. These content studies were for independent study, such as writing essays or completing online assignments, and they were the same as for students who were not from the programme. However, the students could bring materials and themes from these courses to the Finnish classes and use them for the learning tasks, such as for writing a summary in Finnish. In addition, students had meetings with mainstream degree students, who acted as their tutors; in these meetings they could receive further support with the materials and tasks and where they mainly spoke Finnish. I had a dual role in the training, in that I was one of the five teachers of Finnish as a second language and I gathered data as a researcher.

Conducted in this educational setting, the current study is part of a larger ethnographically oriented multidisciplinary research project which draws on the nexus analytical framework (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). As already explained above, the aim of nexus analysis is to investigate a social action at a nexus point, which is an intersection of the life experiences and historical trajectories of the participants (historical bodies) with discourses and interactional elements (Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 19–20). The social action in the current study is writing as participating in a literacy practice, and the focus is on the historical bodies of the participants. During the training programme, I interviewed some of the students and collected their oral and written course work, as well as course material and interaction data from their student tutor group meetings. The interviews had many of the features of ethnographic interviews, since we had shared many classroom situations. There was mutual trust, but my dual role also affected the nature of the interviews. The participants often seemed to treat me as their teacher – for

example. when asking about their word choices in Finnish. I was not in a position to formally grade or assess the students, but it is possible that they still thought it was important that they should make a good impression on me. I tried to be sensitive in handling the interview questions, because they were either closely related to course work or were very open-ended, and I did not want the participants to feel that they were obliged to talk about personal things that they would rather not talk about with their teacher. In the interviews, the participants and I shared two common languages: Finnish, which was my first language and the participants' second language, and English, which was a lingua franca for all of us. All participants chose to use Finnish. The reason might have been that they saw the interviews as an opportunity to practise speaking Finnish, or that they were used to speaking Finnish with me. Being so used to communicating together in Finnish helped us to find mutual understanding in the interview interaction, even though it sometimes took some time. However, the choice of language further contributed to the already existing asymmetrical power relationship between me and the participants.

The analysis started with mapping the academic literacy practices that were part of the training. Three literacy practices were selected for further analysis based on the many different experiences that the students expressed in their narratives throughout the data. These practices were writing a summary of a field-specific text for the Finnish class, participating in a discussion forum in an online learning environment as an assignment for a content course, and writing a learning journal for the Finnish class. The analysis is based on the participants' spoken narratives on the three literacy practices. (See Table 6.1. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants or by the author.) These narratives are from four data types: their pair discussions, and individual, pair and group interviews. The summary writing and the forum discussion data were both gathered approximately halfway through the programme, while the learning journal data were gathered at the end of the programme. In addition, the students' pieces of writing as well as interaction data from a student tutor group meeting were used as a secondary data source to contextualize the narratives. Oral data were transcribed, and relevant data excerpts were translated into English for the purpose of this chapter. In the translation process, some elements of the learner language were lost, and the speech in the translated excerpts may seem more fluent and more target-like than in the original narratives.

The key participants (see Table 6.1), all 25–35 years old, were from different fields. They had migrated to Finland for a variety of reasons, but in no case was studying

a major reason for migrating. Some of the participants had come to Finland as refugees. At the beginning of the training, students were divided into two Finnish classes, based on their language skills. Students at the estimated A1 and A2 levels in the CEFR were in group A, and students at the B1 and B2 levels were in group B (see Council of Europe, 2001). Olga was from Russia, Mostafa was from an African country, and Faisal, Waseem, Adam and Adnan were from Middle Eastern countries.

Table 6.1 Participants by group (A/B) and data types (pair discussion, individual/pair/group interview) concerning different literacy practices

	Group	**Summary writing**	**Forum discussion**	**Learning journal**
Olga	B	Pair discussion		Individual interview
Faisal	B	Pair discussion		
Waseem	B	Pair discussion		
Adam	B		Group interview	Pair interview
Mostafa	A		Group interview	
Adnan	A			Individual interview

After mapping the three literacy practices from the whole data set, I analysed the narratives that were related to those practices, in order to identify the different aspects of agency that were involved. I draw on the ideas of the small-stories approach (Georgakopoulou, 2015) in understanding the nature of narratives as part of the ongoing interaction. From the small-stories perspective, everything that is told is worth analysing, not only traditional, long, chronological stories of past experiences (Georgakopoulou, 2015: 258). In the actual analysis, I analysed the content combined with the form and structure of the narrative (Riessman, 2008). This meant paying attention to word choices, such as repetitions and verb forms, bearing in mind the fact that the participants were speaking their second language (see Vitanova, 2005).

