Searching for an English self through writing

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Abstract

Most Finnish university students, just like the other new global elites (Kramsch, 2013), use English without problems. Some students, however, struggle with English to the extent that their studies suffer. One could say that they have a deeply "wounded" English self (Karlsson, 2013). My context of research and practice is the Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) at Helsinki University Language Centre. In my work as a language counsellor and practitioner-researcher, pedagogical concerns are always primary, and there is a need to appreciate diversity yet notice every student's unique experiences. The broad background of my recent work is English as part of the identity of young academic Finns. In particular, I have been interested in how students with a "wounded" English self can develop new identity positions, and in how a language counsellor can help them in this process. In this paper, my focus is on the subtle practical interconnections between learner autonomy, learner diversity, and learner identity as they emerge in a diary written by a student of English with dyslexia and language (classroom) anxiety. A narrative case study of Mariia illustrates how the counsellor's appreciation and her own recognition of the complex ecological realities (Casanave, 2012) surrounding and interacting with her learning encourage and empower her. Mariia uses her freedom to control her own learning (Huang & Benson, 2013) and makes choices from the many lifewide experiential learning opportunities in her life (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011). Reflective writing in the learning diary helps her to construct a realistic vision of herself as a learner and user of English, and she leaves the identity position of a failure in the classroom and claims a new, more successful one (Norton, 2014).

Keywords: language self, storied self, language anxiety, narratives, learner identity

1. Introduction

On a January afternoon, Mariia opens the classroom door. She peeps in and hurriedly looks at each face in the room. The route is clear; no familiar faces from the past but a few who look like "her people." She enters.[1]

English has a very prominent status in Finland; unlike languages such as French, German, Italian, Russian or Spanish, it is only a so-called "foreign" language (Ushioda, 2013, p. 3) in Finland. As elsewhere in the Nordic countries, English totally dominates the foreign language curricula at schools. In reality, it is a life skill, an educational skill and an absolute necessity for a university student. It is a working language at the University of Helsinki alongside the two official languages: Finnish and Swedish. This sadly means that for some students it becomes, in Kramsch's (2013) words, "the language of dreams shattered" (p. 199). For a number of years, I have studied Finnish university students whose dreams indeed have been shattered, or are about to be shattered, by the English language in the form of a foreign language requirement in their degree (e.g., Karlsson, 2012, 2013). These students, despite having studied English for nine or more years at school, fear having to speak it in front of their fellow students in study-related situations and on university language courses, where I meet them. Moreover, many close their eyes, ears and minds to all the opportunities for contact with this very prevalent language even outside the classroom.

And yet, I think, the students could be seen as multilingual subjects (Kramsch, 2009): They first acquired Finnish as children (or Swedish, in the case of the 6% Swedish speaking minority) and later learnt the second domestic language in formal education settings and informally. English was the first foreign language for them, usually learnt in formal education contexts. They have often studied other foreign languages both in formal settings and on their own. They do not know all these languages equally well; in fact, they often claim not to know any of their foreign languages particularly well. Although "silenced" speakers of English (Kramsch, 2009, p. 17), they are expected to use it in their everyday life at the university and even learn about their subject of study partly through English.

To use the words of a national survey on Finns' uses of, attitudes to and perceptions of English in the 2000s (Leppänen et al., 2009), these students could be called the silent and marginalized *have-nots*, who, in the language classrooms at the university, will have to encounter the majority, the *haves* and *have-*

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[1] This story snippet was written by the writer as a re-storying of the case study student Mariia's words. Mariia is a participant of the Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) at Helsinki University Language Centre.

it-alls, the elite of English as a lingua franca in Finland. The process of marginal-isation often starts early; from the memoirs some students write it becomes clear that in the English language classroom a loss of confidence and joy of learn-ing sets in as early as in primary school. Others name secondary school English classes places of humiliation, in which they started believing of themselves as failures because of, say, a flaw in their pronunciation. Yet others only changed into invisible learners in upper secondary school in order to avoid the stigma of not speaking fluently. As university students, such as Mariia, they still fear open-ing language classroom doors and try to avoid them for as long as they can.

This paper explores the subtle practical interconnections between learner autonomy, learner diversity, and learner identity as they emerge in a diary writ-ten by Mariia, a student of English with dyslexia and language (classroom) anxi-ety. I will first give some background to my work and then a brief theoretical backdrop and methodological considerations. After these, I will present a narra-tive case study of Mariia inspired by my reading of her learning diary written during an autonomous English course in spring 2014.

2. Background

> *If I had the power to decide who gets to study at the university, I would say that somebody with dyslexia needs to stay out. Or not. I don't know.* (Henriikka's diary)[2]

In all of my longitudinal research efforts (Karlsson, 2008, 2012, 2013), I have worked against the backdrop of big pedagogical and ethical questions: How can wounded learners develop new identity positions and how can a language coun-sellor help them in this? How does this happen within the Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) at Helsinki University Language Centre, my given framework for pedagogy, and during the individual counselling sessions? The present study is an addition to my prior body of research in this area.

