Language learners' drawings and textual commentaries as a way to envision goals and aspirations for future language use

Anu Muhonen, University of Toronto

Written and spoken language are not the only ways to illustrate thinking. Incorporating arts-informed and multimodal ways to communicate can offer new insights for higher education language teaching and learning practices. This study investigates how Finnish as a second language students' drawings as visualizations support an arts-informed approach to knowledge production in the initial years of language learning and proficiency in higher education in Canada. Further, it explores how students of Finnish represent their aspirations and objectives for their future language use and study through these embodied visualizations. The article focuses on how students visualize their aspirations to learn and use language without having to look for support from English. Grounded in reflective arts-informed language pedagogy, this study employs multisemiotic content analysis to examine a selection of students' drawings. Through drawing, students visualize their imagined potential selves as future language users in different situations, activities and tasks and with different people. While language learners traditionally express their thoughts through oral and written language, and commonly in English, this study shows that drawings offer an alternative and artistic avenue for knowledge transmission and communication in the early stages of the language learning trajectory. Through reflective research practice, this study also addresses some implications of integrating arts-informed teaching and learning practice into second language pedagogy, encouraging instructors to adapt arts-informed teaching methodologies to align with students' individual learning trajectories.

Keywords: art-informed language pedagogy, drawings, visualizations, reflectivity, learning aims

1 Introduction

Written language is not the only way to illustrate thinking and learning (Jones, 2006; Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014; Smith et al., 2016). Art forms, such as singing, pictures, photos, and posters, are commonly incorporated in language pedagogy (Webster & Wolfe, 2013). When employing arts in language pedagogy, the focus is not necessarily on the art itself but rather on how artistic activities aid students in exercising thinking skills and learning the target content (Ingraham & Nuttall, 2016). The arts serve as tools for language teachers to visually demonstrate and explain content. Additionally, language teachers can integrate envisioning—the capacity to contemplate or plan the future through imagination and dreams—into their pedagogy to motivate learners (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2013).

This study examines some of the benefits of multimodal and arts-informed assignments for higher education second language teaching and learning practices (see Simons & Hicks, 2006) and how students of Finnish as a second language envision imagined future competence. While previous arts-informed studies have mostly focused on young learners of Finnish in Finland (Niemelä, 2020a, 2020b; Scotson, 2018), there is a need to study arts as a channel for communication in higher education second language pedagogy outside of Finland. This study further sheds light on university students' aspirations and motivations for studying Finnish and how they envision themselves as language learners and users in their imagined futures. It explores how arts-informed, multimodal pedagogies support knowledge transmission to meet the pedagogical needs of higher education language students and investigates how drawings—visual representations of thinking and ideas crafted using lines, shapes, and colors—have been utilized in reflective Finnish-as-a-second-language pedagogy in higher education at the University of Toronto (UofT) in Canada. Further, it reflects on how elementary-level university students employ drawings to envision their imagined futures as language learners and users.

Motivation and the ability to envision are important factors in language learning. The ability to envision holds significant motivational power, especially given the often-lifelong process of learning and mastering a second language:

> While individuals pursue languages for a variety of purposes, and an equally wide array of reasons keep their motivation alive, the vision of who they would like to become as second language users seems to be one of the most reliable predictors of their long-term intended effort. (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2013, p. 4)

I teach undergraduate Finnish language courses at the UofT. At the beginning of each new course, I assign tasks to my students aimed at fostering reflection and helping them envision their language learning journey from various perspectives at the current stage in their trajectory. These tasks encourage students to envision their language learning aims and aspirations visually, recognize their strengths, and articulate their developmental needs. I encourage students to do what van der Helm (2009) called *personal visioning*, which entails imbuing one's life and studies with meaning to realize a personal dream as a language student. Within the dynamic framework of connecting the human self with human action, the concept of *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) serves as a self-motivational mechanism, representing individuals' notions of their possible future selves, including manifestations of future goals and aspirations (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2013). According to Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2013), possible selves can be seen as the "vision of what might be" (p. 12). These course tasks also help me to plan and adjust my teaching and learning practices accordingly, actively shaping my teaching to meet students' needs and expectations (regarding *reflective pedagogy*, see Bailey, 2012; Farrell, 2015; van Manen, 1991). Teachers can also be transformational leaders, driven by their vision for improvement (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2013).

The reflective pre-course tasks include written assignments in which students consider and describe their strengths and, subsequently, their wishes or areas for improvement. Another task prompts students to reflect on their relationship with the Finnish language through writing, based on the theme "*Suomen kieli ja minä*" ("Finnish language and me"), where they complete sentences like "*Suomen kieli*

on…" ("Finnish language is…") or *"Suomen kieli kiinnostaa minua, koska…"* ("Finnish language interests me because…"). Students can write in Finnish, English, or bilingually. The third task presents the following prompt: "In what kind of situations do you want and need to use Finnish this semester/in the future? Draw a picture." Interestingly, while students sometimes exhibit less diligence in answering the written parts of the pre-course questionnaire, they *always* complete the drawing task. In these assignments, art — or drawing — serves as both a means of information production and dissemination (Pöyhönen & Paulasto, 2020). This article delves into these drawings, examining the knowledge they visually and verbally convey and investigating the learning objectives embodied within them.

Situated within the realm of applied language studies and rooted in reflective and arts-informed language pedagogy, this research employs multisemiotic content analysis (Bell, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Krippendorff, 2019) of visual representations and focuses on a selection of students' drawings. These artistic productions are investigated as integral forms of communication and representation (see *research with the arts*; Bradley & Harvey, 2019; see also Pitkänen-Huhta & Pietikäinen, 2016; Pöyhönen & Paulasto, 2020). While language learning forms the foundation of the language pedagogy that motivates this study, underpinning the courses in which these assignments were assigned, this study does not investigate *second language acquisition or learning* through arts-based methods. Instead, it explores the insights offered by language students' visual representations for reflective language pedagogy as well as students' needs and motivation for continued language learning. The study examines students' thought processes through multimodal course assignments (e.g. drawings), which serve as visual and textual envisioning. In this context, the relationship among representation, communication, and the arts becomes relevant for understanding how students perceive and engage with language learning.

Although the assignment only requires students to "draw a picture," they often supplement their drawings with brief textual annotations (*on the language of the visual process*, see Kallio, 2010). Visual images and sometimes texts appear together multimodally. Here, less emphasis is placed on language and more on the creation of visual representations, which are used to understand students' needs and create a pedagogical curriculum aiming to address them. This approach challenges the dominant position of written text in second language pedagogy, providing an alternative approach to illustrate thinking, motivation, and envisioned imagined future competence (see Mertens, 2009; Muhonen, forthcoming; Shifrin, 2009).

Following the introduction, section 2 reflects on arts-informed language pedagogy, succeeded by a discussion on the empirical study (section 3). The analysis in section 4 centers on the spaces and scenarios depicted in the students' visualizations of future language use. The findings are discussed in section 5, while section 6 presents the conclusions, limitations, and implications for pedagogy.

2 Arts-informed language pedagogy

While higher education language teaching and learning typically prioritize communication, the arts-informed pedagogy in my class is based on the premise that artistic, or multimodal expression can convey additional information. It

provides elementary-level students with an alternative method of communication while enabling them to envision their future as language learners and users. The incorporation of arts-informed learning and teaching practices in my course modifies the methodology of second language pedagogy, aligning with the *research through the arts* framework (Bradley & Harvey, 2019; Bradley et al., 2018; Pöyhönen & Paulasto, 2020; Smith, 2007). Kallio (2010) stated that "the ways of knowing are learned at school early on" (p. 24), emphasizing that knowledge has historically been conveyed primarily through text and language, with sensory-based knowledge often regarded as enigmatic and elusive. Traditionally, students have conveyed their thinking verbally through writing and speaking.

