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SEEING ENGLISH THROUGH SIGNING EYES: FINNISH SIGN LANGUAGE USERS' VIEWS ON LEARNING ENGLISH

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This article discusses learner beliefs of Finnish Sign Language users as learners of English. For Finnish Sign Language users, the language learning situation is a complex one: Finnish Sign Language is a visual language but English has to be learned mostly in a written modality and with the help of Finnish. This qualitative study focuses on Finnish university students' beliefs about themselves as learners of English. The beliefs are elicited from the students' self-portraits as learners and their mind maps about the most important factors in learning English. The self-portraits provide four different points of view on learning English. The findings are compared with the results of a previous study concerning Finnish students' learner beliefs.

Keywords: Finnish Sign Language, language learning, English, learner beliefs

1 INTRODUCTION

For Finnish Sign Language (henceforth: FSL) users, learning English may be an even more complex process than for those whose first language is a spoken language. FSL is a visual and manual language, whereas English has to be learned through a different modality, written text, and with the help of Finnish which also has

been learned in a written form as a second language. The purpose of this article is to gain an understanding of how FSL users see themselves as learners of English by examining their visual self-portraits and their verbally expressed beliefs of the learning process. The learner beliefs of the university students investigated in this study are also compared with the results of Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva (2008), who studied the learner beliefs of Finnish university students majoring in English. This article is the first part of an ongoing action research in which more data will be collected and analysed in order to gain an understanding of FSL users' learning of English.

2 FSL USERS AND ENGLISH

The first foreign language of FSL users, Finnish, starts in the first grade. English is the second foreign language and starts in the third grade (Haukkaranta School Curriculum 2008). Schooling for the deaf lasts for 11 years, so when students come to the University they have several years of English studies behind them.

For young people of today, English is increasingly becoming an everyday language of communication, and a language that can offer access to international networks. The Internet, as a largely visual medium, is particularly attractive to sign language users: learning English opens up the international world of web pages, chat, email etc. According to Luukkainen (2008: 153–160), modern communication technology has brought about a change in the communication culture of sign language users. It makes it easier for them to communicate visually and helps to provide a global, international communication network instead of a local one: in Luukkainen's study, two-thirds of the young adults interviewed saw themselves as part of a global network.

3 SIGN LANGUAGE AS A LANGUAGE

Compared to the study of spoken languages, the study of sign languages is a relatively new field. Most studies have focused on American Sign Language (ASL): a comprehensive description of its phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics can be found in Valli and Lucas (2000). Finnish Sign Language has been studied increasingly intensively in the last three decades, establishing itself as an academic field of study. Terhi Rissanen (1998) has focused on its morphology, Ritva Takkinen (2002) has studied its phonology, Päivi Rainò (2004) has studied names in FSL and Tommi Jantunen (2008) has focused on its syntax.

4 DEAF IDENTITY

The concept of being deaf is a complex one, and includes such issues as the age of sign language acquisition, the level of sign language skills and the cultural group where sign language is acquired. In North America, the term ‘deaf’ is used when talking about an audiological condition, whereas ‘Deaf’ with a capital letter is used when referring to the cultural and linguistic group (Padden & Humphries 1998: 2–3). According to Malm and Östman (2000: 11), the deaf in Finland do not capitalise the term “kuuro” (deaf) when they refer to the cultural group, but instead have started to use the term “viittomakielinen” (“Signer”). The term “Finnish Sign Language user” (abbreviated as FSL user) is used in this article to refer to the socio-cultural group, except when quoting Finnish sources in which the word “kuuro” is used, in which case “kuuro” will be translated as “deaf”.

The definition of the deaf as a socio-cultural group is still in progress in Finland. Jokinen (2000: 80) distinguishes three main groups of sign language users: 1) those who use sign language as their mother tongue or first language, 2) those who use sign langu-

age as their second language and 3) those who use sign language as a foreign language. This article focuses on the first group.

