Autoethnographic account of 2L Finnish learning. Disambiguation of language

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Abstract After the recent refugee crisis Europe was plagued with anti-immigration policies and doubts about the effectiveness of immigrant integration programs; Finland was no exception. Integration programs include teaching of the official language, however not to advanced levels. This leaves foreigners as basic communicators —with poor language skills— and low profile candidates for mainstream job markets slowing social integration. This paper integrates the authors' previous work about an online Finnish language learning system —ideation, construction and testing— created to resolve foreigners unmet needs. The data presented here, is the result of trial performed on such system and presented as an autoethnographic study focusing on the emotional implications and dual-role of a learner and researcher. Results show how online 2L systems help learners with ambiguous situations —linguistic and social— by lowering anxiety with indirect interaction. Future studies on possible solutions include the design of metacognitive strategies and reading/writing tools for 2L Finnish for specific purposes.

Keywords *Autoethnography, Language-learning, Social-integration, Ambiguity in language*

Introduction

Social phenomena such as immigration have unavoidable consequences —such as social and economic instability—. The most recent refugee crisis from Syria has affected Europe and raised debates on anti-immigration policies and integration programs for foreign population. Finland alone has received over 30 000 refugees by the end of 2015[1] of which many may be candidates for integration programs and Finnish language courses (2L hereafter). Finnish language is part of the Uralic linguistic group, unrelated to other linguistic families and origin unknown. Finnish language is a key part of Finnish identity; teaching it to foreign population is of relevance to preserve this living cultural feature.

Paradoxically, 2L Finnish language integration courses only offer beginner to mid-level[2] courses. Personal experience as a learner —with governmental institutions and private courses— and earlier studies (Rodriguez-Kaarto &Hahn, 2014) confirmed the lack of advanced courses offered by the Ministry of Education or Employment; private custom-tailored courses are a costly alternative.

In consequence, after complying with these courses learners remain basic communicators —with poor writing and reading skills— making them low profile candidates for the Finnish mainstream job markets. This has taxing consequences on their wellbeing and social development; since poor language skills are a strong reason for unemployment and low wages among foreign population in Finland (Yleisradio, 2012; Elonen & Wooley, 2014). In search for solutions to advance 2L learners, this study has searched for possible online solutions. This paper presents autoethnographic results of a trial for an online learning system in Finnish (Rodriguez-Kaarto & Hahn, 2015); with special focus on the role of emotions and disambiguation processes in language learning. Research questions are:

RQ1: Why is autoethnography a reliable and adequate method to discuss emotional ambiguity in language?

RQ2: What are the emotional aspects of 2L learning?

Theoretical review

This section briefly reviews the most popular language-learning theories that explain how we acquire language and its emotional implications. In addition, a brief review on Reflective Autoethnography methods applied in this study is also revised.

Cognitive and ecological approaches for L2 learning

The following language theories are the basis for our online system for 2L acquisition (Hahn & Rodriguez-Kaarto, 2015; Rodriguez-Kaarto & Hahn, 2015). **The**

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1   The Finnish Immigration Services, 2016.
2   According to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR), A1 is the beginners or breakthrough level and C2 corresponds to proficient users, with two stages for each level. B2 (advanced-intermediate) is the highest level offered in *Finnish for foreigners* courses. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

cognitive approach (Krashen, 1982) assumes that learning takes place linearly, coherently and progressively through comprehensible linguistic inputs (i + 1); learners advance step-by-step and complexify in their use of the language. **The ecological approach** (van Lier, 2000; 2004; 2010) takes learning as a complex, dynamic and non-linear progression of knowledge through linguistic affordances in an environment full of semiotic possibilities; learners interact with *More Knowledgeable Others* that scaffold them to the *Zone of Proximal Development*. In both cases, these theories emphasize the role of emotional wellbeing as crucial for 2L learning — affective filters (Krashen, 1981;2002), and learner's self-concept (van Lier, 2000; 2004; 2010)—. Additionally, Fredrickson and Branigan (2005, p. 315) focus on how positive emotions *amplify* cognitive capacities given the right motivation. Positive emotions in 2L language learning, expand the learners' "thought-action" repertoire —the ability to relate broader concepts— making them more flexible and empathic learners (Fredrickson and Branigan, 2005, p. 315).