In ALMS, we promote pedagogy for learner and *teacher* autonomy and, as a way of supporting these, do systematic research on our pedagogical prac-tice both individually and collaboratively. ALMS counsellors have become "au-thors of their own thoughts and actions" (Vieira, 1999, p. 27) and aim at creating and producing educational knowledge, not only consuming it. My research arises out of the need to develop my own pedagogy of counselling for the "wounded" learners, but also out of a desire to develop what, borrowing from Flavia Vieira, I would like to call a "scholarship of counselling" (cf. Vieira, 2010,

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[2] This is a direct quote from the diary by another ALMS student, Henriikka, who also suffers from dyslexia and language (classroom) anxiety.

2013). That is, counsellors inquiring into, narrating and disseminating their own practice. This paper aspires to be one contribution to such scholarship.

I have worked as a language counsellor in ALMS since 1995. Since 2009, I have been the counsellor for two special ALMS groups per academic year which are targeted at Helsinki University students who have classroom fears, language anxiety, learning and/or social problems; in other words, students who have a serious reason not to join a regular ALMS group (or other English language course). Learning and mastering English in Finland involves a lot of external pressure to succeed both from institutions and peers. The special groups in ALMS offer a safe place of exile where the students do not have to use energy to deal with these pressures and to worry about the narrowly defined criteria of success.

Building a personal relationship with these students in the individual counselling meetings is very important; I need to appreciate diversity and yet notice every flesh and blood human being with her unique experiences. Focusing on the lived and felt experiences in learning English means that my task is to support students in telling their very own personal story in English, no matter how flawed the language. To do this, they must reach beyond the cognitive dimensions of the learning process. Therefore, I invite my students to write autobiographical texts, personal and intimate stories, as part of their course work, often in a learning diary. In writing, I ask them to focus on the process, not the product, and to ponder their realities and expectations, memories, worries, anxieties, fears, doubts, uncertainties, but also their hopes and dreams and, very significantly, personal understandings of themselves as learners. This kind of writing gives the anxious students an opportunity to experience the unhurried, noncontrolled process of reflection in a safe space.

I have come to understand that, more than simply examples of writing in English, the texts represent the students' thinking, their reflection process (Karjalainen, 2012). As a reader, my role is not to evaluate the language; I need to appreciate the meaning-making and creation of new thoughts and ideas that have been happening in the student during the writing. I consider such autobiographical reflection and writing a way of supporting students in the process of developing their learner autonomy, which can be very significant for students with language classroom anxiety. They talk about their learning as a part of their whole lives, as the holistic process that it is; it involves the whole person, their personal history, feelings, actions and language and, importantly, an integration of formal and informal learning. This happens when writing arises from students' *lifewide* interests, that is, the personal, social, study-related and professional aspects of their lives. It is one of the pedagogical goals of the programme to help students to recognise and realise the value and potential of *experiential lifewide learning* (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011) in developing their skills in English; they can learn it, after all, in many parts of their lives, not only

through formal language teaching. Formal learning situations only form a fragment of the totality of learning experiences; for many anxious students, however, this fragment weighs heavily in their memory.

2.1. Theoretical voices

In writing this paper, I have explored the interconnections between learner autonomy, learner diversity, and learner identity as they appear in pedagogical practice. The reality of these connections can be approached and interpreted from an ecological view of learning as a dynamic interaction between the learner and her environment (Van Lier, 2004), and as a subjective experience that happens in time and space and is socially, culturally and historically grounded (Kramsch, 2009). An ecological analysis of learning gives a lot of thought to context, the interwoven factors and influences surrounding learning (Palfreyman, 2014). As a practitioner-researcher, I am concerned with the whole complexity of context, both the physical and emotional. Context includes the messiness of life as it happens, "the effects of sleep, health, weather, mood, work and personal conflicts" (Casanave, 2012, p. 645), which are tangible in the pedagogical situation but mostly ignored in research efforts.