Luukkainen (2008: 90–106) studied the identity formation of young deaf adults in Finland. In her view, the language environment that children are born into is the primary factor in the formation of their identities. The majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents. Whether they start learning sign language at home or at school depends on the parents' sign language skills. When a child is born into a deaf family, the child and the parents are able to share a sign language from the start, making identity formation more straightforward. According to Ahmad et al. (1998: 73–76), language and communication are essential factors in becoming a member of a community in the United Kingdom. In the ethnically diverse United Kingdom, when a deaf child is born into a hearing family where languages other than English are spoken, the choice of the language spoken to the child is complicated still further. The situation in Finland is simpler in terms of ethnicity, as its population is still largely homogenous. However, learning English as a foreign language offers FSL users access to a broader community than the Finnish community.

5 VISUAL RESEARCH, BELIEFS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

Experiential research has become a valuable addition to experimental research in modern language learning research. Increasingly popular are methods that investigate the socio-cultural framework of reference and research that focuses on learner beliefs and narratives. A survey of different approaches to learner beliefs can be found in Barcelos (2003). Recently, visual materials (pictures, photographs and drawings) have been used in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and their views on language learning. According to Kalaja et al. (2008: 187), the analysis of visual representations is becoming increasingly impor-

tant in language studies. Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta (2008: 172) see narratives as “significant in the social construction of identities” and use photographs taken by Finnish teenagers as a starting point in understanding how they see the role of English in their lives.

Learner beliefs provide an insight into how language learners actually see the language they are learning – as well as the language learning process itself. According to Alanen (2003: 69), beliefs are socially constructed and influenced, and they are changed by past language learning experiences. Compared to other Finnish students, FSL users have a longer experience in learning foreign languages than other Finnish students, since they learn Finnish starting in the first grade. Finnish is the language of the majority, so it is possible that FSL users may give different meanings and social significations to learning Finnish than to learning English.

The socio-cultural approach sees human action and thus also language learning as mediated: both symbolic and concrete artefacts are seen as “aspects of human goal-directed activity that are not only incorporated into this activity, but are constitutive of it” (Lantolf & Thorne 2006: 62–63). Thus artefacts used in learning are important in their own right. In the study by Kalaja et al. (2008: 189), student drawings were used to “investigate the second language learning process and to identify the mediational means that students consider important in relation to themselves as language learners”.

6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the study were all university students taking a compulsory English course at a university language centre. The four students were all proficient in FSL. All were bilingual: either in FSL and Finnish, or in FSL and Swedish Sign Language. The first research question was to find out how FSL users see themselves as learners of English. The second research question was

to find out whether there are any elements in the learners' views about themselves that are connected to FSL. During the course, the students were asked to draw a picture of themselves as a learner of English and then to describe the picture with a few short sentences in Finnish. This task was included to give the students an opportunity to express their view in a visual format, and also to provide a point of comparison with the results of Kalaja et al. (2008). The second task for the students was to draw a mind map about the most important elements of learning English, and to rank the elements in the mind map in order of importance. The tasks were given out in class and the students completed them at home. Finally, I wanted to compare the self-portraits of the FSL users with the self-portraits in Kalaja et al. (2008), to see if the two groups of students differed from one another in their views or the kind of mediating artefacts they used in their learning.

7 SELF-PORTRAITS OF THE LEARNERS

The results presented here are based on the students' self-portraits, their short descriptions about the self-portraits, the mind maps, and the ranking of the elements mentioned in the mind maps. Together these present an insight into each student's beliefs. These findings will be complemented in a later study by interviews, as part of an ongoing qualitative study on FSL users' learning of English. Below each student will be analysed individually and compared with the results of Dufva, Kalaja, Alanen and Surakka (2007) and Kalaja et al. (2008).

7.1 Learner 1: focus on motivation



FIGURE 1. Learner 1: Focus on motivation

Learner 1's picture shows her contemplating climbing over a fence, trying to decide which route to take. The reference is to a Finnish saying, "to cross where the fence is lowest", meaning to take the easy way out. We cannot see much of the road ahead, but what is there to be seen looks clear once she has climbed over the fence. Looking at the picture, it seems that the student herself has the key role in learning. Based on the mind map compiled by the student, the most important element in learning for this student is her own motivation, and she specifically mentions the goal and her own willingness to work as important aspects of learning. She also recognises the value of existing language skills in learning, since the most important factors following motivation are for her the teacher's FSL skills and her own Finnish skills. It could thus be said that both the picture and the mind map emphasize the importance of motivation in learning. This focus is further strengthened by the fact that the picture contains no visible mediating factors or other people. (For more on the importance of motivation in learning language, see Dörnyei 2001.)