Barkhuizen (2013: 6–7) identifies three interconnected levels of context in narrative study, which I also took account of in the analysis. The first level refers to the interactional context of the narrative, such as the speaker's role in the interaction. The second level is the local context of the narrative, which includes for example the physical setting and language choice. The third level refers to the larger sociohistorical and sociocultural context. Vitanova (2010: 30) also remarks on the context of narrative and suggests that Bakhtin's philosophy enables the researcher to analyse the dialogic interplay between the individual and the context. Following Vitanova (2005, 2010) the data of the current study are analysed from a dialogical perspective by seeing the narratives as polyphonic

interactions. In practice this meant, for example, identifying the different voices that were present in the narratives.

Findings

Beliefs and prior knowledge shaping the experience of writing a summary

It was evident that, with the summary task, the participants' beliefs about language and language learning were related to their sense of agency, and it seemed that their beliefs also had an impact on how they decided to take action (see also Aro, 2009). The students also perceived their prior knowledge as a resource, and their lack of prior knowledge as a hindrance, when writing the summary. The aim of the task was to learn reading strategies, summarizing, paraphrasing and writing from a source text. The students chose texts such as scientific articles that were related to the content courses they were attending or their own academic field more generally. The summary (*referaatti*) they wrote had a word limit of 500 words. Afterwards, they had an oral task in pairs in which they reflected on the reading and writing processes and their reading and writing skills. As a guideline for their discussion, students had a handout with a list of questions, and they recorded the pair-work with their own cell phones.

In the discussions, students expressed various beliefs about second language learning. These beliefs seemed to reflect common views, or authoritative voices in Bakhtin's (1981) terms (see also Aro, 2009). In the first example, Olga and Faisal are identifying what they want to practise next in reading and writing, and they also explain why. These students follow their handout closely, and Olga is taking the leading role in the discussion.

Example 1

Olga: - - ja mitä sä haluat harjoitella (.) se on kaks bee
Faisal: miten haluat erityisesti harjoitella (.) minä haluan (.) harjoitella kielioppi, minä pitän minun pitää ensimmäi- ensimmäiseksi pitää ymmärtää kielioppi, ja lauserakentaa sitten mä voin ymmärtää lause lauseita
Olga: mhy
Faisal: jos minä en tiedä, mikä tämä pääte on, sitten minä en osaa (.) ymmärtää
Olga: no mä haluan, kun mä oon jo sano- kun oon jo sanoin, lukea enemmän tällaisia tekstejä ja tavallisesti sun ammatissa on, samanlaisia termejä ja jos sä luet ehkä kymmenen tekstiä, varmasti sä muistat kaikki terminit nyt

Faisal: ((naurahtaa))

Example 1 (English translation)

Olga: - - and what do you want to practise (.) it's 2B
Faisal: how do you specifically want to practise (.) I want to (.) practise grammar, I have to, I fir- first have to understand grammar, and sentence structure then I can understand sentence sentences
Olga: mm
Faisal: if I don't know which ending this is, then I can't (.) understand
Olga: well I want to, as I have already sa- as I already said, to read more the kinds of texts that you usually have in your profession, similar terms and if you read maybe ten texts, surely you remember all the terms now
Faisal: ((laughs))

Faisal's belief about reading in a second language seems to be very grammar oriented. He wants to practise grammar next because he believes that in order to 'understand sentences' (*ymmärtää lauseita*) he needs to 'understand grammar' (*ymmärtää kielioppi*). He goes on to say that if he does not know the ending of a word, he cannot understand. Finnish is an agglutinative language with numerous different endings, which might make it challenging for the learner to know all the endings (see Martin, 1995). Faisal's belief is in line with the traditional, formal conceptualization of language as structures, or monological thinking, in Bakhtin's terms (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Dufva *et al*., 2011: 110–114). Therefore, from a dialogical perspective, Faisal's conceptualization may be an authoritative voice, which he ventriloquates in his narrative (Bakhtin, 1981). Olga, in turn, believes that if she reads 'maybe ten texts' (*ehkä kymmenen tekstiä*) from her field she will learn all the discipline-specific terms. Aro (2009), in her interview research on young learners of English, identified an authoritative belief similar to Olga's, which emphasized the role of reading, practising and memorizing vocabulary in language learning. According to Dufva (2003), beliefs about language learning are both shared and individual at the same time; they are a combination of personal experiences and views from societal contexts, such as school and media. Students' views at any given moment are therefore related to their past experiences and their past contacts with authoritative voices.