Methodology: Reflective autoethnography

As part of ethnographic research, autoethnography is recognized as a method for extracting data from self-reflective observations of the researcher while being a member of the group under study. There are different types of autoethnography: a) *evocative ethnography* with focus on the personal interpretation of a phenomenon (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), b) *interpretive* whereby research is carried out as a "biographical studies of experiences and performance of a person" (Denzin, 2014) and the one applied to this study c) *analytic autoethography* (Anderson, 2006).

In analytic autoethnography, Leon Anderson (2006) introduces five key aspects. 1) **Complete Member Researcher** (CMR): the researcher is "a complete member in the social world under study" (p.379). The CMR role is of a "double-viewer" —researcher and member—, CMRs are expected to analyze both, the participants' common interpretations of phenomena —diverse among members— and her own (p.380). 2) **Reflexive Autoethnography** is the capacity to be analytical of our connection with the research; mindful of the on going information exchange between the group and us (p.380-382). 3) Autoethnographic studies collect data of phenomena that involves us inside the group; therefore, being a **Visible and Active Researcher in the Text** and report personal experiences and feelings is part of the key data. This means that researcher may write in first person using "I" or "my" while reporting data. 4) Additionally, to document how the researcher's participation affects and "transforms social understanding and relations" (p.385) is relevant since in autoethnographic studies our **Dialogues With Informants Beyond the Self** are part of the data. 5) Finally, Anderson calls for a **Commitment to an Analytic Agenda**, referring to "empirical data to gain insight into a broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data" (p.387).

Collection of data

This section is an account of the open trial period of Finnish101.fi —an online 2L learning system for advanced learning— carried out in December 2015. The first trial of Finnish101.fi aimed to test how learners could improve their use of language through Self-regulated learning (SRL). This method derives from educational psychology, where the learners are active developers of their own metacognitive strategies for self-improvement regardless of external factors (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Zimmerman, 1998; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001; Chamot 2014). SRL provides cognitive framework to define concepts (Big Ideas) and frame relevant questions (Essential questions). Learners were recommended to apply SRL techniques to Content Based Learning (CBL), which meant they should choose the content they wanted to work with in the target language (Kaufman & Crandall, 2005; Chamot, 2009).

My daily participations as a researcher and learner consisted in detail on writing my own content, revising posts, comments, e-mails or chat conversations and keep motivation high among learners. A record of every interaction, production and insight gained —as a participant and researcher— is kept in the internal logs of the sites database.

Finnish101.fi overview
Finnish101.fi is constructed with free open software, providing functionality yet a rigid interface. It offered helpful links and aggregation functions for videos, images, forums, tags and chat.

This online system follows a set of principles and strategies (Hahn & Rodriguez-Kaarto, 2014; Rodriguez-Kaarto & Hahn 2015) drawn from 2L language learning theories (Krashen, 1981; 2002) (van Lier, 2000; 2004; 2010) in our previous studies; emphasizing active learning and interaction with More Knowledgeable Others (Vygotsky, 1997) to scaffold learners to Zones of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1997). The system comprises four learning modules (Observation, Writing, Reading and Speech and Interaction) and a Dictionary-Phrase bank tool to holistically link different areas of language learning (Rodriguez-Kaarto & Hahn, 2015). The site is a platform where learners create their own content in the target language, share and discuss with other learners/peers. By doing so, they broaden their knowledge of the chosen topic and the target language.