Arts-based approaches have been applied to higher education pedagogy (e.g. Bayley, 2016; Borgdorff, 2012; Edlund & Balgopal, 2021; Holtham & Biagioli, 2021), and drawing has long been applied as a research method in educational studies (e.g. Scotson, 2018, 2019; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Pietikäinen et al., 2008; Pitkänen-Huhta & Pietikäinen, 2016; Simmons, 2019). Visual teaching and learning methods, such as photographs, drawings, and sketches, have proven valuable in revealing the spatial dimensions of language learning experiences. For example, Kalaja and Melo-Pfeifer (2019) highlighted the so-called multilingual and visual turn in applied language studies, emphasizing subjectivity as a lens for understanding multilingualism as a lived experience, where research participants share their multilingual experiences through translanguaging, not only verbally but also visually, using mediums like drawings (see also Rose, 2016).

Arts-based approaches have been widely applied and studied within language pedagogy from different perspectives. Altun (2015) discussed how English language teachers helped students memorize and understand content by drawing objects on the board when teaching vocabulary (see also Adoniou, 2013; Gidoni & Rajuan, 2018; Kendrick & McKay, 2011). Ludke (2016) explored how integrating singing, visual arts, and drama into French language instruction enhances language skills. Meanwhile, Latomaa et al. (2016) explored the intersection of multilingualism and art, demonstrating that new knowledge emerges through multilingual art creation. The ways in which embodied pedagogical social circus activities relate to second language learning and use have also been analyzed (Lilja et al., 2020). Scotson (2018) investigated how highly educated Finnish as a second language learners represent their agency in visual narratives. Scotson (2019) also used visualizations to explore the emotions, beliefs, and agency of educated Finnish language users in relation to their language learning and use. Niemelä's (2020a) study on Finnish learning as part of multilingual elementary education in Finland examined the strengths and weaknesses of drawings representing Finnish as both a method and a visual material and how the material related to language ideologies among elementary school students and teachers. Visual representations of the Finnish language were found to portray Finnish education and Finland as ideologically monolingual (Niemelä, 2020a).

While earlier studies focused on young learners of Finnish in Finland in primary/elementary school, this study offers insights into the arts as a channel for communication in higher education second language pedagogy outside of Finland. Further, it sheds light on young adult university students' aspirations and motivations regarding studying Finnish as well as how they envision themselves as language learners and users in their imagined futures. Additionally, this article emphasizes awareness of the different *spaces* and *situations* in which language learners visualize their need and desire to communicate outside the classroom. Prior research on drawing as a method in

(higher education) language pedagogy primarily emphasized communication and knowledge transmission for the purpose of language learning and teaching. In contrast, the focus of this article is on how *students visualize their aspirations to learn and use* language without having to look for support from English. The novelty of this study relates to the possibilities arts-informed, multimodal pedagogies provide for transmitting knowledge to meet pedagogical needs in higher education. The findings of this study will help instructors understand students' aspirations and consider them against their course aims, adjusting their teaching and learning practices accordingly.

3 The empirical study: Research questions, data, and methods

This study investigates how drawings, as visual representations of thinking and ideas, have been utilized in reflective Finnish-as-a-second-language pedagogy in higher education at the UofT, seeking to answer the following research questions:

- What do language learners draw, and what kind of knowledge is transmitted via drawings?
- What kind of future language learning objectives (e.g. situations, activities and tasks) do the students' drawings represent?
- What are the implications of this study for higher education second language pedagogy?

I explore drawings created by students enrolled in elementary and intermediate Finnish courses. As van Leeuwen (2005) noted, semiotic resources are often shaped by established practices: "Such uses take place in a social context, and this context may either have rules or best practices that regulate how specific semiotic resources can be used or leave the users relatively free in their use of the resource" (p. 4). These so-called loconomic systems (Hodge & Kress, 1988) imply that there are certain rules regarding the production and semiotic meanings of signs. The visualizations produced by students as their course tasks were also subject to specific regulations. They were mandatory but ungraded assignments at the beginning of an intensive 12-week academic semester. The drawing style was unrestricted, with no instructions stipulating how the drawings should be done. Students had autonomy to draw whatever they wanted in their preferred manner. Some drawings were crafted using computer programs, while others were sketched by hand. Some students used colors, while others drew their illustrations with pencils. There were no correct or incorrect ways to draw. The emphasis was entirely on the creative communication initiated by the students themselves (see Knapp, 2012). Submission of the task was also flexible, and students could submit it either electronically or on paper. The teacher was the sole audience for these visualizations.

   The data selected for this study encompass 12 drawings created by students in elementary and intermediate Finnish courses during 2019–2023. The selection criteria were based on the frequent thematic contents that were represented in the drawings. The selected excerpts were also relevant and socially significant to the students who produced them in terms of language level and the course aims. I also attempted to select a variety of visual stylistic representations. As the drawings were originally created for pedagogical purposes, student consent for their use in research was obtained after the course. The participants are identified

using pseudonyms, using gender-neutral pronouns to provide additional anonymity and distance. Given the relatively small class sizes and the potential to identify students, no background information about the student population is included in this study.

I regard the drawings as visual *representations*. Representation involves using language or other means of communication to convey something meaningful about the world or to represent it meaningfully to others (Hall, 1997b). I understand drawings as visualizations of ideas, and like any symbol, their compositional modality is interpreted to convey meanings. Kress (2010) stated that "representation focuses on my interest in my engagement with the world and on my wish to give material realization to my meanings about that world" (p. 49), a sentiment applicable to students' artistic productions in this study. In the analysis, I consider how the drawings connect the participants to the process through which their meanings and representations are produced, intertwining concepts and language to reference both fictional and nonfictional life worlds, events, and even objects (see Hall, 1997a). Drawings as representations offer insights into the spaces and situations in which students envision using Finnish as well as the people students wish to communicate with.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 18) considered semiotic images used in communication as "windows on the world." Since the data utilized in this study consist of drawings, I employ the tools of multimodal semiotics research in the analysis (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). I draw on Kress's (2010) theory on social semiotics (see also Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005) in studying visual representations for the following reason:

> Signs are always newly made in social interaction, they are motivated, not arbitrary relations of meaning and form; the motivated relation of a form and a meaning is based on and arises out of the interest of makers of signs; making of signs are made in social interaction and become part of the semiotic resources of a culture. (Kress 2010, pp. 54–55)

The sign is the fundamental unit of semiotic analysis: Signs are referents that can be *signified* (i.e., representing objects) and function as *signifiers* (i.e., images, sounds, or words attached to the signified) (Rose, 2016). Dyer (1982) compiled a list of signifieds, such as signs that humans symbolize in multimodal semiotic communication and analysis. In this study, I first look at the signified objects that the students have drawn and explore what they might represent. Second, I look at different signifiers that are attached to the drawings and analyze what meanings they add to the visualization. When relevant, I also discuss *representations of manner*, *activity*, as well as *props* and *settings*. Social semiotics focuses on the complete process of communication, exploring what Kress (2010) called the design of meaning, wherein humans create meaning within specific situations in particular communicative contexts. In the analysis, I emphasize the *social contexts*, primarily the language courses in which students' visualizations occur and the diverse social contexts in which students visualise themselves as language users in their imagined futures outside the classroom. I further focus on the various *modes* through which meanings are made. Kress (2010) described some key modes, including images, writing, layout, gestures, speech, and moving images. Multimodal communication may involve several modes simultaneously. Visual images are often accompanied by other kinds of semiotic signs that are integral to the meaning (Rose, 2016). In this study, students draw images, semiotic

signs, symbols, colours, and written texts as multimodal modes of communication.