Ushioda's (2009) person-in-context relational view of learner diversity nicely combines with ecological perspectives on learning. She argues for a "mutually constitutive relationship between persons and the context they act in" (p. 218), that is, the learner shaping and being shaped by her own context. She emphasizes, on the one hand, the significance of contextual factors and influences and, on the other hand, learners as flesh and blood "real persons" (p. 220). Autonomy theory, Ushioda suggests, has been grounded in people, not abstractions, with a focus on learners as people who are "not just language learners" (Ushioda, 2011, p. 13). She remarks that pedagogical practices inspired by autonomy thinking have sought to encourage students to express their identities through the language they are learning, to "speak as themselves" (Legenhausen, as cited in Ushioda, 2011, p. 14), not as language learners practising and performing language. Language (classroom) anxiety in this view is contextually grounded, relational, and an inseparable part of identity. Identity can be seen as a "site of struggle" (Norton, 2014, p. 60) and anxiety as an expression of a learner's view of her relationship to the environment. When approaching identity as changing and multiple, I have also drawn on narrative approaches. It is a hopeful and comforting theoretical perspective for a practitioner-researcher working with "wounded" learners to view identity as narrative, with a focus on the telling and the emplotment in that telling (Ricouer, 1991), and as an ongoing internal story, a *storied self* (McAdams, as cited in Ryan & Irie, 2014, p. 110).

The concepts of *lifewide* and *lifedeep* learning, which are of crucial significance to my practice, also arise out of an ecological approach to learning (Jackson, 2013; Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011). The totality of our experiences, be they in language classrooms within formal education or experiences and activities outside the traditional classroom environment, is what we should be looking at. Jackson (2010) writes:

> . . . while a learner is engaged in higher education, an individual's life contains many parallel and interconnected journeys and experiences and these individually and collectively contribute to the ongoing personal and potentially professional development of the person. By reframing our perception of what counts as learning and recognizing and valuing learning that is not formally assessed within academic programmes we can help learners develop a deeper understanding of how they are learning in the different parts of their lives. Heightened awareness is likely to help learners become more effective at learning through their own experiences. (p. 493)

Thinking ecologically (Murray, 2014), a theoretical inspiration for this article, has become part and parcel of the autonomy literature: Learner autonomy itself could be understood as an ecology (see Palfreyman, 2014). It is this broad theoretical foundation of learner autonomy as a rich ecology that offers me an angle of inquiry compatible with narrative as a research method and storytelling as a pedagogical and learning tool. Very significantly, research and practice of any work with "silenced" groups should be driven by an ethos for an ethical and democratic language pedagogy:

> At the micro level of the classroom, a focus on ecological processes can awaken in the students (and teachers) a spirit of inquiry and reflection, and a philosophy of seeing and hearing for yourself, thinking for yourself, speaking with your voice, and acting jointly within your community. (Van Lier, 2004, p. 99)

2.2. The power and potential of narrative

Story-based, or narrative, research is well suited to the purposes of a practitioner-researcher for whom pedagogical concerns are always primary. A counsellor-researcher like myself, who moves on the thin edge of theory and practice and works with the paradox of distance and proximity, faces the challenge of producing research texts that would describe this dynamic movement. She also battles with the complex ecological realities (Casanave, 2012) of the world of learning and teaching, and in order to capture even a glimpse of the tangled network of contextual, personal, emotional and social factors surrounding her own and her students' learning in a research text, she needs a method that allows for chaos and complexity. Texts arising out of narrative research have the

potential to speak as themselves, to be permeated by the physical and emotional, and not only the cognitive aspects of learning and teaching.

In counselling, narrative pedagogy allows an appreciation of the *whole* when meaningful stories are told and listened to, that is, shared and even coconstructed. It allows an appreciation of the unity of the foreign language, and the human being and her autobiography. Moreover, narrative counselling pedagogy allows an appreciation of the stories of lived experience and their interpretation, and unique meanings for the teller, arising from their particular experiential context. Instead of arguing against experience, narrative pedagogy strives for empathy and a resonance of stories (Conle, 1996), and thus creates vicarious experiences in the listener. Exactly the same possibilities for deep interpretive understandings are available to a narrative practitioner-researcher.

Aoki (2009, p. 203) lists three "unique merits" of narrative as a research approach and for stories as research texts. She argues that stories are a natural form of representing human knowledge. She refers to the fact that teachers' professional knowledge in particular is widely accepted as being storied (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Aoki further suggests that a story captures the richness and nuances of meaning in human affairs and allows us to express the wealth of details in its very form. Her third merit follows from the potential of capturing the richness and nuances of meaning: Stories allow for vicarious experiences in readers (cf. Conle, 1996; Karlsson, 2008). This kind of writing indeed helps the readers to vicariously relive the experiences described in the research text. Very significantly, it can also help them to see for themselves where the potential biases might be (Aoki, 2009): In narrative texts, the experiential contexts that the story emerges from are described, the relationship between the research participants and the researcher are explained, and the participants are involved in the research also as readers and revisers of their stories.