Participants: learners and peers
The trial recruited ten foreign Finnish students from basic to mid-advanced level and ten Finnish native speakers to use the system for three weeks. The call for participations —issued in social media circles— invited foreign participants (*learners* hereafter) to interact in the system using the target language for an average time of 60-90 minutes daily. It requested the participation and interaction of Finnish native speakers (*peers* hereafter) for 60 minutes daily under the same circumstances. The participation time equated the amount of hours of a "study credit" in a regular Finnish for foreigners course —as explained by Finnish language teachers—. Our participants were
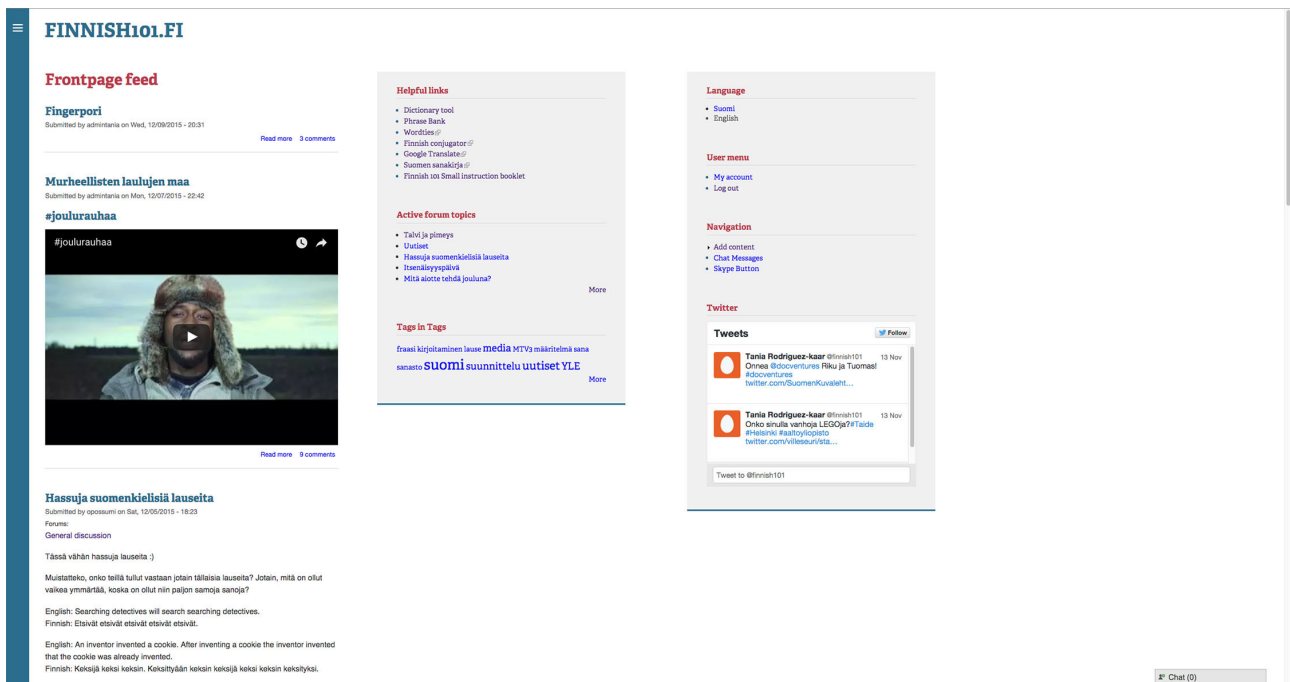
Figure 1. Finnish101 front page.

from different universities in Finland and held different degrees (i.e. masters to post-doctoral degrees). The rest took part as independent learners — whose identities or language level could be verified—.

Collection of data
Participants initially created a user profile with their basic information (i.e. language skills, professional and academic interests). As an administrator and a user, I monitored learners' login times, participations and topics during the three weeks of the trial; the analysis of the data took place between February and April 2016.

My own participations involved extensive online search, writing and editing on topics relevant to my research. I followed Self-regulated learning[3] (Chamot, 2014); searched for related material in Finnish, translated keywords and posed Essential Questions in discussion forums. Since I had a special interest to write posts using self-regulated learning and discuss topics relevant to my research, all posts involved extensive online search, writing and editing beyond my skill level.

Discussion of findings
The data analyzed are samples of discussion forums and posts from the trial. Feedback from the participants was collected online through a brief questionnaire at the beginning and end of the trial. Their feedback and discussions made evident the adequacy of autoethnographic methods for analyzing emotional implications in 2L learning.

Emotional aspects of 2L online learning
The process of 2L learning is an emotional one. Abundant research points towards anxiety and negative emotions as causes involved in slow 2L learning. As a learner, I observed that online learning systems may drop learners' anxiety by providing indirect personal interactions; relieve the frustration from awkward face-to-face encounters. Online 2L systems may provide a suitable environment for advanced learners to connect, carefully research the language and produce content. Additionally, online systems with discussion forums offer a good linguistic resource where the learners can compare different structures and writing styles. Learners' feedback pointed out that during the introductions she "*could see different ways and expressions to talk about 'same' thing.*" (from electronic communication, November 30th 2015).