Applying multimodal and multisemiotic analysis of visual representations entails scrutinizing visual images and symbolism in meaning making (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), social semiotic analysis of communication presupposes that participants seek to make their messages maximally understandable by selecting forms of expression that are maximally transparent to others. Students in this study use multisemiotic visual representations (e.g. images and symbols) to communicate their ideas, with textual messages complimenting them and adding information. Rose (2016) noted that social semiotics emphasizes "the social modality at all sites of meaning making" (p. 108). In social semiotics, the focus shifts from the signs themselves to how people use semiotic resources to communicate (van Leeuwen, 2005). This study analyzes students' semiotics based on what meanings students convey by drawing.

Observational and cultural content analyses of visual images (see Bell, 2004) are also performed to thematically categorize the representations, patterns, and themes emerging from the students' drawings. In the analysis, I further considered replicability and *validity* within the categories (Krippendorff, 2019). Initially, I selected representative images pertinent to the research questions and subsequently reduced the sample to 12 representative images, aiming to streamline the core focus of the analysis and the scope of the article while including as much variation as possible. Codes were not only categorized based on the visual content of the material but also on the significance and frequency of representation as well as symbolic meaning. I then organized the drawings into six subcategories (Sections 4.1 to 4.6) and assigned interpretative subtitles in the analysis.

4 Analysis

In the following multisemiotic content analysis, I will demonstrate how students visualize situations in which they — as language learners and users — are in contact with the real world, engaging in authentic or imagined activities (sections 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4), and spaces (sections 4.1, 4.3, and 4.6). Section 4.1 illustrates situations where students envision speaking Finnish with different people, while section 4.4 demonstrates students visualizing different learning situations. As van der Helm (2009) noted, the emphasis on personal visualizations relates to learners' desire to approximate a preferred future state — an ideal self as a language learner. Drawings further represent activities that students enjoy doing and would like to do in Finnish. This section addresses research questions 1 and 2, while section 6 addresses research question 3.

Following Anderson's (2006) notion, the students envision participation in imagined Finnish communities where they may "never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or ever hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 6). When imagining their possible selves, students articulate their dreams and visions about themselves as language users in the future and expedite the process of becoming their possible selves in these situations. All visualizations, as signs, are metaphors applicable to specific environments, for specific audiences and purposes, arising from, for example, the designer's use of available semiotic resources with an awareness of the

requirements of the social environment (Kress, 2010). The drawings emphasize students' visualizations of language use in the real world, in real spaces, and often with real people.

4.1 Speaking Finnish with different people in different situations

In the first set of analyses, representations of *situations* involving different people in which a student would like to *speak Finnish* are discussed. In the first narrative illustration (Figure 1), two people are facing each other at a store counter.

Figure 1. Speaking Finnish in a Finnish store

The characters are engaged in a typical customer–seller encounter. A person named "*minä*" <me>, the student, is handing money to the seller (no name has been assigned to the clerk). Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) asserted that colour is a semiotic resource, a mode, with multifunctional uses in the culturally situated making of signs, stating that "the colours of flags, for instance, denote specific nation states" (p. 347). A symbolic Finnish flag is drawn in blue and white in both speech bubbles, indicating that the participants are communicating, speaking, and conducting the transaction in Finnish. The blue coloring highlights the flag, but the rest of the visualization is drawn in pencil. While Niemelä (2020a) reported that the visualization of Finnish flags had nationalistic symbolism in the drawings of Finnish school children, the participants in this study used the nationalistic symbolism of the Finnish flag to express that Finnish is one of the languages spoken in multilingual Canada. In the student's visualization, Finnish is spoken locally, and the English title "The Finnish Place" at the top of drawing likely refers to a real store with the same name in Toronto. The drawing's design mimics the store sign, with the written text functioning as both the signified and the signifier, indicating the location where one can buy Finnish things. The drawing suggests that the student envisions themself running errands at the local Finnish store conversing in Finnish. This suggests that students are aware of the local Finnish community in which communication and learning can occur. For students, whose

language learning has been grounded in the classroom, these are new innovative imagined practices.

The subsequent excerpt (Figure 2) also illustrates a situation in which a student expresses a desire to speak Finnish.
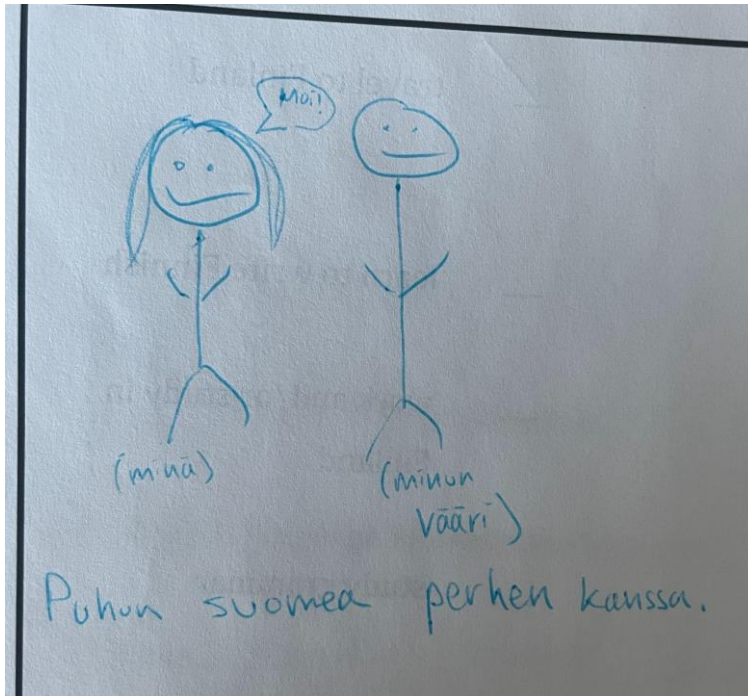

Figure 2. Speaking Finnish with relatives

The student has drawn two stick figures standing side by side, posing, and facing the same direction. The text under one of the characters reads "(*minä*)" <me>, referring to the student, who says "Moi!" <Hi!>, depicted in the speech bubble, to the other person named "*minun vääri*" [sic] <my grandfather>. Below is a textual explanation: "*Puhun suomea perhen [sic] kanssa*" <I speak Finnish with family>. This multimodal visualization conveys the message that the student desires to speak Finnish with their family, particularly their grandfather, who is included in the drawing. This suggests that the grandfather already possesses some knowledge of Finnish. Envisioning the ability to speak Finnish with Finnish-speaking relatives is a common study motivation for many heritage speakers.