Students' beliefs about language learning, reading and writing seemed to have an actual impact on the learner's action. In the next example, the same students talk about planning their own summaries.

Example 2

Olga: - - miten sä suunnitelet sun oma tekstin
Faisal: oikeesti minä haluan (.) lukea vielä, pari ehkä parikymmentä ((naurahtaa))
Olga: mhy ((naurahtaa))
Faisal: koska se on todella vaikea teksti, kun minä (.) ymmärrän kaikki sitten minä voin kirjoittaa, mitä tekstissä on, ja voin referoida
Olga: joo (.) no minä taval- mä tavallisesti luen pääotsikko, sitten kun [opettajan nimi] neuvoi meille alaotsikot, ja nyt mä, no ehkä ehkä voin arvata mistä, tuo koko teksti (.) sitten mä luen ja alleviivaan tärkeät kohdat (.) ja sitten aloitan kirjoittaa omin sanoin mistä mä oon jo lukenut ja niitä asiat mistä mä ymmärsin (.) joo ja kun mä luen samaan aikaan mä yritän vaikka jotain vaikka pari sanaa tästä lauseesta kirjoittaa koska jos mä vain luen, sitten mä en voi muistaa mitään, mun pitää samaan aikaan lukea eli nähdä kirjaimet ja itse kirjoittaa, omalla kädellä

Example 2 (English translation)

Olga: how do you plan your own text
Faisal: really I want (.) to read a couple more times, perhaps twenty more times ((a laugh))
Olga: umm ((a laugh))
Faisal: because it's a really difficult text, when I (.) understand everything then I can write what the text is about, and I can summarize
Olga: yeah (.) well I usual- I usually read the title, then the sub-headings as [teacher's name] advised us, and now I, well maybe maybe I can guess what the whole text is about (.) then I read and underline the important parts (.) and then I start to write in my own words what I've read and about the things that I've understood (.) yeah and when I read at the same time I try to write a couple of words from that sentence because if I only read, I can't remember anything, at the same time I have to read or see the letters and write for myself, with my own hand

Summary writing involves both reading and writing, and both students in this excerpt first start to talk about reading. Faisal says that before being able to write, he wants to read the text 'a couple more times, perhaps twenty more times' (*pari, ehkä parikymmentä*) to understand it; his laughter shows that he might exaggerate a little. He seems to believe, however, that reading and writing are two quite separate activities, which is in line with the dominant classification of the four elements of language competence (see Hartley, 2007). According to Faisal, his source text is 'really difficult' (*todella vaikea)*, and he cannot proceed to writing or even answer Olga's question about writing before understanding 'everything' (*kaikki*) in the text. Olga, on the other hand, sees reading and writing in a different light, as she regards them as intertwined activities. The practices she talked about in the interview are similar to those described in previous studies on writing from sources in a second language (see, for example, McCulloch, 2013). Olga seems to

have a variety of strategies that she uses to approach the task, which Bhowmik (2016) has shown to be a major element in an L2 writer's agency.

In the example, Olga says that she reads and underlines the most important parts and writes 'in her own words' (*omin sanoin*) about what she has understood. From the dialogical perspective, this paraphrasing is part of the process of making another's words her own, and it is also a central element in gaining agency (see Dufva & Aro, 2014). In addition to the ideas in her text, Olga seems to be appropriating the reading and writing practices that she describes. She reads the sub-headings 'as the teacher advised' (*kun opettaja neuvoi*), and thus explicitly refers to an authority whom she has listened to. In addition, Olga's word choice – 'in one's own words' (*omin sanoin*) – is most commonly used in educational settings, such as in assignments and instructions, which also refers to classroom discourse. Olga therefore seems to be following reading and writing practices that she has learned in educational settings. Maybe this strong involvement is related to her profession as a teacher or her possible identity as a 'good student' – or maybe she just finds the practices useful. However, Olga's beliefs about the literacy practice allow her to exercise her agency in the writing task, whereas what Faisal says indicates that his belief about the nature of the summary writing task limits his capacity to act.