In my case, posting was not without pressure; a step-by-step Self-regulated learning felt too strict and not spontaneous. However, results were clear with strings-of-words[4] and vocabulary augmentation. Reflecting on the trial, I realize that learners might also have perceived Self-regulated learning too rigid and so didn't follow it. Feedback from learners revealed they wanted to improve their use of Finnish, however not for specific purposes. As doctoral students they produce work only in English, so the topics during the trial seem casual and unrelated to professional or academic endeavors. I concluded that independent learning needs more than just the motivation to improve in 2L. Emotional investment in 2L is crucial for advancement (Krashen, 1981; 2002)

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3   Self-Regulated learning: Independent learners for 2L draw out *Big Ideas* from a topic of choice. They formulate *Essential Questions* which they answer in the target language using *Keywords* previously defined by them (Chamot, 2014).

4   *Strings-of-words* refers to the order in which words are placed in a sentence.

Figure 2. Image composite of the original Eppu Normaali "Murhellisten laulujen maa" video (upper three images) with images of the cover version (below) depicting Finnish people with diverse ethnic backgrounds.

(van Lier, 2000; 2004; 2010). Therefore, systems like Finnish101 need learners in dire need to improve in their 2L (i.e. non-English speaking learners).

Autoethnography of a 2L learner
Reflexive awareness in Autoethnography poses complexity when researchers need to make sense of two strains of —apparently— contradicting data. As a learner and researcher, the information gathered gave insights on our needs and lack of metacognitive strategies for 2L. Most learners cannot compose texts in Finnish without structuring it first in English as commented by a learner "*I can't construct correct structures […] and use correct form of the Finnish words, though I used Google translator to help me*" (from electronic communication, November 30th 2015). This common practice perpetuates our structural mistakes since our texts usually "come out wrong or funny" (i.e. the Google translate effect). Through this study I also became aware of flaws in Finnish101.fi design and need for peer/learner communication protocols. This would have enabled peers to correct our texts openly. Participants expressed their opinion on this shortcoming over feedback: "*It's a bit difficult to start correcting people's writing, it feels impolite especially if not asked for directly*" (from electronic communication, November 30th 2015); or as expressed by a learner "*I am not sure if I am using the proper words […] I wish I could ask someone when I am puzzled*" (from electronic communication, November 30th 2015).

The reliability/adequacy of autoethnographic methods in 2L learning lays on the fact that 2L learning produces cognitive and emotional data difficult to understand as a sole observer. To reflect on this process raises awareness of the tacit knowledge gathered in practice. It helps us "make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness" that we encounter (Schön 1983,p. 61). The unique sense of accomplishment after producing a well-written text are the types of motivation learners need to continue their exploration of the target language.

Disambiguation in 2L learning
Disambiguation in this paper is taken as: i) the act of clarifying literal meanings of words and ii) removing uncertainty of their use in different social circumstances —contextual meanings and cultural representations—. Such are the cases of polysemy and contextual variations, common conundrums in 2L. Words that have over one meaning or strings-of-words that vary according to the context are difficult for learners to decipher. During the trial I posted a video of a cover song for a Finnish 80s classic pop-song; the original version talks about Finnish lifestyle and ideals of the 80s (i.e. male roles). We discussed about the second versions' meaning in our forum, where people with various ethnic backgrounds sang solemnly about *Finnishness* (in the midst of anti-immigration discussions). Many words needed translation and the topic ignited discussions on some deeper cultural implications and disambiguation of contextual meanings; the shift between an original humorous version vs. a new serious and touching one.

Conclusion
This autoethnographic study revealed how online 2L systems can lower learners' anxiety and possible frustration from face-to-face encounters by providing indirect personal interactions. By providing a suitable environment for interaction, research and production

of content, an online 2L system provides good resources for learners to compare linguistic structures and writing styles; disambiguate and negotiate contextual meanings. This study reinforced the statement that emotional investment is crucial for independent learning. The reliability and adequacy of autoethnography in 2L, lays on the fact that 2L learning is a cognitive and emotional process difficult to understand as a sole observer. Autoethnographic methods raise awareness of the emotional data and allow researchers to gain insights on their learning strengths and weaknesses. This gives a wider overview of what may be required to improve learner's use of 2L. Future research will concentrate on improving Finnish101.fi and develop tools for writing and reading comprehension, aural exercises and cultural observations.

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