The student in drawing (Figure 3) visualizes a situation in which they wish to speak Finnish with peers.
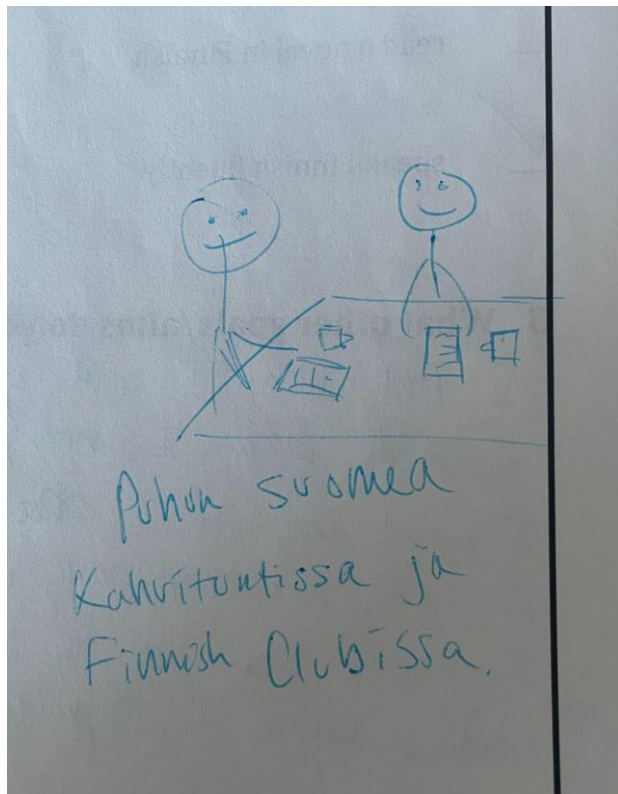
Figure 3. Speaking Finnish at the Finnish student club

The drawing portrays two stick figures seated at opposite sides of a table, both smiling and posing. There are documents on the table, with illustrations of written texts and iconic signs of coffee cups. The accompanying text states, "*Puhun suomea kahvituntissa* [sic] *ja Finnish Clubissa*" <I speak Finnish at coffee hour and Finnish Club>. *The Finnish Club*, also known as *Kahvitunti*, is a semi-organized extracurricular activity where students of Finnish language gather to chat, play games, enjoy coffee and snacks, listen to music, or do their Finnish homework together. The use of Finnish is encouraged. The drawing depicts a typical situation, and each sign in this arrangement is purposeful (Kress, 2010). The students are sitting in the department seminar room, engaged in homework and drinking coffee. The characters in the illustration are portrayed as two students in an equal peer relationship, and the visualization indicates that the student aspires to participate in Kahvitunti, study there, drink coffee, and converse in Finnish with peers.

In another narrative drawing (see Figure 6B), a student illustrates themself facing two other people, who are referred to, based on the textual signifier, as "dad, mom, etc." Here, "etc." suggests that the person could be anyone, preferably another family member. The presence of a Finnish flag inside the student's speech bubble indicates the student's vision of speaking Finnish to them. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) noted, colour can be used as a communicational resource, and the blue Finnish flag in the otherwise colourless illustration emphasizes the Finnish aspect. Judging from the facial expression, the student appears content. The other individuals are gazing at the speaker attentively. The student expresses a desire to speak Finnish to others, even in situations where their family members depicted in the drawing are not actively engaged in conversation.

4.2 Free-time activities in Finnish

Many of the drawings demonstrate different activities students aspire to do in Finnish alone or with others. The following drawing (Figure 4) only represents objects: a cup of steaming warm coffee and an open book on a table. No human characters are visualized.
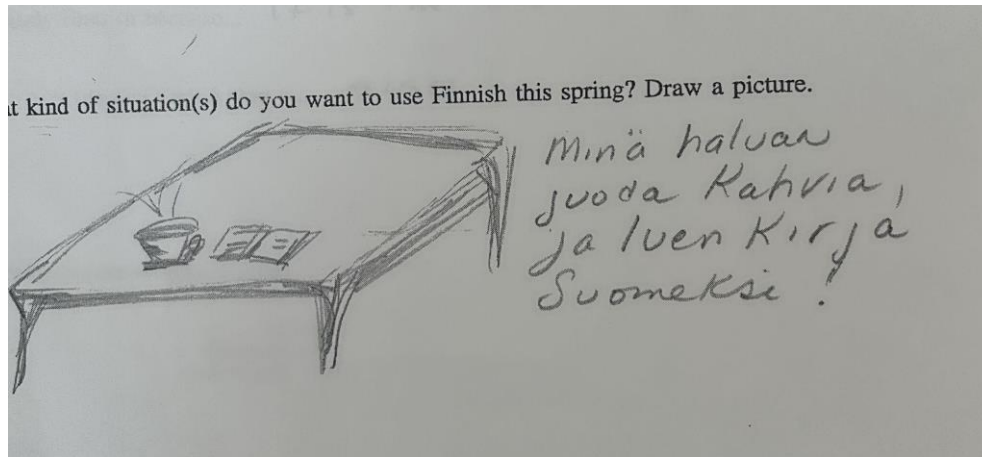

Figure 4: Reading a book and drinking coffee

The text written next to the visualization reads, "*Minä haluan juoda kahvia ja luen kirja [sic] suomeksi*!" <I want to drink coffee and read a book in Finnish>. This text is a signifier, indicating the student would like to spend time drinking coffee and reading books in Finnish. The iconic signs, an open book placed casually on the table and the steaming coffee next to it, create an impression of a pleasant relaxing activity. The visualization can be interpreted in a sensory way, and the viewer can imagine the smell of the coffee based on the steam arising from the cup.

In Figure 5, another student illustrates an activity they would like to do: baking.
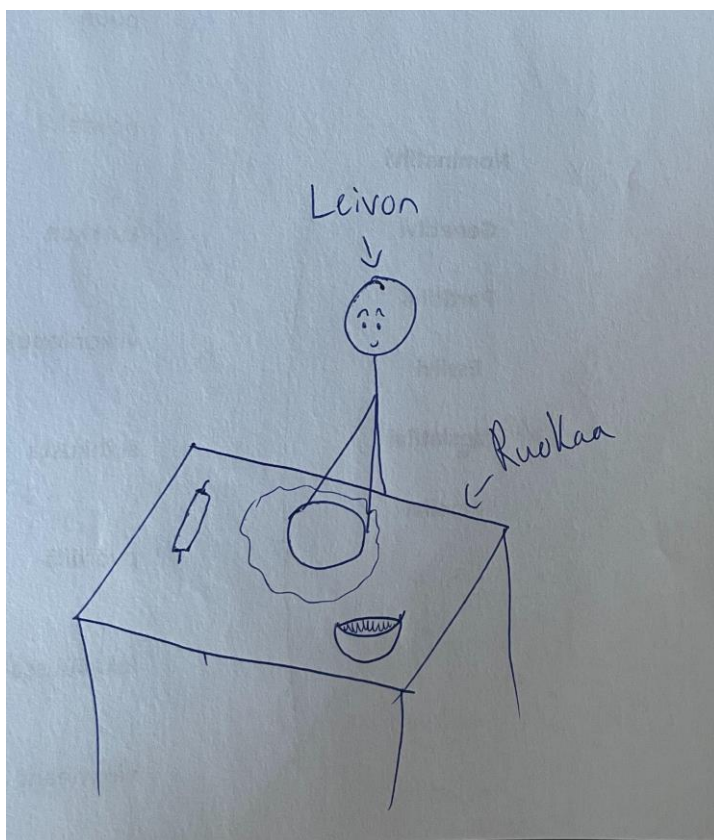
Figure 5. Baking in Finnish

This drawing also depicts an authentic activity. In the self-portrait, a stick figure representing the student is shown standing behind a table, working the dough with both hands, baking. A baking bowl and roller are placed on the table within arm's reach, and the ensemble of these iconic signs contributes to the meaning. Additionally, an arrow with the text "*Leivon*" <I bake> points towards the student, indicating their role. Another arrow by the word "*Ruokaa*" <food> points towards the table. These texts function as signifiers explaining what the student is doing. The narrative multimodal illustration conveys that the person is baking, and the outcome will be food, something to eat. This multimodal representation conveys that the student wishes to bake Finnish cuisine, do so in Finnish, and possibly both. The student appears satisfied.