In addition, Olga's description of her reading and writing practices in this example is very physical, because she mentions her sight and hands as being crucially involved in the activity. Olga says that if she only reads, she cannot remember anything, because 'at the same time I have to read, see the letters and write for myself, with my own hand' (*mun pitää samaan aikaan lukea eli nähdä kirjaimet ja itse kirjoittaa, omalla kädellä*). Olga's belief, as well as her agency, are thus embodied. In addition, her sense of agency is bound in time and space (see Dufva, 2004). This is evident from another narrative in the same discussion in which she talks about what is easy for her in reading and writing. She ends up describing the ideal reading situation for her: 'I can just sit alone quietly and read very slowly, and at the same time underline familiar phrases or words, it gives me confidence' (*mä voin rauhassa vain yksin istua, ja tosi hitaasti lukea, samaan aikaan alleviivata tuttuja fraaseja vai sanoja, se antaa mulle itsevarmuus*). Her material surroundings, namely having the opportunity to sit alone and underline whatever she wants, as well as having plenty of time, are key elements in shaping her experience.

In addition to their beliefs, students' prior knowledge also emerged as a source of agency in the narratives on summary writing. Olga, for example, says in another occasion

that some terms that she had 'already studied in Russia' (*jotka mä oon jo opiskellut Venäjällä*) were easy for her in the summary writing task because she 'could guess what they mean' (*mä voin arvata mitä ne tarkoittavat*). In other words, Olga was somewhat familiar with the content of her text because she had already studied the terms in her first language. Olga also actively made use of her prior knowledge in guessing the meanings.

Waseem, on the other hand, perceived the summary writing task as difficult because of his lack of background knowledge. In the pair discussion with a student called Tatjana, he explains that the reason for his difficulty is that his source text is not from his own field. In the following excerpt, his focus is on understanding the concepts.

Example 3

Waseem: joo, ei vain esimerkiksi se on ei vain, ongelma ei vain ole
Tatjana: lukee ja ymmärtää
Waseem: ymmärtää sanat, se on ei ei suomen kieli onkelma, se on esimerkiksi (.) liberaali asioita että politiikka asioita, he kirjoi- he sanovat sisälle artikkelissa, mä en ymmärrä mä en tiedä mitä on, hyvin mä me tiedä hyvin mitä on liberaali esimerkiksi

Example 3 (English translation)

Waseem: yeah it's not for example, the problem is not just
Tatjana: to read and understand
Waseem: to understand words, it's not not a problem with the Finnish language, it's for example (.) liberal and political things, they wri- they say in the article, I don't understand I don't know what is, I don't know well what liberal is, for example

Waseem says that understanding the text is difficult not only because of the Finnish language, but also because he does not understand what the concepts mean. He repeats the word 'problem' (*ongelma*) and only uses the negative verb form when referring to himself, which might imply that his sense of agency in the situation is rather weak. Waseem makes a distinction between knowing a word and understanding a concept – maybe he knows the equivalent for *liberaali* in some other language. Waseem's example of a concept that he does not know draws attention to his reservoir of previous knowledge. In the Finnish higher education context, 'liberal' is presumably a construct that all students know. Academic texts are full of concepts, some of which are explained thoroughly while some are concepts that readers are expected to be familiar with already. Taking a transformative approach to academic literacies means acknowledging these different knowledge repertoires (see Paxton & Frith, 2015).

Using multilingual and external resources to participate in an online discussion forum

Online learning environments offer students a space to use their multilingual resources and digital skills. As part of the training programme, a few students completed an online course in entrepreneurship. The main task of the course was to post a weekly assignment, using source materials, in an online learning environment, and comment on other students' assignments. This was done in an online discussion forum set up by the learning environment. The material was mainly in Finnish, but students could use either Finnish or English in their assignments and comments. However, most students used Finnish in the discussion forum.

In the following example, Mostafa describes his multilingual practices when completing the tasks.

