Multimodal cooperation and academic identification in French as an Academic Language

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In contemporary, postmodern and highly individualized societies, language teaching and learning, especially in academic settings, are not only connected to, amongst other things, lifelong learning and the development of plurilingual and intercultural competences, but also to the characterization of the different types of experts that language learners will become in their future professional fields. In order to educate language professionals who will promote social cohesion, language-teaching curricula have to take into consideration varied discourse communities and their complex multilingualism (House & Rehbein 2004, Johansson & Pyykkö 2005) and culturality (or culture as an endless creation, cf. Dervin 2006). In other words, language teaching and learning should be planned so that students understand the complex and hybrid interactions embedded in the variety of contexts that make up the globalized world.

In this article, we propose to describe an academic learning environment in which multimodal cooperation contributes to the learning of both French as an Academic Language (FAL) and academic identification. In this process, one of the basic components is individual plurilingualism, that is a learner who is capable of speaking and writing several languages and who in this particular case is mastering in French. Our main objectives are to examine, through one case study, how learners can be trained towards expertise. The notion of expertise has been analyzed from various angles: as individual competency and skills (Ericsson & Lehman 1996) or as a capability of functioning in professional communities (Engeström & Middleton 1996). In this paper, we investigate how students assess their own identification process as apprentice-experts.

As we see it, the future professional expertise needs to be based on what we call academic language expertise that will allow the learners to engage in various professional fields related to languages. A language expert is therefore a social actor who is capable of performing communicative activities in the best appropriate manner with very different others in various socio-cultural contexts and media (Johansson & Dervin forthcoming). Moreover, s/he needs to construct meaning through the use of language(s) and demonstrate meta-cognitive knowledge about the processes and products of communication. In view of this definition, teaching and learning should incorporate various contexts and different types of interactional relationships. Moreover, they should involve the students in an ongoing process of evaluation of their knowledge building and learning process.

FAL and multimodal cooperation: data and learning environment

Our paper is based on data which were collected during the academic year 2006-2007 at the Department of French Studies of the University of Turku (Finland). The data contain semi-structured questionnaires, developmental narratives and reflective narratives on the learning process. The participants were Finnish-speaking and Master students in French Studies. Their main fields of study included linguistics, applied linguistics, and enunciative and discursive approaches to intercultural communication. In our analysis, we use excerpts from the questionnaires or the narratives that were translated from either Finnish or French. Each excerpt is followed by a code that refers to the students (e.g. E4 = student 4).
The respondents took part in a one-year Bachelor course, which aimed at preparing them to write and defend a thesis. The course contained several modules: an introduction to linguistic research, academic writing in French and the defense of the thesis. The main objective of the course was to produce a scientific paper of 15 to 20 pages on a linguistic topic. The course is one of the core courses in the curriculum and it is based on the principles of collaborative task-based learning and process writing. The course also included activities that aimed at helping the students to develop meta-cognitive skills (such as reflecting on the learning process and products, cf. Mutta 2007). Two members of the teaching staff lectured separately on the course (introduction to linguistic research and academic writing), while the last part of the course (defense of the thesis) gathered both staff and students (cf. Dervin, Johansson & Mutta, Forth.).

The learning environment was blended: it contained face-to-face work and mediated writing on an LMS (Learning Management System). Moreover, it was composed of various teaching and learning situations and different types of relationships with the people involved in the course were established. First, some classes were based on classroom interaction between teachers and students while other lessons incorporated mostly group discussions between students. Second, as the papers progressed, the students regularly met their teachers for feedback in dyadic interaction situations during office hours. Thirdly, the students were tutored by their peers, or more precisely advanced students who participated in the course during the previous academic year, and who guided them in basic language skills and technical matters concerning computer-mediated writing. Finally, the writing process took place entirely in the LMS on a weekly basis: the students published different versions of their papers for either their peers or the teachers to comment upon.

**Academic identification**

Within the framework of this specific course, the concept of academic identification was coined to render the idea that expertise in the academic field (i.e. FAL, academic knowledge and savoir-faire) is unstable and is constantly (co-)constructed with interlocutors, contexts, etc. It allowed us to move away from an essentialist vision of identity as an element, which is created once and for all (the term identity comes from the Latin term for same, while in identification, the suffix –ation shows that identity is a never-ending process). By making the students aware of this paradigm, we wished to teach them to be more flexible (by accepting e.g. that one cannot know everything and that one changes all the time, depending on interlocutors) and to develop “self-programmed capabilities” (Castells 1996). The latter has been theorised as proteophilic competence (Dervin 2006) within our context, and which is defined as the acceptance and constant reflection on the instability involved in multiple role-taking, role-switching, role-mixing (as is the case with our learning environment). The following analysis is based on this understanding of academic identification.