Dufva et al. (2007: 318–319) analysed the self-portraits of Finnish university students majoring in English and found that 69% of the students drew just themselves in the picture, without any other people or any kind of learning environment. In this respect, the first student is rather typical in her view of herself as a learner.

7.2 Learner 2: focus on informal learning

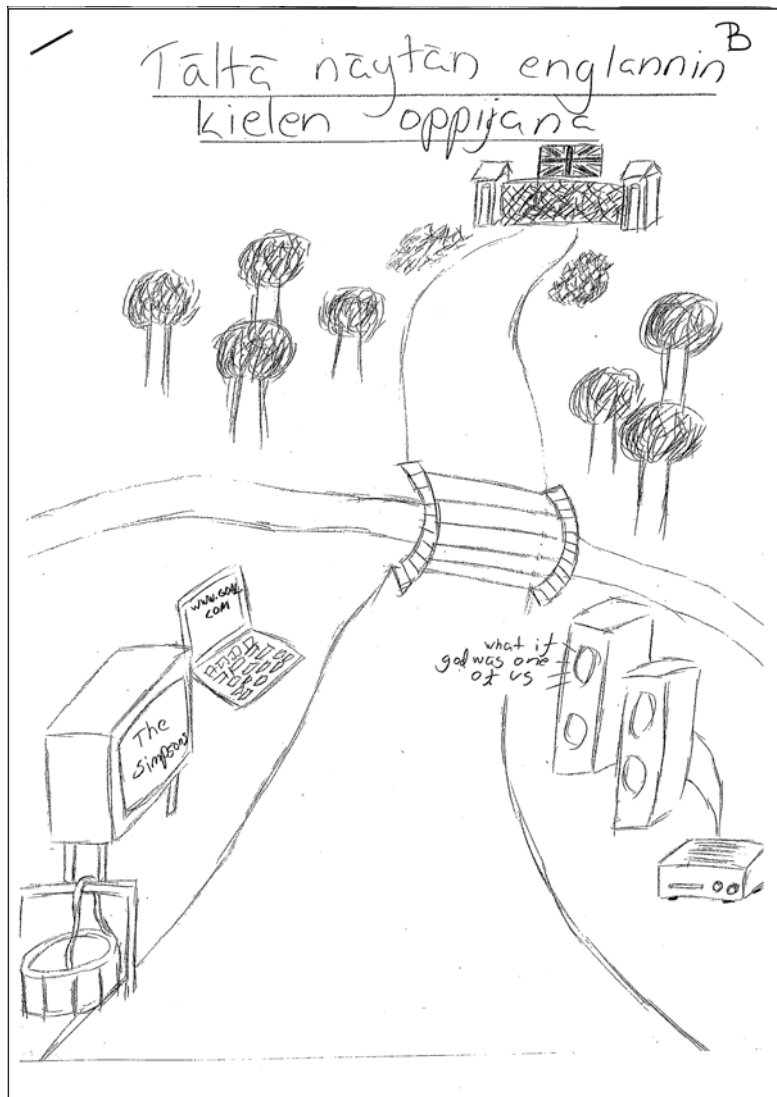


FIGURE 2. Learner 2: Focus on informal learning.

In learner 2's picture, the student himself is not actually visible. However, the point of view in the picture is that of the student, and it is easy to imagine the student looking at the road ahead flanked by various opportunities for learning. On the left hand side of the road there is a well, a TV and a laptop; on the right, there is a stereo set. About half way up the picture there is a river. The road goes over a bridge crossing the river and through a forest, and ends in front of a barrier, a huge and solid gate. For this student the question appears to be: "why do we need teaching when English is all around us?" Thus it seems that he values the opportunities provided by the informal and mediated learning environment. The most important elements of learning in his mind map were the topic studied, the teacher and a peaceful studying environment. In Dufva et al. (2007: 320–321), books were the most common medium of learning, appearing in 65% of pictures; half of the pictures portrayed other media. For this student, books do not seem to play an important role but other media are valued and seem to be actively in use – the music is playing in the stereo and both the computer and the TV are on. In Kalaja et al. (2008), half of the students had included other media in their self-portraits. For this student's language learning, the role of media and an informal learning environment seem to have been important.