I would like to add one more merit of narrative as a method related to the consideration of (research) writing as a tool for inquiry. Vieira (2010, p. 25) states that the creative use of language in narrative inquiry is a way to "counteract the disempowering effect of neutral academic discourses that say nothing about the uniqueness of pedagogical experience and its actors." She continues to characterise pedagogical writing, the kind that a practitioner-researcher like myself engages in, as a process that presupposes "an intimate relationship between experience, writer and text" (p. 25). In higher education in particular, we are used to mostly reading and ourselves attempting to do academic writing that fades the self, the writer and the researcher. First-person explorations and coconstructed stories, however, can also be ways of writing *from* the self, not *about* the self (Contreras & Pérez de Lara, as cited in Vieira, 2013, p. 158) when autobiographical understandings and experiences are put in the broader context of educational knowledge and thinking.

I myself consider this kind of experimental pedagogical writing a way of exploring, describing and interpreting the complex *ecological realities* surrounding the writer and her research. These realities are full of encounters and episodes, actions, characters and their motivations and purposes and, as such, challenging for the writer of a research text. For Ricoeur (1991), narratives presuppose *plots* that link these possibly discordant elements; narrating, in his view, is a creative act that weaves life events into a story with a plot. Emplotment as an active interpretative process, I believe, helps both the writer and, later, her readers to understand the "selves" of those involved in the events. Stories as ways of understanding the self, appreciating the discordances and controversies, are at the core of the notions of a *narrative identity* (Ricouer, 1991), or a *storied self* (McAdams, as cited in Ryan & Irie, 2014, p. 110): the self which is understood as an ongoing internal narrative or exploration of who we are, have been or will be, with many potential plot lines, as a story that gets revised and retold.

The nature of a narrative inquiry process and writing a research text arising out of it is closely linked to the idea of a *storied self*: The texts written are always based on an intense internal conversation. In a sense they are written for the self and with the knowledge that every text is a chapter in an ongoing story. This self-reflexive dialogue, however, needs to be transformed into an external report: Integration is needed of the internal meaning-making and a way of reporting that is understandable to the readership. In the following section, I am going to tell the story of the narrative inquiry into how a student, Mariia, constructed her own storied self. She engaged in reflective writing, which could be seen as resembling the researcher's internal conversation just described. She wrote it in the pages of a learning diary in order to tell her very own personal story as a learner and user of English.

3. Story of the research

Narrative starts on the professional landscape, in the experience of lived and told stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In my professional landscape, ALMS,[3] I meet students who are not language majors but students from all faculties of the university taking a language course as an obligatory part of their degree. They can choose to take more teacher-fronted language courses, but they also have the option of taking an ALMS module in English. ALMS is based on autonomous principles and personal study plans negotiated with a counsellor (see Karlsson, Kjisik, & Nordlund, 1997, 2007 for more information on the programme).

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[3] See our website http://www.helsinki.fi/kksc/alms for more information.

Student life in ALMS means taking part in two group awareness sessions at the beginning and in three individual counselling sessions during the course. They have a free choice of joining various skills support groups. At the beginning of the course, they make a detailed plan of their independent studies, including the skills support groups they want to join. To help them plan their studies with personally meaningful goals in mind, the students are invited to write a language learning history or memoir, which is shared and discussed with the counsellor in the first individual counselling meeting. They are encouraged to think about their previous experiences and, subsequently, to use their autobiographical insights and imagination in the planning. Reflection on learning and self-evaluation are very central in the work the students do: They write learning diaries (or logs) and reflect on the development of their skills, strategies, learning approaches, attitudes, motivation, feelings and beliefs.

I understand narrative as both the phenomenon and the method (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 2000). Storytelling and sharing stories, that is, narrative as a phenomenon, is to be observed in ALMS counselling and other interactions through and in the dialogues between the participants, a counsellor and her learners, and learners and their peers (Karlsson, 2012, 2013). As described above, written and oral narratives are used in ALMS as a method of supporting reflection on learning in face-to-face counselling; it is a method which is very much part of the phenomenon. Understanding the complex and shifting phenomena on the landscape is essentially what narrative inquiry is about.

When research work proceeds, aspects or themes relevant to the inquiry emerge and are named; in this case, learner autonomy, learner diversity, and learner self as they appear in pedagogical practice emerged as themes. The field texts on my landscape typically include all the learning materials and student diaries, learning logs and portfolios, counselling notes, my counselling/research diary, and, in the case of a few students every term, audio or video recordings of counselling meetings and/or research discussions. They make up "nested sets of stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 144), mine and my students'. The narrative quality of these documents varies. For my students, the texts and documents are learning tools; for me they become field texts when I switch into my researcher role.

The dual role I have, that of a counsellor and that of a researcher, is always an issue to be considered (Karlsson, 2008). I prefer calling interviews "research discussions." They inevitably share features of the close and personal counselling sessions but, for the student, they are not part of the course work. The aim of a research discussion, however, should be to empower, respect and give a voice to the student as an active and knowledgeable participant, just as in a counselling meeting. I never work with the students' texts alone but bring them into the research discussion and explain how I am going to use them. I also send

the finished stories to the students so that they have the possibility to change the text or to say "no" to their publication. Narrative pedagogy in ALMS has its roots in pedagogical ethics: The demands placed on the close and personal counselling practice are huge. The ethical principles need to be reconsidered repeatedly as pedagogical contexts change and ecological realities surrounding our work mould our actions: Ethics are not only abstract principles but always contextual considerations. The same goes for research; narrative, I believe, "communicates ethics in a way nothing else can" (Bolton, 2010, p. 34).