   In the following excerpt (Figure 6), a student visualizes two situations in which they want to use Finnish (see also the analysis of 6B).
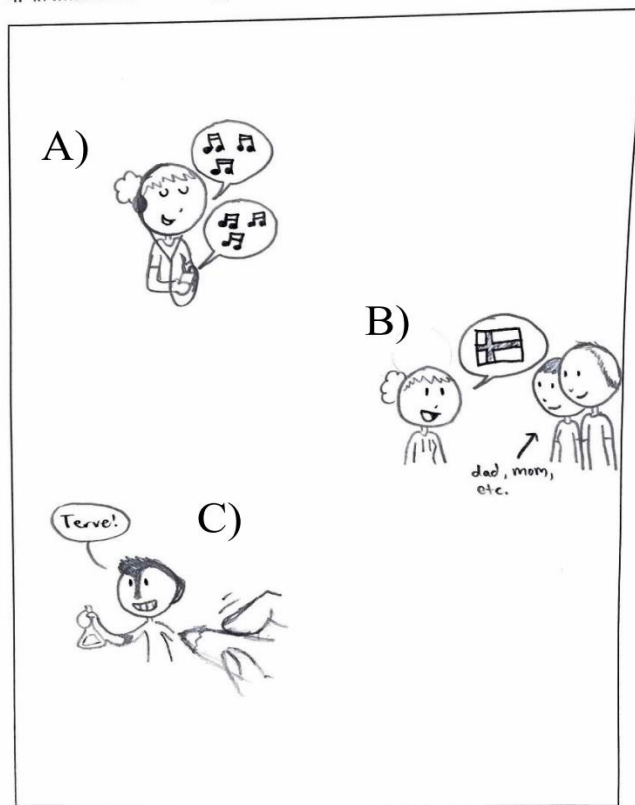
Figure 6. Using Finnish in different everyday situations

The illustration "A)" depicts a scenario in which a human character is listening to music with over-ear headphones, singing with their eyes closed, and holding an electronic device, which allows exposure to Finnish music. The person is alone in the picture. Iconic signs of musical notes appear in speech bubbles emanating from both the device and the lips of the character. This multimodal sign conveys that the student aspires to listen to Finnish language music and understand its lyrics well enough to recite them. The interpretation of this drawing also engages our eyes; sensory information connects communication to our senses. The student visualizes themselves as content and emotionally happy while engaged in this activity. Similarly, Kalaja and Melo-Pfeifer (2019) reported that student teachers drew smiling faces when they were envisioning positive feelings towards the foreign language class. The visualization of this imagined activity presents a cognitively embodied description making it possible to imagine the musical experience. The drawing comprehensively visualizes the student's desire to engage in this activity and reflects the emotional mood associated with it.

Excerpt "C)" is a narrative illustration featuring a hand holding a pen and a drawing of a person who says, "*Terve*!" <Hi!> in Finnish, as depicted in a speech bubble. There are two characters involved in this signified illustration, the drawer, the student, whose hand is visible, and the character the visualization depicts. The student has included a commentary indicating their desire to "c) Use bits of Finnish dialogue in my comics/stories without having to reference Google Translate." This signifier suggests that they would like to sketch and implement Finnish words without relying on online translation tools. The act of drawing and holding a pen is central to the message. This visualization demonstrates that drawing as an art form is also an embodied practice, engaging both the brain and the body.

4.3 Watching Finnish films in Finnish

Many visualizations depict students' desire to watch Finnish films. Figure 7 depicts a student sitting in front of a large movie screen alone.
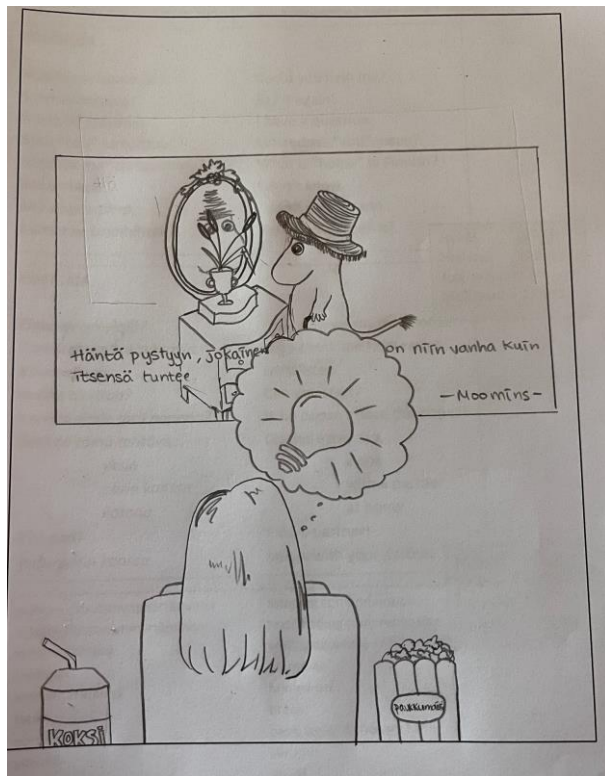

Figure 7. Watching a film in Finnish

The character is leaning on the back of the chair and appears relaxed. There is a drink on the left of the character, denoted by the text "*koksi*" [sic] <coke>, and a bag of popcorn on the right, with the text "*paukkumaissi*" [sic] <popcorn>. These objects are positioned towards the viewer to indicate what they are. On the screen, a well-known character, Moomin, from the Finnish animated film "Moomins," is looking at themselves in a mirror. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), visual language is not always transparent and universally understood; It is culturally specific. Finnish films are produced in the Finnish language and are culturally specific. Here, what is culturally specific but known to the student population in the Finnish language class is the recognizable Moomin character. A text quote on the screen reads, "*Häntä pystyyn, jokainen on niin vanha kuin itsensä tuntee*" <Cheer up, one is only as old as one feels>. The text in this illustration refers to the actions in the film. The narrative drawing reveals that the student is engaged in watching "Moomins". Next to the character's head is a shining light bulb in a thought bubble, a symbolic signifier indicating a sudden moment of understanding. The character realizes they can understand the Finnish film. In this self-portrait, understanding means both the cultural context of Finnish cinema and the Finnish language. Kress (2010) observed that "all signs are made for specific audiences and purposes, so metaphors too are made for specific

audiences and purposes" (p. 30). This drawing is a descriptive representation of what the student thinks and wishes to do.