**From dialogic assessment of selves to the roles of others in academic identification**

**Self assessing selves**

In the data, the students look back on what was achieved during the course and introduce various selves to describe their learning process. During the process, the identification of the students seems to shift from novice identifications to language expertise. In the following three excerpts, an expert identity starts to emerge:

(1) One of the most important input was finding my own working habits (E10).
Last year, I was still a bad writer in French who couldn’t handle academic writing in that language: now I notice how much more confident I have become as far as writing (and speaking) are concerned (E10).

My research was the most important piece of work in my study time (E10)

In the first excerpt, the student explains how s/he has found a “working self”. In the second example, the same student describes her/his awareness of the expertise and asserts that s/he is more confident about it. In the last example (3), it is the knowledge-building aspect of the learning process that is put forth, as the academic paper produced during the course is perceived as an important step in the student’s academic career.

In the process, the learners become aware of the nature of writing and of the type of research that they are producing. It is a never-ending process that includes different types of emotions:

A continuing process accompanied with stress (E4)

In my own understanding of what has been achieved, the format and contents of my research have often changed during the trip, the end result was something very different from what I expected (E4).

In both excerpts (4,5) the learner explains her/his understanding of the process and her/his feelings about it, which oscillate from stress to unexpectedness. In excerpt 5, the learner also uses the metaphor of travelling trip in her/his discourse and thus implicitly indicates the different phases that s/he went through.

Role of the others in the building up of identification

Many others are also included in the students’ speech when they narrate their experiences: staff (teachers), other students (peers but also former students) and “language experts” (French students). This section examines their roles in the construction of academic identification. We have classified these others in two main categories: positive and negative others. These two categories show that the presence of otherness in the construction of academic identification has a twofold meaning. The first category contains the following subcategories: others as mirrors, others as consultants, others as relievers and complementary others. The second category is composed of: others as intruders, and conflicting others. Due to limited space, we shall only report on the subcategories others as mirrors and others as conflicting others.

In the first two excerpts, the students show how important it was to see their selves in the work of the others. In other words, the others became “mirrors” and this increased their motivation as they noticed e.g. that they shared the same problems while writing their papers:

It was important because I learnt to understand that although we all had different topics, the work allowed convergence between us (E4).

Work in the groups was quite good, I saw how others progressed and what sort of problems they had (E5)

On the other hand, there were also signs of uncertainty and confusion in the students’ discourse, for example when they talked about the French tutors’ and the Finnish tutors’ input:

The tutors helped us with French, but the French tutors’ advice was a bit contradictory. You would think that they are able to correct mistakes, but once they had to discuss among
themselves the right answer to one of my questions and it turned out that I was right. After that, I felt unsure about who I could trust (E7)

(9) I received good comments from the tutors on my work. I also got some contradictory comments, which made it difficult to choose between alternatives (for instance in the choice of some words to use in the thesis) (E9)

The adjective *contradictory* appears in both excerpts to describe this input. While we believe that this aspect is essential and constitutive of collaborative work and of the construction of academic identification, some students seem not to appreciate it and feel puzzled by it. This is indicative of the fact that contradictory input in task-based group work needs to be addressed more implicitly in the kind of experiment described here.

**Conclusion**

Our paper has demonstrated the importance of reflecting on identification within the context of language learning and teaching at university level. As an increasing number of courses are taught online and involve various *others*, it seems important to make language apprentice-experts aware of the instability of identification. As was evidenced by our analysis, academic identification is not only a personal construction but it is also – and above all – co-constructed through interaction with others. What our analysis shows is that, when students recall the processes that they experienced during a research course, they cannot but involve and compare past and future selves and those who were involved in the making of the course (staff, peers, etc.). Thus, the more the students are made aware of these *occasional identities*, the reader they will be to work with and accept *otherness* (that of the *other* but also their own) in the academia but also in their future lives and professions.

**References**


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