Working with these types of different data could be compared to the work of a biographer (Karlsson, 2008). When interviewing, I specifically invite and elicit stories, even retrospective life histories, but mostly what could be called "small stories" (Georgakopoulou, 2007), that is, shared and coconstructed narrative activities, story fragments, and episodic tellings of experiences, which also emerge in counselling discussions. Diary entries can be approached as such small stories as well.

4. This study

4.1. Mariia

In this study, selecting one student's learning diary as the main field text was a choice made deliberately: I wanted a new take on the phenomenon of diary writing in ALMS with, firstly, a focus on my own reading of a diary and, secondly, on how a diary reflects lifewide learning as part of a student's very own personal story of English. Casanave's (2012) fresh approach to diary studies triggered this, but I also had an interest in seeing how a novel way of using diaries as data would work.

I know from both my practical experience and previous research (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2007, Karlsson, 2008, 2013) that students have varying expectations and wishes when it comes to the counsellor's reading of their diaries, and, accordingly, I approach each diary with the unique student in mind and negotiate the reader-writer pact with each individual. Some only give me permission to read selected entries, others point out certain sections as most relevant to their reflection process, while others seem happy about general skimming. This writer-reader relationship built around the learning diaries has been a pedagogical interest and a concern for me for a long time. The counselling meetings with students, however, are only short encounters, inherently episodic and fragmentary (Karlsson, 2008): Time never stands still in counselling, and a counsellor's reading of a diary is very often fast and sporadic. I wanted to take the opportunity to fully focus on one diary in the research process because, unlike in a counselling meeting, "freezing" the text under the research lens and stopping time becomes a possibility, and repeated readings can be made.

I made a total of three postcourse readings of Mariia's 15-page ALMS diary: two before and one after a research discussion, all from a holistic-content perspective (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The first reading happened against the background of Mariia's whole ALMS history, her memoir/learning history, her application letter to the course, her learning plan, contract and course completion form and other documents. In our counselling meetings, we had shared ideas arising out of the diaries; the discussions were mainly initiated by me and the entries I was invited to read were pointed out by Mariia as reflections on her particular concerns, developments, or insights into the learning process and course work. In my researcher role, I read the diary as a coherent whole at one go and highlighted the bits of text in which Mariia wrote about learner autonomy, her dyslexia and language anxiety, and her learner identity.

Before the research discussion, I made a second close and *novel* reading of the diary, a novel reading of a diary by an Other who, by now, "is familiar enough with the writer's system of meaning" (Czarniawska, as cited in Vandrick, 2013, p. 22). During this reading, I picked up and highlighted what I felt were personal keys for Mariia in how she made sense of her experiences: dyslexia and language (classroom) anxiety, her dreams of writing and an academic life. The first and the second reading, and my interpretations arising out of the readings, guided me in preparing for the research discussion, a narrative biographical interview.

At the very beginning of the discussion, which was carried out in Finnish, I asked Mariia to tell me "her ALMS story." This was an elicitation question that had her talking for about 20 minutes. When Mariia was telling her story, I did not interrupt her with questions but tried to listen carefully in order to see if my beliefs about her personal keys to making sense of her lived experiences were confirmed. As Chase (2003) suggests, I had jotted down questions in advance that had to do with the interlinkages of her potential keys and the inquiry themes. However, I also took Chase's advice on "listening well" to Mariia and the story she was telling. In the discussion that followed, my questions arose from what she had been telling. I aimed at creating an experience for Mariia that would expand her view on her English self. Having started with language anxiety and a weak English voice, she had become more confident during the course and was now using English in her lifewide interests. I had to ensure that the voice would continue to be heard; I had no right to take risks and shatter her dreams (Kramsch, 2014). I gently invited Mariia to expand her story on the themes relevant to the inquiry: self/identity, language (classroom) anxiety, dyslexia, learner autonomy, and their interlinkages.

Before the third reading, I listened to and transcribed Mariia's replies. Reading the diary a third time in the light of the research discussion and Mariia's personal keys to meaning-making made me more sensitive to how the diary reflected

the complex ecological realities (Casanave, 2012), the network of contextual, personal, emotional and social factors that had surrounded and interacted with Mariia's learning. It also made me more appreciative of how Mariia was becoming aware of these ecological realities herself, the whole web of internal and external factors.