Figure 8 also relates to watching films, this time at the movie theater with another person. The title of the visualization is "*Teatterissa*" <in a theater>.
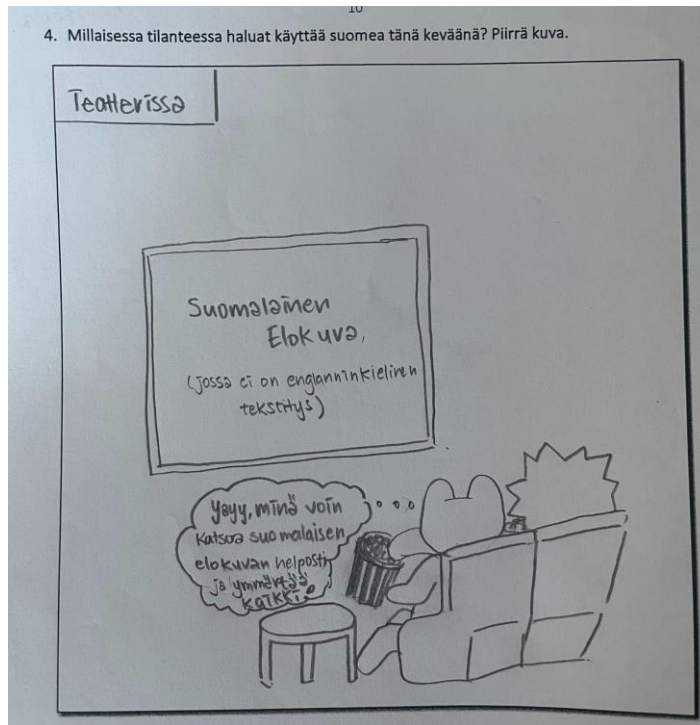

Figure 8. Finnish films in a theater

The generic film title is "*Suomalainen elokuva*" <Finnish film>, indicating that the film they are watching is a Finnish film in the Finnish language. There is a written explanation in brackets that reads, "(*jossa ei on* [sic] *englanninkielinen tekstitys*)" <which does not have English subtitles>, meaning that the student envisions watching a Finnish film without subtitles. The character is watching the film with another person. They are sitting next to each other and appear to have a friendly relationship.

The comment in the thought bubble, "*Yayy, minä voin katsoa suomalaisen elokuvan helposti ja ymmärtää kaikki*!" <I can watch a Finnish film easily and understand it all>, emphasizes two fundamental qualities: "*helposti*" <easily> and "*ymmärtää*" <to understand>. Going to the cinema to watch a Finnish film with someone requires an advanced understanding of language, and it is also a culturally specific Finnish social activity. The character visualizes watching a Finnish film as an activity in which they have full access and agency because they understand Finnish. The film-watching activity seems to take place with a level of ease—it is effortless—and the participants enjoy it together and even eat popcorn while watching, as the character is holding a bag of popcorn. The drawing demonstrates what the student is watching, eating, thinking, and feeling during the activity.

4.4 Studying together with peers

The drawings in this section demonstrate studying Finnish together with others. Studying Finnish together with peers is an authentic and relatively realistic activity. Indeed, collaborative teaching and learning practices are common at the UofT, and the following two drawings demonstrate students' desire to study together. The first narrative drawing (Figure 9) represents two characters sitting next to each other by a desk, looking over a book.
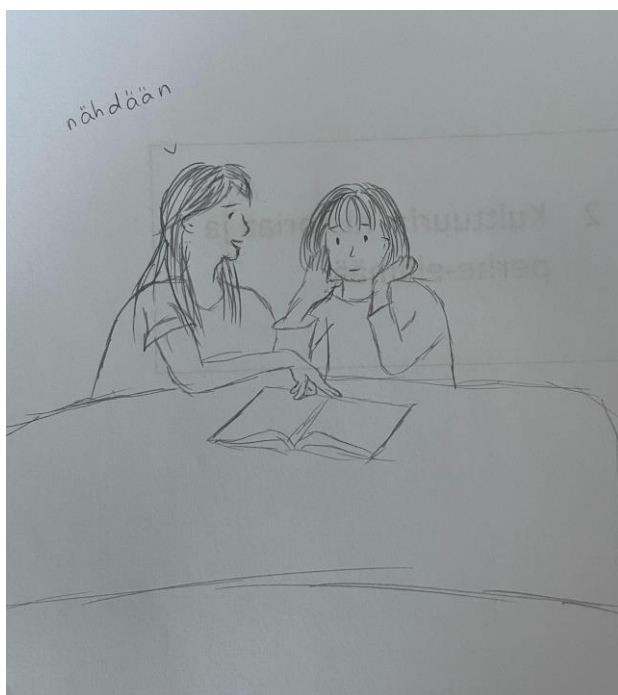

Figure 9. Explaining content to a peer

The character on the left appears to be speaking, as their mouth is slightly open. They are explaining something to the other character and pointing at something in the book with their finger. An arrow situates the word "*nähdään*" <see you> above their head. This textual signifier could indicate that they are studying the Finnish passive voice, Finnish vernacular language, or perhaps the so-called spoken language register. The character is gazing at the other person while speaking. It appears the person on the right, who is not speaking, is concentrating and thinking about the content while leaning on their elbows and listening. It is not explicitly clear which of the characters represents my student. The students are shown studying together, engaged in the material in the book. Nevertheless, as Mitchell et al. (2011) stated, there is rich, persuasive evidence embedded in the simplicity of the drawing, which visualizes the student's possible self, studying Finnish together with others. One can even *feel the mood*, and there is a glimmer of hope in the eyes of the character receiving the explanation.

Figure 10 also envisions and narrates a future situation both visually and textually. Two characters are facing each other, one sitting in front of a computer screen on which the other is visible.
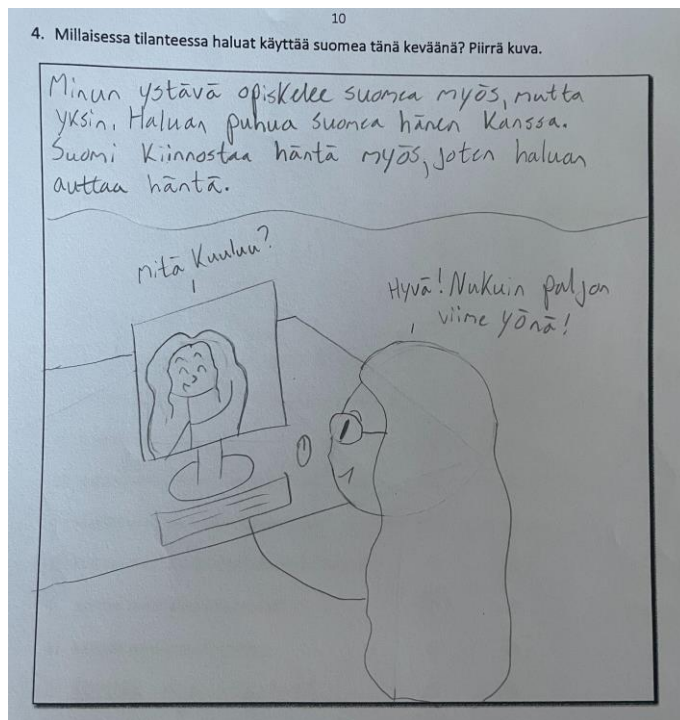
Figure 10. Virtual chatting with a peer in Finnish

The person on the computer asks, "*Mitä kuuluu?*" <How are you?>, and the student replies, "*Hyvä!* [sic] *Nukuin paljon viime yönä*!" <Good. I slept a lot last night!>. Both characters seem happy chatting casually and effortlessly in Finnish.