Example 4

Mostafa: ennen minä käytin kääntäjää minä yritän ymmärtää mitä tämä tarkoittaa, ja kun minä ymmärrän ehkä (.) neljäkymmentä tai viisikymmentä prosenttia, ja sitten minä ota kaikki, ja sitten kääntää, ja ymmärrän mitä tarkoittaa, ja sitten, on kaikki on minun päähän (.) ja sitten voin minä kommentoida mitä tämä tarkoittaa ja, miten mutta (.) minä, en voi (.) myös kirjoittaa suomeksi kommentoita - - minä käytän englanniksi kommentoi mutta minä ymmärrän mitä keskustelevat ja mitä, he sanovat he kommentoita

Example 4 (English translation)

Mostafa: before I use an online translator I try to understand what this means, and when I understand maybe (.) forty or fifty percent, then I take everything, and translate it, and understand what it means, and then, everything is in my head (.) and then I can comment on what this means, and how, but (.) I can't (.) also write the comments in Finnish - - I use English when I comment, but I understand what they discuss and what they say they comment

In this excerpt, Mostafa positions himself in the centre of the action and focuses on describing what he can do: there is only one negative verb form in the whole narrative. Mostafa was able to participate in the discussion because he used both Finnish and English as well as an online translation application. In other words, his 'historical body' (Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 46–49), which includes his language repertoires and skills related to using technology, had a central role in his completion of the task. García and

Kleifgen (2019) point out the same issue: multilingual readers and writers benefit from using their linguistic and multimodal repertoires in literacy activities. On the other hand, the structure of the course enabled Mostafa to use all these resources, and therefore his agency was constructed in a dialogue between the environment and his own capacities.

In addition to their multilingual resources, students used their information-searching skills and relied on source texts when participating in the discussion forum. The next example comes from Adam, who had not been involved in digital academic literacy practices during his previous studies at university level. In the interview with me, he describes the online course as 'difficult' (*vaikea*) but also as 'a new and wonderful experience' (*uusi ja ihana kokemus*). Adam usually used English in his own posts and replies but on one occasion he responded to a post about a new business idea in Finnish. In the following, he describes this occasion to me.

Example 5

Adam: yksi kerta minä kommentoin, toinen toinen opiskelija hän on suomalainen opiskelija, ja hänen yrittäjyys oli avaa apteekin, apteekin
Kirsi: mm joo
Adam: ja todella minä luulen että mä (-) noin kolme ehkä neljä tuntia, että mä haluan sanoo, mä haluan tiedä suomen sää- säännöt, suomen säännöt (.) joo kuka haluaa avaa apteekin, ja sitten minä otan vähän, kolme tai neljä lausetta ja laita hänelle ja laitan myös että mistä lähde- lähteet
Kirsi: okei joo
Adam: mutta ota, ota ota aika mulle että kolme tuntia vain että
Kirsi: joo tosi kauan
Adam: miten tämä apteekkiasia kääntäjä

Example 5 (English translation)

Adam: once I commented on a student he was a Finnish student and his business idea was to open a pharmacy
Kirsi: mm yeah
Adam: and really I think I (-) about three maybe four hours, I want to say, I want to know the Finnish ru- rules, Finnish rules (.) yeah for someone who wants to open a pharmacy, and then I take some, three or four sentences and respond to him and also add the sources
Kirsi: okay yeah
Adam: but it takes, takes takes time, three hours only -
Kirsi: yeah that's very long
Adam: to translate this pharmacy thing

In this small story, Adam describes the actions that were involved in his writing process. His main message seems to be that he needed a long time, as he repeats this at the

beginning and at the end of his story, and he specifies that it took three or four hours to write three or four sentences. However, in the narrative, Adam positions himself as an active and agentive participant in the discussion forum; he first wanted to know the rules for opening a pharmacy in Finland, so he searched for the information, and, when writing the response, he wanted to add the sources. Adam uses a whole repertoire of skills – in nexus analytical terms, his 'historical body' is involved in the action (see Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 46–49).

In the excerpt, Adam says that he 'took' (*otti*) a few sentences and that he needed several hours 'to translate the pharmacy thing' (*tämä apteekkiasia kääntäjä*). This 'taking' and translating process is visible in the actual response that Adam wrote. The written response contains two sentences; the first one is copy-pasted from his source, and the second one is so complex that he probably has not written it all by himself. He mentions the sources but he does not use quotation marks or otherwise follow the instructions for citing. Previous studies have shown that writing from sources is often challenging for students, and it might be even more challenging in one's second language than in one's first language (e.g. Cumming *et al*., 2016). It is also influenced by individuals' previous reading and writing knowledge and strategies (e.g. Cumming *et al*., 2016; Hyland, 2011; Wette & Furneaux, 2018). However, Adam knows the idea of citing, and his response is relevant in content. By depending on the source texts and recycling others' linguistic resources he is able to participate in the discussion (see Suni, 2008), which might not have been possible with only his own productive Finnish skills.