7.3 Learner 3: focus on challenge

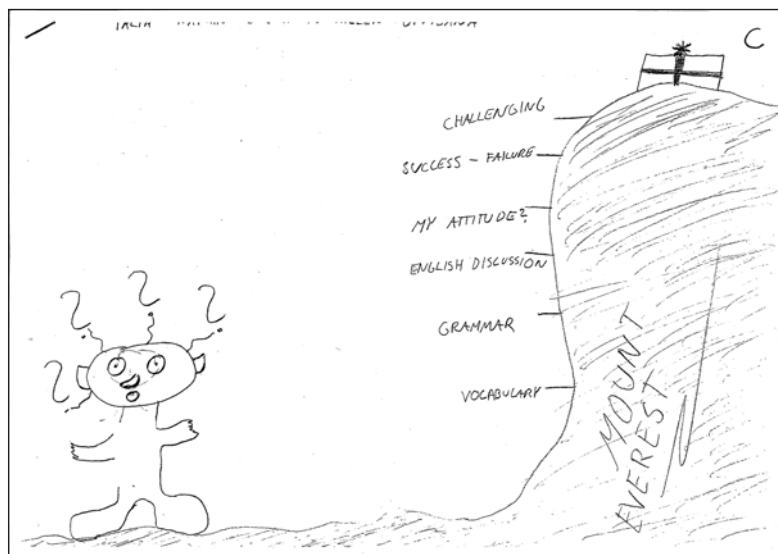


FIGURE 3. Learner 3: Focus on challenge.

For learner 3, the focus seems to be on the challenge of learning. In his picture, he compares learning English to climbing Mount Everest. The mountain seems to be very high, steep and difficult to climb. Nevertheless, at the top of the mountain there is a reward waiting. The student himself looks quite puzzled about how to make it to the top: the confused expression is emphasized by four question marks drawn around the head. This student has also decided to use key words in his picture, placed like milestones up the mountain or perhaps even as a ladder helping him to the top. The first three steps have to do with the elements of language, whereas the last three have to do with his own attitude. The student's attitude seems undecided, as shown by a question mark; he mentions both success and failure, and the final ascent as is marked as being challenging. These last three steps clearly involve emotions, an important aspect in language learning (Dewaele 2005).

For this student, the most important elements in his mind map were: a strong bilingual basis, using English, being supported in using English, and the student's own attitude. Like learner 1, this student too emphasized the importance of his existing language skills in learning a new foreign language.

