

# Insights into the agency, positioning and development of professional Finnish language skills of international nursing students

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*This article focuses on international students studying in an English-mediated nursing degree program in Finland. From sociocognitive and ecological perspectives, this study examines the development of the students' professional Finnish language skills and agency during their practical training. In addition, this article explores how students are positioned as capable workers. To shed light on the students' professional language skills, agency, and positionings, interviews with vocational teachers, head nurses, and two international nursing students are examined using narrative analysis. The findings suggest that due to their lack of Finnish language skills, international students are positioned differently than their local peers. Hence, they are given fewer responsibilities and fewer opportunities to perform work tasks independently. Although international students are expected to know the language needed before they start work as a nurse, neither the educational institution nor workplaces are willing to take responsibility for language skills training. Therefore, language learning seems to be students' own responsibility. Consequently, international students may be set in unequal positions regarding their access to the labor market in Finland. Nonetheless, during their practical training, the students are positioned as active agents and scaffolded in many ways so that they can potentially exercise their agency and promote their professional language skills more independently. In this study, it was found that positionings are interconnected with the development of agency and professional Finnish language skills.*

**Keywords:** agency, health care, international students, positioning, professional language skills

## 1 Introduction

In Finland, as in other Western countries with aging populations, the demand for nurses in the health care sector is growing. Due to international recruitment and a growing number of international students, workplaces in the health care sector are becoming increasingly diverse. At the same time, the professional language skills of the international workforce have been under debate because of an

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assumed lack of language skills, and the fact that the hospital environment is predominantly monolingual. This article focuses on international nursing students studying in an English-language nursing degree program in Finland. Despite the labor shortage in health services, international students struggle with becoming acknowledged as potential and capable members of the workforce.

This study examines how the students' professional language skills and their agency develop during their practical training. Furthermore, it considers how they are positioned as capable workers (by others). Previous studies on culturally and linguistically diverse nursing students' experiences on practical training have shown that limited language skills can be seen as obstacles for students trying to gain access to learning opportunities in clinical settings (see Crawford & Candlin, 2013; Mikkonen et al., 2016). However, the development of language skills necessary for nursing as a profession has not been scrutinized previously. Furthermore, although there are a few studies on agency and second language learning in a professional context (on small business owners, see Miller, 2014; on trainees in integration programs, see Sandwall, 2013), they do not explore the development of agency in detail. The current study opens a new perspective on the development of professional language skills and agency by bringing together different sociocognitive and ecological approaches that draw on dialogical and sociocultural perspectives (Atkinson, 2011; Bakhtin, 1981; Dufva et al., 2011; Dufva & Aro, 2015; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). Although agency has been explored from various perspectives, I will draw on the sociocognitive and ecological formulations. In these, agency is seen as highly relevant from the point of view of perceiving the opportunities for action in the environment, and is therefore a crucial factor in examining language learning (van Lier, 2004; van Lier, 2008a, p. 179). Here, I draw on Dufva and Aro's (2015, p. 38) dialogical view in time and space, which highlights the dynamic nature of agency and sees it both as subjectively experienced and collectively emergent. Additionally, agency is seen as negotiated in a dialogue and as accumulated and continuous by nature (Dufva & Aro, 2015, p. 38). Moreover, this study is inspired by positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), which adds a complementary perspective to subjectively experienced agency and its role in language learning. Thus, this study investigates professional language skills and agency from a new point of departure by bringing in both the subjective viewpoints of language learners and the way they are positioned by others.

This article is part of a more extensive longitudinal multi-sited ethnographic study on international nursing students' professional Finnish language skills<sup>1</sup>. To establish how agency and professional language skills develop and are exercised during practical training, this study reports findings of two longitudinal case studies. In these, the perspectives of teachers, the head nurses, and international students are in focus. Interviews with the participants have been examined using narrative analysis (de Fina, 2013, 2014; Vitanova, 2005, 2010). The research questions are the following:

1. How are international students positioned as potential members of the workforce and as capable Finnish language users by teachers and head nurses?
2. What factors are seen as either helping or hindering the development of students' agency and their professional language skills?
3. How is the development of students' professional language skills and their agency related to the positionings they are given in a professional context?

This article begins with an overview of research on agency in a professional context. The data and methods used in the current analysis are then described. The results are discussed by first analyzing the teachers' and head nurses' responses, then moving on to the students' narratives. Finally, the conclusion discusses the theoretical and pedagogical implications.