Perceiving a learning journal as a platform for exercising agency

In the case of the learning journal, it was clear that each student developed a personal relationship with this literacy practice and that they perceived it as a source for their agency in different ways. A learning diary is defined as a form of academic writing that helps students to understand the ideas of a course and their own learning processes (Creme, 2008). In the programme, the aim of using a learning journal was also to introduce the genre to the students and practise writing in Finnish. The genre was first explicitly introduced to the students in class, and then their task was to write a short diary entry in Finnish once a week for three weeks. The students could write about anything they had learned during the week, and in the detailed instructions they were encouraged to be reflective. The students were also given some brief feedback on each journal entry.

Adnan perceived the learning journal as a platform to practise his Finnish skills however he chose. In addition to the language class in the programme, he had taken another class in which he had also written entries in a learning journal. In the following interview excerpt, Adnan reflects on how he learns through writing, and I seek for confirmation for my interpretations.

Example 6

Adnan: oppimispäiväkirja minä opin paljon oppimispäiväkirja (.) ja raportti, koska, ajattelen että kirjoittaminen on parempi (.) on parempi puhuminen ja ääntäminen tai lukeminen (.) en tiedä ehkä koska, mulla on aikaa kirjoittaa ja ajatella miksi tämä sanoja ja miksi *like*, loppu- lopuksi ja, joo joo mutta minä ajattelen kirjoittaminen on tosi parempi kuin puhuminen joo
Kirsi: eli sä opit, enemmän kirjoittamalla kun sä saat miettiä, saat aikaa, saat miettiä saat ajatella
Adnan: joo ehkä mulla on aikaa mä ajattelen mutta puhu (.) ei ei oo ei ole tarpeeksi aikaa, joo mutta kirjoittaa ja joo ja mun *like, like more confidence*
Kirsi: mm joo
Adnan: kirjoittaminen joo minä ajattelen (.) käy- käytä uusia sanaja tai fraaseja, joka oppimispäiväkirja (.) oppia op- oppimaan uusia sanoja

Example 6 (English translation)

Adnan: learning journal I learned a lot learning journal (.) and report because I think that writing is better (.) is better than speaking and pronunciation or reading (.) I don't know maybe because I have time to write and think about why these words and why *like*, final- finally, yeah yeah but I think writing is much better than speaking yeah
Kirsi: so you learn more by writing when you get to think, get time, get to think
Adnan: yeah I have time I think but speaking (.) I don't I don't have enough time yeah but writing and yeah and my *like, like more confidence*
Kirsi: umm yeah
Adnan: writing yeah I think (.) I use new words and phrases, each learning journal (entry) (.) learn new words

From the dialogical perspective, the process of language learning can be seen as the appropriation of linguistic resources: the language learner recycles the linguistic material of the community (Dufva *et al*., 2014; Suni, 2008). In this example, Adnan implies that he uses a learning journal as a platform for this kind of recycling, as he 'uses new words and phrases' (*käytä uusia sanaja ja fraaseja*) in his entries in order to learn them. This recycling can also be observed in his actual journal entries, in which he uses some words and phrases that were introduced in language classes.

Adnan also says that he has ‘learned a lot’ (*opin paljon*) from writing a learning journal. He thinks this is because ‘writing is much better than speaking’ (*kirjoittaminen on tosi parempi kuin puhuminen)*, which might mean either that he likes writing better than speaking or that he considers himself to be better at writing than at speaking. In either case, the reason why writing is better for Adnan is that he has more time to think when writing than when speaking, and this gives him *more confidence*. This belief about himself as a person who learns by writing and who learns when he has time to think has its roots in his previous experience; it might be related to his learning experience or to his interest in literature. Overall, Adnan’s beliefs about language learning and himself as a learner seem to frame his experience of agency in writing the learning journal and his perception of this as an affordance for his language learning.

Olga also developed ownership of the same literacy practice, but she perceives it as a platform for reflecting on her life and learning.