7.4 Learner 4: focus on teaching

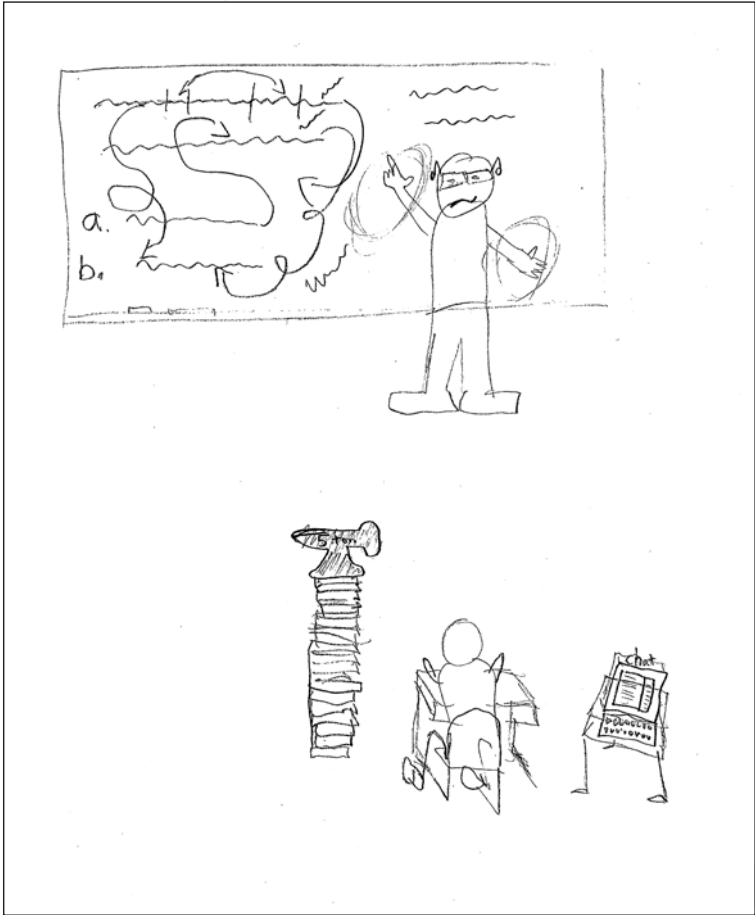


FIGURE 4. Learner 4. Focus on teaching.

For learner 4, the focus in learning seems to be on the teaching. This is the only picture including a teacher, and the student wrote that it is important that the teacher is able to teach in an understandable way. This student only drew the self-portrait and not the mind map. In his short explanation about the picture he mentioned that teacher's FSL skills are important. He also mentioned that complicated explanations make English grammar difficult to understand, and said that English texts are hard to read. The teacher is shown as someone tall in front of a complicated picture on the board, and the student is small and sitting quite far away behind his own desk, next to a big pile of books held in place by an anvil. The image of the teacher does not appear to be a very positive one.

In Kalaja et al. (2008: 192–193), only one third of the learners' pictures of their language learning included other people: the teacher was a rare occurrence in self-portraits drawn by Finnish speakers, but books played an important role in their surroundings. In comparison, books did not seem to play such an important role for the FSL users. This is the only student who included books in his picture, but even here it does not look as though the books are of much help to him as they are weighed down by an anvil.

7.5 Summary of the self-portraits

The students investigated in this study focus on different issues in their pictures of themselves as learners of English. Even in this small group of students, the students' views of themselves as learners of English vary widely, but some common elements can be identified. The clearest common image is the road ahead: three of the FSL users' self-portraits include the idea of a road in some form. Sometimes the road looks easy, other times there are obstacles on the way or the road climbs up a steep mountain. In Kramsch (2008: 114–115), undergraduate language learners at the University of California at Berkeley made metaphoric statements about language learning: one of the metaphors found was that of travelling to new places. The visual images of roads and mountain

climbing in the students' pictures in this study come close to the travelling metaphor used by students in the United States.

In the descriptions and mind maps, three out of four students mention the importance of good FSL skills, either their own or that of the teacher. This shows awareness of the importance of existing language skills. Overall, it can be said that the students responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to use visual imagery in expressing their learner beliefs, especially in comparison with the written tasks given in the course.

8 CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be said that FSL users see studying English as a task that is faced alone. This also applies to the Finnish-speaking students studied by Kalaja et al. (2008). The image of the road used by FSL users seems to emphasize the loneliness of the learning process; the only picture without a road showed both the student and the teacher. This study shows that FSL users understand and value the importance of previously acquired language skills in terms of learning a new foreign language. As Alanen (2003: 69) has pointed out, previous language learning experiences have an important role in the construction of learner beliefs, and this seems to have been highlighted in the FSL users' learner beliefs. As users of a minority language and having learned their first foreign language at an early age, the subjects in this study seem to value their own language skills and are aware of the importance of learning foreign languages.

Because of the small number of participants, this study can only give a qualitative picture of learner beliefs and experiences. However, it does provide a starting point for an ongoing study of the foreign language learning of users of FSL. The next step is to broaden the understanding of the FSL users' learner beliefs in the form of interviews. It seems that working with visual images met with a positive response and thus could be developed further as a

working tool for eliciting learner beliefs from FSL students. Finding new visual ways to enable the students to express their views could be a useful method to broaden our view of how FSL students see themselves as learners of English.

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