In the top corner of the drawing, the student has written a longer signifying explanation: "*Minun ystävä opiskelee suomea myös, mutta yksin. Haluan puhua suomea hänen kanssa. Suomi kiinnostaa häntä myös, joten haluan auttaa häntä*" <My friend is also studying Finnish but alone. I want to speak Finnish with them. Finnish interests them too, I want to help>. The message this visual and textual envisioning conveys is that, sometime in the future, the student would like to connect with a friend, chat, study Finnish together virtually, and even help the friend in their studies.

4.5 Information search for activities of interest

In Figure 6C, analyzed above, a student visualizes their desire to apply Finnish textual content in their sketches without relying on virtual translation services. Similarly, in Figure 11, a student's drawing indicates their wish to be able to perform an information search in Finnish to support their leisure-time activity: baking.
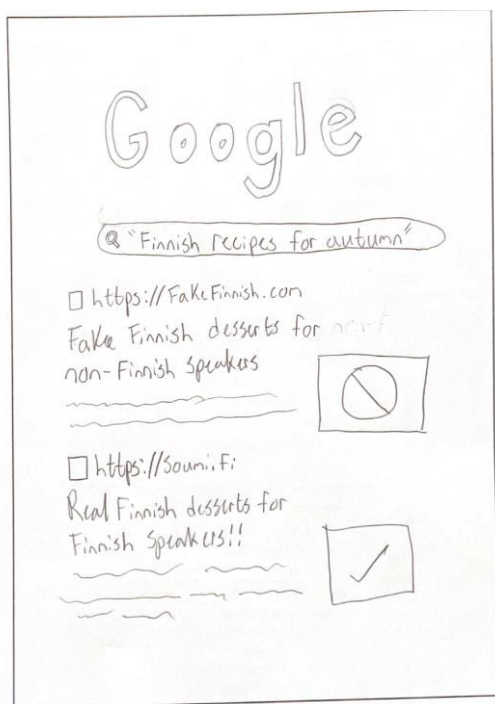
Figure 11. Searching the Internet for authentic information in Finnish

This symbolic drawing depicts an open Internet page following an imaginary Google search for "Finnish recipes for autumn," which has resulted in links to two different sites. One is https://fakeFinnish.com, and the other is https://Soumi.fi [sic]. As the textual commentary reveals, the first site, recipes for "fake Finnish desserts," is aimed at "non-Finnish speakers." In contrast, the latter, with a Finnish domain ".fi," displays search results for "real Finnish desserts" aimed at "Finnish speakers!!!" These pages are further contextualized with two symbols: the first with a well-known prohibition sign and the other with a check mark indicating a successful, completed, or correct search. This drawing includes layers of multimodal signs, including different texts. There are no people, although the illustration implies that a human, the student, has conducted the Google search. This drawing demonstrates the student's desire to understand authentic information in Finnish and recognize fake information. The need of these students for reliable information implies that, for example, authentic baking recipes are only accessible in Finnish, implying that baking Finnish food requires Finnish recipes. The student acknowledges the need to learn enough Finnish so that they can access this information appropriately online.

4.6 Traveling to Finland

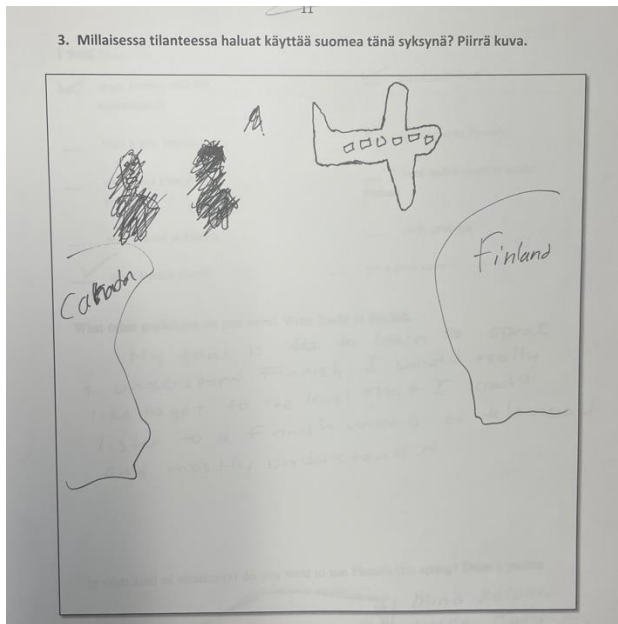The last excerpt, Figure 12, is a visualization in which an airplane is in the air over the Atlantic Ocean.

Figure 12. Desire to travel to Finland

"Canada" is written on the left side and "Finland" on the right. In the middle, there is a moving image, an airplane, flying towards Finland from Canada. This symbolic ensemble of signs does not include many details, and the design is simple. Yet, as Rose (2016) argued, "nothing is ever just visual" (p. 138). This envisioning represents a clear desire: to travel from Canada to Finland. For Finnish language students outside of Finland, traveling to Finland is a natural and motivational goal. It is common to dream about visiting, studying, taking a summer course, going on vacation, or working in Finland, and here the student has visualized it. Communicationally and semiotically, this is a complete message, even though it does not include an active human character. Yet, it can be assumed that the student envisions being a passenger on the plane one day.

5 Discussion

Multimodal visualizations encompass various ways of creatively communicating motivations, ideas, thoughts, aspirations, emotions, and feelings. Visualization enabled the students to apply different layers of multimodality to transmit knowledge and insights regarding their thinking. Students represented *visualizations as language*. They expressed themselves without textual language (Figures 6A, 7, and 12) or with very simple language (Figures 1, 2, 5, 6C, and 9). Communication and speaking Finnish was commonly expressed with speech bubbles in which they drew, for example, symbolic, blue-coloured pictures of Finnish flags (Figures 1 and 6) or short written textual greeting, such as "Moi!" and "*Terve*!" <Hi!> (Figures 2 and 6). Students applied musical signs of notes in speech bubbles to symbolize listening to music or singing. One student drew a light bulb in a thought bubble to denote thinking. Signs and simple texts in bubbles demonstrate the language the student imagines themselves speaking, reading, listening, singing, or thinking in.

Throughout the drawings, visualizations functioned as representations. One student drew lines of steam to illustrate hot coffee. Eating was illustrated by drawing bags of popcorn. Shopping in a local Finnish store was visualized as two people standing on the opposite sides of a counter with the student holding a note as a sign of payment for (imagined) purchases. Film watching was illustrated by characters sitting in front of screens. An illustration of a Google page was used to depict information and information search. Books were drawn on tables depicting reading as a desired activity. Art as visual text speaks for itself. Drawings exist because ideas may not be easily expressed in words (Mitchell et al., 2011).

Texts in the visualizations sometimes explained the signs, as in Figure 3, where a student wrote the signifier "Puhun suomea kahvituntissa [sic] ja Finnish Clubissa" explaining communication, or in Figure 8, where the text in the thinking bubble explains that the student can watch and understand a Finnish film. The visual conceptualization of processes sometimes requires language (Pöyhönen & Paulasto, 2020), but while envisioning, students can rely less on language—and particularly on English. Indeed, none of the visualizations communicated in English. Only the authentic store name "The Finnish Place" in Figure 1 was written in English. Thus, this study shows that visualizations enable students to present their ideas and thinking multimodally in creative and flexible ways without having to rely on English, a language with a dominant presence in students' lives, the university, and society at large.