Example 7

Olga: oppimispäiväkirja on aika mielenkiintoista koska siellä sä kirjoitat omasta no opiskelusta tai mitä sä valitset se voi olla joku ju- sun oma joka päivä elämän, päiväkirja esimerkiksi, aika mielenkiintoista miettiä miks mä teen sen miks mä herään aamulla ja menen johonkin, onks se on hyödyllistä, olenko opiskellut no ahkerasti tai, olenko samaa mieltä tai tutkijat ovat, no tekevät virheitä vaikka ne on tutkijat mutta ne on henkilöt, aika mielenkiintoisesti

Example 7 (English translation)

Olga: the learning journal is quite interesting because you write about your own studies or what you choose it can be a journal of your everyday life for example, it’s quite interesting to think why am I doing this why do I wake up in the morning and go somewhere, if it is useful, have I studied hard, or do I agree with researchers, well they make mistakes even though they are researchers, they are human, quite interesting

In the narrative, Olga repeats the word ‘interesting’ (*mielenkiintoinen*) three times in various inflected forms and lists six different questions to reflect on in a learning journal. This gives the impression that the learning journal is interesting because it offers a space for dialogue. Following Olga’s questions, one can reflect on the choices one makes and become aware of the possible consequences of one’s choices. This kind of reflexive awareness is the key feature of agency (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004: 295–297, 307). On

the other hand, the last aspect that Olga mentions as interesting is being critical about what researchers claim, and it might refer to Olga's one diary entry in which she writes about the results of an article that she disagrees with. For Olga, the learning diary seems to be a platform for a dialogue, either with herself or with others. In Bakhtinian terms, this dialogue helps Olga to find her own voice. Olga's goal is eventually to work as a teacher in Finland, but she first has to complete some complementary studies in order to be qualified to teach in Finland and writing a learning diary is a typical activity in the field of education in Finland. Olga might therefore find the learning diary interesting also because it is a purposeful literacy practice for her (see Jeffery & Wilcox, 2016), and she can relate it to her future self or her ideal self (see Virtanen, 2013).

Adam, on the other hand, offers a third perspective. He does not find a learning journal useful for his learning. In the programme, he was writing entries in a learning journal for the first time in his life, and he put some effort into understanding what a learning diary is about, as he talked about it with his tutors. His actual texts were quite short in relation to the instructions they were explicitly given, and the teachers commented almost every week that he could write more about his own thoughts or opinions. In the interview with me, Adam concluded that he did not really like writing the learning journal.

Example 8

Adam: todella mä en (.) se on hyvä idea mutta mä idea tutustuu uusi asia mitä suomalaiset, opiskelijat tehdä yliopistossa mutta mä en tykkää tehdä asi- tästä asiasta
Kirsi: joo oppimispäiväkirjasta
Adam: - - nyt mä ymmärrän millainen oppimispäiväkirja on ja miten pitää tehdä sitä

Example 8 (English translation)

Adam: really I don't (.) it's a good idea to get to know a new thing how Finnish students study at university but I don't like doing thi- this thing
Kirsi: yeah learning journal
Adnan: - - now I understand what a learning journal is like and how I should write it

In the example, Adam is first very forthright about what he feels about writing a learning journal, and then he tries to explain why he does not like it. He says that it is a good idea to learn 'what Finnish students do' (*mitä suomalaiset opiskelijat tehdä*), and these word choices indicate that writing a learning journal is their literacy practice, not his. In this

narrative, Adam claims that he has understood what a learning diary is like, but he seems to resist taking ownership of it, or, in other words, he seems to resist being socialized into this literacy practice (see Vitanova, 2010: 145–151). Lee and Maguire (2011) analyse this kind of resistance towards dominant ways of writing as a question of identity.

Interestingly, Adam takes a very different stance toward studying online than he does to writing a learning journal. In Example 5, above, Adam talked about his experience of writing a discussion forum post in Finnish. In the next excerpt, Adam continues his narrative as an afterword to the small story that he told earlier (in Example 5).

Example 9

Adam: se on minulle se on ensimmäinen kerta, verkossa mä tein mä opiskelin yliopistossa (.) mutta ehkä tulevaisuudessa toinen, toinen (-) tai mitä, joo toinen kolmas neljäs sitten sitten (-) ei ole ottaa paljon aikaa

Example 9 (English translation)

Adam: it is the first time for me to study online in the university, but maybe in the future the second, second (-) or what, yeah the second, third, fourth then then (-) it won't take much time

Adam returns to the time-consuming aspect of writing his response when talking about the future, as he says that maybe after two, three or four times it will no longer take so much time to participate in this kind of activity in Finnish. However, Adam positions himself as possibly studying online again often in the future. An agentive individual looks both at earlier events and towards potential events in the future (Dufva & Aro, 2014: 41). Adam's ideal selves might be shaping the present experience and creating the motivation to invest enough time to complete the online learning assignment (see Virtanen, 2013).