I wanted to use the first person in Mariia's story because I strongly felt that it should be Mariia's voice talking in the pivotal section of the paper, the findings (cf. Benson, 2013). The story as it appears in this paper is not only based on, but to a large extent uses her very words from the research discussion both when she told "her ALMS story" to begin the session and when she replied to my questions afterwards. Then again, Mariia's story was coconstructed during a narrative inquiry process, and it is *our* story in the sense that the plot comes from my reading of her diary. It is *our* story also in the sense that I had interpreted the diary entries through my research lens when I was looking for interconnections between learner autonomy, dyslexia and identity. The plot moves from Mariia's learning history to her self; to dyslexia, fears and shame; to academic reading, academic and creative writing; and to an emerging new English self and seeing the role of English in her life in a totally different way.

The discussion was held in Finnish so my coconstruction of her story is also tangible in the translation, which is necessarily my interpretation of what she said in the discussion. A lot of reading between the lines took place in order to give form to her colourful idiolect of Finnish. Her storytelling and gestures, smiles and laughter have inevitably been simplified into a cohesive linear text in English, which is only a pale reflection of the original story-telling. Mariia read the story I wrote and gave permission to publish it as "her story," using her own name. She did not want to change any of the content or wordings. In an email to me she wrote:

> *The first time I read my story, I was deeply moved, because it brought back all the tumult that I was going through last spring* [time of the ALMS course]. *I decided to read it a second time through more objective lenses but there is nothing to change. The text accurately describes my feelings last spring and my learning history and the phases I have gone through as an English learner.*

A desire to give Mariia a voice, although genuine enough, is not a guarantee of what happens when the story is out. In the following, I present Mariia's story, her search for an English self through writing during an autonomous English course in spring 2014.

4.2. Mariia's story

> *My history as a language learner has been a long road of anxiety and annoyance. ALMS was a new beginning for me and I have never learnt as much as in ALMS. I have*

always thought that I simply won't learn. Now I have gained hope and started believing in my own ability as a language learner. I used to think that I just didn't have the right kind of brain and that my learning style was not suitable for learning foreign languages. I don't learn by cramming and by memorising details by heart but had understood from what happened in language classes that that is the way to learn languages. During ALMS, I realized that I can learn languages exactly in the same way as I learn anything else I am interested in. I just need to get in touch with the language and start reading and using it in situations that are meaningful and interesting to me. In other subjects like history and literature I have never crammed, just read the books through and because I have liked it I have learnt. I don't in fact remember names or dates or details, but I do remember the big picture and I am good at analysing and dwelling on it. Analysing and "dwelling on" English, that is how I learn it.

English has become a language that everyone knows and the expectation is that you should know it truly well. I am shy and I have been so ashamed of my bad English. For a long time my dyslexia was a kind of a walking stick for me: I had convinced myself that I don't learn because of dyslexia but that was really not the reason. I was diagnosed in primary school when I struggled with learning to read and write and had a lot of support. In the end, I learnt to read and write very well in Finnish, and in upper secondary school I had a Finnish teacher helping me a lot: she taught me to look at my mistakes and to remember the ones I always got wrong and correct them. I didn't always see them but they disappeared, and it wasn't a problem in Finnish anymore. In English I also struggled from the very beginning but never found a solution. When I finally found out about the ALMS group for "blockheads", I felt relief: this was for me. Everything changed.

What happened with Finnish can happen in foreign languages: I just need to stop thinking about dyslexia as a problem and using it as an excuse. I can just stop and think about those mistakes that I keep making and if needed, blindly correct them. In writing the diary entries I have used auto-correct which underlines my mistakes and I try again, and the computer underlines again and I try again and finally I take the dictionary and check the spelling. The next time I write the word, say the word 'with', the same thing happens: I always get it wrong but having corrected enough times I might learn and remember; with 'with' I now know I could do it, learn it but I am not good at forcing myself to do things. It really annoys me to be so lazy and bad and not use enough time to study. I always complain to my girlfriend that I have done nothing, just been lying around at home and read books and wandered around in town. I don't like sitting in one place, studying for two hours a day is enough for me. I get bored easily but I do get credits and I do have goals and am doing alright with my studies. But I don't want to push myself too hard. I only spend one day studying for an exam because I cannot force myself to sit in the library for a week, and if I did that, I would get bored and would, again, end up studying a new field. I need the freedom not to study if that is what it feels like.

Academic reading is fun and easy nowadays because when I have the urge to know, I do push myself. Even an easy text is hard and English not understandable if I have no interest; it can even be from a field that I am interested in but if the text is not captivating, I quit. When I was reading Fictional Minds [required reading in her major], *I was so engrossed that I didn't even remember I was reading in English. My*

brain, not that I am a neuroscientist, seems to work differently when the interest is there, reading is easier, this is the same in Finnish. The secret for learning language from the academic reading is that I don't cram! I have words that I haven't noticed learning but suddenly I am using them when I am writing and speaking, they have come from the reading and now arise from the unconscious. This has been great fun; I almost feel guilty for how easy it feels.