Briell et. (2010) revealed that drawing is a useful tool for exploring young students' epistemological beliefs, especially when students are discussing abstract issues they lack adequate vocabulary to describe. This study shows that drawings may also serve as an empowering activity for university students at the elementary language level, allowing them to symbolize and mimic more advanced and complex thinking and communication than they can currently express in Finnish. Visualization enables the expression of insights and knowledge that are beyond their current Finnish language skills. As Niemelä (2020a) observed, drawings are always ideological because they are connected to the institution where they are produced. Drawing in my classroom creates an ideologically Finnish language space in an otherwise dominantly English higher education institution and society.

Students regularly *drew different characters* in the visualizations, and many drawings represented and situated students themselves in the center. Even in the drawings where there were no visible illustrations of characters, the multimodal presentation implied representation of the student. These semiotic visualizations were complete messages even without the active human characters in them. Students' drawings also emphasized the people in their imagined or real-life contact networks. Many strategic people appeared in the drawings (shop clerk, grandfather, peer student, family member, or friend), and students imagined futures involved communication in Finnish with them in diverse real-life contexts. Scotson (2018) reported that students highlighted interaction and the importance of other people. Speaking to real people in authentic situations appears to be a fundamentally important vision for my students as well.

The students also visualized *participating in various activities* in Finnish. They expressed the desire to listen to and sing along with Finnish music and to relax with a book and a cup of coffee. The aspiration to engage in diverse reading activities in Finnish also included reading and searching for information online, looking for baking recipes or study materials. They envisioned a future in which they could watch Finnish films without subtitles, and they aspired to study

together with others in person and virtually. One student visually articulated that they liked to sketch by drawing a hand that was sketching, while another student drew a rolling pin and bowl to symbolize baking. One student even visualized a trip to Finland.

Through imagined situations, visualization also allows students to portray themselves as characters who are thinking using symbolic thought bubbles. Such abstraction reflects an advanced level of cognitive activity. According to Barthes and Heath (1977), pictures represent the unmediated reality of life. Visualization as a form of communication differs from simply stating, describing, or writing about ideas textually. Semiotic resources are socially constructed, encompassing the discernible regularities of social occasions and events and, hence, have a certain stability because they are never fixed (Kress, 2010). All the multimodal visual messages the students conveyed are understandable to the viewer as they are.

The students in this study identified and visually represented *many spaces in which speaking and using Finnish* would be meaningful to them. Overall, this study shows what the students wish to do outside the classroom. As Rose (2016) noted, no visual product is neutral, and a drawing is produced by a specific individual in a particular space and time. Students envisioned these activities in different settings, including a store, different locations on campus, at home, in the movie theater, online, and even abroad in Finland. For instance, in Figure 1, the depiction of running errands in *The Finnish Place* in Finnish reflects a possible real-life situation while also acknowledging the scarcity of public spaces in Toronto where Finnish can be used. Similarly, Figures 2 and 6B illustrate the recurring motivation to speak Finnish within the family, while Figure 3 portrays a desire to participate in a Finnish student club at the university.

Rose (2016) highlighted the "power of visuals," and as simple as these visualizations may be artistically, they represent situations in which the urge to speak Finnish is real. Scotson's (2018) study on visual narratives also found that speaking was the most described language skill by participants and was illustrated in most of their drawings. To understand these messages and capture their communicative functions, it is necessary to realize that the signs are not only directed at intelligibility but are also associated with specific locally or contextually significant social characteristics (Dyer, 2007).

Drawings bring more to the table than just actions, spaces, and meanings. They also convey the characteristics, moods, and illustrated gestures of the students or others who are visualized in them. In seemingly simple drawings, it is possible to see how the characters are positioned and recognize their facial expressions when they are engaged in different activities. Facial expressions depict characters who are happy and smiling, satisfied, and interested. For example, in Figure 6A, the student portrays themselves listening to music, singing, and feeling satisfied without the use of textual words. In Figure 9, the student seems to be deep in thought. Visual expressions also afford opportunities for characters to express human emotions. Both students in Figure 10 are portrayed as content and happy.

The excerpts presented in this study demonstrate that art—here, the different drawings—prepares students for the world of communication, increases their awareness of differing opinions and thoughts, and illustrates the various means by which people choose to express their thoughts and feelings (see Barton et al., 2013; Shulsky & Kirkwood, 2015). Kress (2010) stated that "the 'take' on what I wish to represent arises out of my *interest*: *interest* directs my *attention* to

something that now engages me, at *this* moment" (p. 50-51). Through these course assignments, students visualized and represented their possible future selves.

6 Conclusions

This study examined how drawings, as multimodal course assignments, allow students to express their aspirations as future language learners in the early stages of their language learning trajectory. Through their drawings, students expressed their dreams, experiences, and plans, visualizing their wish to go shopping, study together, watch films in Finnish, bake, listen to Finnish music, sing, read, sketch, search for information about Finnish culture online, travel to Finland, and most importantly, to communicate in Finnish with different people in diverse situations. The students depicted authentic activities, situations, and places where they imagine or hope to use Finnish. They expressed a desire to study together, communicate with Finnish-speaking store staff, converse with peers at Finnish Club, and communicate with family members and relatives who already speak Finnish. The representations were focused on the individual — here, the student — and shaped by their social histories and current social environments. The students' visualizations reflected what they do, what they look at, what they see, eat, and drink, as well as what they wish to experience in different situations and how they react. Their drawings highlighted what is relevant in their social environments at this moment in their lives (Kress, 2010).

Engaging students in thinking about their learning goals enhances their observation of, response to, and representation of the world in which they live, motivating continued learning. The results of this study align with Pöyhönen and Paulasto's (2020) assertion that artistic activities can be a way of producing and disseminating new information. This study shows that visualizations offer a different way to communicate and demonstrate learning goals and motivation for students in the initial stage of their language learning trajectory. Drawing maximizes communication and transmits knowledge without complex language or support from English. Just like verbal language, these drawings involve specific structural, functional, aesthetic, and communicational aspects, and the visualizations function as a form of visual language. Multimodal visualization allows Finnish as a second language students to express themselves at a deeper level beyond written language, demonstrating a depth of interpretation and subjective insight while providing transparent and authentic glimpses into their thinking. Students who are at the beginning of their Finnish language learning trajectory commonly turn to English for support. This study shows that arts-informed pedagogy allows students to communicate and make themselves understood without English.

However, there are limitations to this study. Each student's visualization is a product of personal meaning in a particular social and temporal context. The analysis primarily focused on the compositional modality of the signs and images, offering little insight into production, circulation, and audience positionality. Future research could triangulate student representations with participants and artistically educated individuals to enrich the analysis. Additionally, exploring how the findings can inform teaching and learning practices and align with expected CERF levels for each course could provide valuable insights (see CERF, 2002).

The use of arts-informed, multimodal pedagogy provides diverse perspectives on language teaching, closely linking knowledge with reflective language learning and student motivation (e.g. Borgdorff, 2012; Cutcher, 2013). This study offers new insights into reflective teaching methods in higher education, where second language teaching and the arts intersect. Envisioning imagined futures infuses learning with meaning and fosters creativity in second language higher education pedagogy outside of Finland. Drawings offered a glimpse into what students enjoy doing outside the classroom and, more importantly, which activities they aspire to engage in using Finnish within society. Drawing and envisioning also help instructors understand student interest and aspirations as well as who is in their network. Understanding how students envision their potential selves can aid instructors in tailoring course content and planning their teaching and learning practices. Visualizations also facilitate students' self-reflection, deepening their understanding of their motivations for learning Finnish as they work towards becoming their envisioned best possible selves.

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