If we compare Adam's two experiences, we see that in both cases he used some external resources (source texts or his tutors) and put some effort into completing the tasks. However, he developed a different kind of relationship with each academic literacy practice. There may be various reasons for that. For example, reflective texts like a learning journal may not be very usual in his field, which is economics, or alternatively, the online forum discussion task was part of an interactive discipline course rather than a language course, which might have made it more meaningful to him; perhaps he just liked one literacy practice better than the other. Whatever the reason, Adam's personal preferences, prior experience or future selves shaped the way he showed agency.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore immigrant students' agency in academic literacies in L2 Finnish by analysing their narratives. The particular focus was on the role of students' beliefs and lived experiences in narratives displaying agency. This was particularly relevant in the current study because the research participants had already completed university-level studies, and they had high goals for their future in Finland.

The results indicate that learners' beliefs about learning, reading and writing in a second language, as well as about themselves as learners, can have a major impact on how they decide to take action (see Mercer, 2012 for similar results). When completing tasks online, students described using their multilingual resources as well as their skills in using external resources, and this seemed to be a crucial part of their strong sense of agency. Finally, the students took different stances on the same literacy practice and perceived it as a source for their agency in a variety of ways, which indicates that each student developed a personal relationship to the new practice with which they were engaged.

Overall, students' prior experiences and life histories, or 'historical bodies' in nexus analytical terms (see Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 46–49), were related to the ways they perceived the new literacy practices. This was evident in the ways the students explicitly referred to their own preferences, prior knowledge or future, but also in the different voices that were present in their narratives. Students' agency was also shown to be embodied and closely connected with time and their material surroundings, such as writing and underlining words by hand, taking time for thinking, and using technology as a mediational means (see Wertsch, 1991) in searching for information and writing.

The results have implications for pedagogy and education policy. Immigrant students' background knowledge might differ a lot from 'traditional' students' knowledge reservoirs – for example, one of the students did not know what the concept 'liberal' meant. However, immigrant students also have their own unique life histories and learning trajectories (see Morrice, 2013). The need that this implies for individual support in academic reading and writing has long been recognized in research. In addition to having their individual capacities and needs, students also perceive new literacy practices in their own individual ways. Sometimes this means that learners do not see the new

literacy practice as relevant for their learning or for their life, or they see it as clashing with their identities (see Lee & Maguire, 2011), as was the case with one of the students struggling with learning journals. In the classroom, this kind of agency may come into conflict with the teacher's ideas. It is thus essential to explain the purpose of the exercises carefully and use reflective practice to acknowledge individual perceptions.

The results of this study suggest that the development of immigrant students' agency in academic literacy practices is indeed a complex process, which is shaped by many individual factors (see also Mercer, 2012). Morrice (2013) uses the concept of capital to contextualize the individual resources and capacities that shape refugee students' experiences in higher education, but she also emphasizes that these experiences are linked to the wider societal framework. In many higher education institutions, entrance examinations are designed for first language speakers, or the requirements in terms of language proficiency are very high (e.g. Airas *et al*., 2019). More sensitivity is therefore needed towards highly skilled immigrants' earlier experiences as well as their capacities and potential.

In this study, the academic literacies perspective helped us to understand literacy practices and students as part of social reality, and to recognize that academic writing always takes place inside power hierarchies. For immigrant students, gaining agency with academic literacies is not only about appropriating new ways of meaning making, but also about gaining access to the academic community. This study has given insights into the everyday reality of students who struggle to find their place, and their voice. The theoretical novelty of this chapter lies in its application of dialogical conceptualizations to the analysis of developing agency in L2 academic literacies. A dialogical approach offered a framework to explore students' strengthening voice – in this case their developing agency both as situated in time and place and as part of their continuum of life. Despite its limitations, such as not analysing the students' actual performance or their observable action, this study reveals how complex and multi-layered a phenomenon immigrant students' agency is.

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