When writing, I write and speak at the same at the time. I have always done this in Finnish. Now I have started doing it in English as well; it is funny because I am not a good speaker. With English I also read the text out loud afterwards. Reading aloud is slow and so I notice if something sounds funny or if something is missing, a or the, and I focus on them, and it is also a way of getting familiar with the rhythm of English. I notice that a sentence is not complete or that there needs to be a comma to get the rhythm right. The realization about the rhythm came from reading aloud and then that became helpful when writing the next texts. This spring I have started noticing what is natural in my texts: understanding this was one of the biggest things and English stopped being static, like a set of Lego bricks. Reading aloud in fact comes from my creative writing activities because I struggle with writing convincing dialogue and I realized that that is how I get it done.

What I have felt about creative writing, by the way, has been a bit like what I have felt about English in my life: I wrote a lot until upper secondary school and then realized I was beastly and I stopped writing. It was something I loved but it was obvious that it didn't just happen and that I would need to study it. I wasn't a natural talent, which is what I thought all other writers were, so I stopped. I was truly sad for a long time but last summer I decided that I couldn't go on: if I wanted to become a writer, I needed to write and I started and the first sentences were just terrible but I just continued and it got better, just by doing it so it is a similar story to English. Recently I even ventured into a symposium for creative writing where I met academics from all over the world and they each spoke English in their own way. I just loved being there. I realized that these are intelligent people all in high professions and they speak this language in different ways and they enjoy the fruits of their language skills, and it was so important for me to realize that you don't need to use English in the same way as native speakers, say in the UK or the States, and that they also have their individual ways of using the language not because of their nationality only but because of their personality.

I want to have a career in academia so academic writing will be a part of my job. I dream of being able to express myself as well as possible and communicate my thoughts to others also in English so this dream has instrumental value. English is a necessity and I need to master the language. Creative writing is in this sense a different story. Well, I have a character that speaks English and I had difficulty translating his thoughts into Finnish and then my girlfriend said "make him speak English in the text". Although I write semi-fantasy, I think about my stories in a rational way and so one character cannot speak English when the others speak Finnish. But then in the symposium somebody spoke about people who write their poems and prose in English although it is not their mother tongue. He suggested that it can be liberating and can help you get rid of the chains of your own language and you might write better. And I thought that perhaps English could be the language of a story or a character; that

perhaps my character could express his thoughts better even if I didn't and that was a world-shaking thought. My strongest language, my perfect mother tongue might not necessarily be the language that is the most expressive.

I realized that if I write my academic or creative texts in Finnish, nobody will read them or hear my voice and that made me anxious and fearful first and then a small voice said, "why not, why couldn't I write in English because then they would hear me." This was the first time that I came up from the bog of anxiety, thinking I need to stop, and I got on top of the emotion and realized that I have the key to make it to the same league and I can speak to a big audience in this language. So I have learnt to see English as a resource, not as something that robs me of opportunities.

4.3. Reflections

It goes without saying that when reading and interpreting Mariia's diary and the experiences described in it, I brought my own restoried counsellor life and self to the reading. Many previous stories have indeed been echoing in me during this inquiry. These stories, however, have also created possibilities for me and helped me in constructing the story reflectively, keeping in mind the context of ALMS, its variety of stories and the important pedagogical and ethical questions I referred to at the beginning of this article: How can wounded learners develop new identity positions and how can a language counsellor help them in this? How does this happen in ALMS during the individual counselling sessions?

Norton (2014) writes:

> . . . some identity positions may limit and constrain opportunities for learning to listen, speak, read or write (particularly under conditions of marginalisation), other identity positions . . . may offer enhanced sets of possibilities for social interaction and human agency, that is, the possibility to take action in social settings. (p. 61)

This succinctly describes the plight of Mariia and many Finnish *have-not* students: They struggle to speak from the only one identity position that they have, a failure in the classroom. And they fail. But Norton also offers a solution: Students could claim a more powerful identity position in a different situation and manage better. This is exactly what happens with Mariia. It is evidenced in her diary: In between her first couple of diary entries and the new beginning after the second counselling meeting there is a gap, but then the diary is suddenly full of text, and Mariia is claiming a new identity position, that of a writer and reader instead of a classroom failure; she is herself, a person reading and writing, also in English.

As mentioned before, I have been inspired by Casanave's (2012, p. 642) idea of *dabbling* and her tale of an "ordinary person's low-pressure" language learning efforts as recorded in her own diaries. I invite all my students to try writing a diary during their time in the ALMS; some take up the offer, others

choose to keep just a record of their work. I believe that when a *learning* diary becomes the site for telling about learning as a part of one's whole life, it can be compared to a personal diary: Writing in a diary develops one's autobiographical knowledge, which is emotionally-charged, experience-based and creative, a form of narrative knowing (Jokinen, 2004). Mariia's diary speaks about such autobiographical knowledge and illustrates how she started to rethink her learning approach and her learner self. Unlike Casanave's notebooks of eight years, Mariia only kept this diary for one university term. *Dabbling* does not quite describe her entries in that they are lengthy reflections, but writing certainly provided her a safe space for forming a "realistic vision" of herself as a learner and user of English in that it was indeed a low-pressure enjoyable experience (Casanave, 2012, p. 642).

Mariia had told me about the issues she had had with learning English both in the counselling and research discussion. In the diary, she refers to her dyslexia, but it does not take a lot of space in her story; she refuses to see it as a problem anymore; it is the fresh realizations and understandings that inspire her. The *freedom to control her own learning* (Huang & Benson, 2013), the underpinning philosophy of a pedagogy for autonomy in ALMS, gives her the power to make experiential lifewide choices. Through these choices, she realizes her potential capacity for autonomy, and her language anxiety is alleviated. In the diary entries, she is interpreting the web of experiences across different contexts, formal and informal, that influenced her learning, and in doing this she is constructing and expressing her English self, her storied learner and user self. She is very vividly bringing to life the broad ecological reality and its elements in her diary. It is obvious that dyslexia and classroom anxiety cannot be separated from Mariia's self: They are part of the narrative identity, the storied self, fragments whose power and significance, however, diminished as she continued her quest towards a realistic vision of her English self. Being a learner of *English*, her enemy, starts to take less space in her thinking and becomes only a fragment of the identity.

Mariia's diary documents the contextual multitude of influences on her learning and, in particular, thinking about her English learner and user self. The lifewide experiences that the ALMS encouraged and allowed her to recognize as learning opportunities and projects, at the same time expecting a cognitive reflexivity (cf. Jackson, 2013), empowered her and helped her claim the new identity position. She started acting as herself, as Mariia the reader and writer, the person inclined to ponder and wander around even when she was in her learner role (cf. Ushioda, 2009). Mariia's "self-created learning ecology" (Jackson, 2013, p. 1) includes a visit to London, staying with a family and talking to different family members, talking to a Russian neighbour in English on the bus, coming to a Reading and Discussion Support Group in the ALMS, reading novels and academic books, cartoons and comics, writing stories in English, taking part in a

seminar on creative writing, reading newspapers, journals and blogs, moving between Finnish and English and reflecting on this, and writing a reflective and self-reflexive diary in English about the totality of her experiences, traversing between the experiences and developing a deeper understanding of how she is actually learning English in different parts of her life.

The metaphor of *ecology*, which was not explicitly used in our discussions, points at a new pedagogical road for me as a counsellor. Jackson (2013) suggests that self-created learning ecologies can become learning *tools* for university students and may help them to integrate experiences and the learning gained from the experiences in different contexts, that is, to recognize and benefit from *lifewide experiential* learning. This is closely related to a consideration of the complex ecological realities of language development and learning (e.g., Van Lier, 2004): The different contexts of students' learning are inseparable from their emotional and experiential responses.

Many students, especially those whose English self is that of a *have-not*, only connect learning English with the classroom. For them, believing in and realising the value and potential of experiential lifewide learning (Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011) can make a huge difference. Mariia is a case in point. I now think that the metaphor and concept of a *self-created learning ecology* could be explicitly named and introduced to students in ALMS. They could be encouraged to process the totality of their learning experiences with the help of this metaphor. This would be a way of putting English into a perspective: Learning a foreign language can become an essential part of growing as a human being, not focusing on learning particular skills and worrying about, say, pronunciation flaws, but rather developing and being empowered as a person.

5. Epilogue

Clough (2002) suggests that the writing of stories in educational research can be likened to the creation of a building with the writer as architect. The writer's work is not *technical* (how?) as much as it is *reflective* (who for?):

> . . . the primary work is in the interaction of ideas; in the act of thinking, tuning, decision making and focusing on the primary intent of the work. And of course, writing a story – like constructing a building – is not carried out outside of a need, a community, a context. (p. 8)

Clough (2002, p. 64) reminds his readers of the fact that educational narratives organise the researcher's own experience, and that they are expressions of the researcher herself. The construction process of educational stories is decisive in the way they turn out. The construction, moreover, does not happen in a void.

It happens amidst the lifewide realities of learning, studying, counselling, researching and living a life. Our *storied selves* are changing, controversial and elusive; they are shaped by and they themselves shape the realities. We lift up different fragments of our fragile stories in different experiential contexts. Identity-making never stops.

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