## 2 Agency in a professional context

Agency can be defined as the "socioculturally negotiated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). It is regarded as socially and historically constructed in a context, and seen as a constantly renegotiated relationship (Lantof & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145–146; Lantof & Thorne, 2006, p. 238–239). However, agency is not seen as randomly changing but as accumulated and continuous (Dufva & Aro, 2015, p. 38). Drawing on an ecological perspective, van Lier (2004) states that agency promotes and fuels individuals to act. Agency can be viewed as a prerequisite for perceiving affordances, but it is not seen as purely individual, but rather, as a property that emerges in a relationship between the individual and the resources of the environment (van Lier, 2004). However, one needs to learn to perceive affordances, that is, the learning potentials and opportunities of the environment (van Lier, 2008b, p. 589, 602). Individuals perceive their environment based on their own purposes and needs in a context, and therefore, agency can be crucial for perceiving learning opportunities in a hospital environment.

Moreover, agency is not freely exercised but influenced by others and linked to power relations in a dialogical relation (Dufva & Aro, 2015, p. 40; Linell, 2009, p. 216–217). Different socioeconomic, cultural, and economic factors affect the choices and opportunities to develop and exercise agency. For instance, minorities are exposed to the influence of such social processes as stereotyping, over which they have little power (de Fina, 2014, p. 50). Power relations are involved also in Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of peripheral legitimated participation: the community has to acknowledge a newcomer as legitimated. At the same time, the community has to offer opportunities for participation in its focal practices in order to allow a newcomer to become a full member of the community. From an ecological perspective, meaningful actions are considered to be the ones in which language learning occurs as long as a newcomer perceives them as such (van Lier, 2008b, p. 602). All in all, gaining agency is regarded as a struggle to find one's own words, and thus one's own voice. (Dufva & Aro, 2015, p. 40). According to Bakhtin (1981, p. 293–294), "the word in language is half someone else's". When appropriating words, one is also making them his or her own. So although each speaker recycles other people's words and intentions, they also add something of their own. Authoritative voices, such as stereotypes, are full of other people intentions. The core of agency is to have one's own intentions in words, one's own voice, instead of merely recycling the intentions of others, such as teachers, peers, and the media (Dufva & Aro, 2015, p. 40; Virtanen 2011; Vitanova, 2005).

This article draws on the dialogical and sociocultural notions of agency, but also adopts the concept of positioning to shed light on the development of professional language skills and agency. The positioning theory of social constructivists was initially proposed by Davies and Harré (1990) and further developed in narrative research (see e.g., Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; de Fina, 2013; Deppermann, 2007; Wortham, 2000). Davies' and Harré's (1990) notion of positioning indicates that a specific position entails specific duties and

worldviews (de Fina 2013, p. 41). However, instead of viewing subject positions as presuppositions of “pre-existing entities”, interlocutors are today more often regarded as speakers who can resist, select, and revisit positions in a discourse, indexing their own agentive role (de Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 162–163). In addition, Kramsch and Steffensen (2008, p. 26) see subject positions as emerging in a discourse instead of assuming pre-given multiple social identities. In this way they highlight the dynamic nature of positions and their emergence in interaction. Relying on these notions, I see these subject positions as shared, accumulated and negotiated in social action. The next section describes the data and the methods used in this study.

### 3 Data and methods

The bachelor’s degree program in nursing under scrutiny is administered in English and intended for both Finnish and international students. The program is provided by a Finnish university of applied sciences. In this nursing program, the students study in English, but they perform their practical training in a monolingual Finnish-speaking hospital environment. No prior Finnish language skills are required. The present study is a part of a longitudinal multi-sited ethnographic study<sup>2</sup>. The data of the present study consist of interviews with vocational teachers, the hospital staff, and two nursing students (see Table 1, all names are pseudonyms).

**Table 1.** Summary of the data utilized in this study.

Data	Participants	Round	Length (minutes) / language proficiency
<b>Vocational teachers</b>			
Semi-structured interview with teachers on teaching and/or mentoring international students	Eija	10/2011	50.44
	Leena	10/2011	1.06.40
	Maria	10/2011	1.02.07
	Veera	10/2011	46.47
	Ritva	11/2011	31.34
<b>Head nurses</b>			
Semi-structured interviews with head nurses about international students on the ward	Päivi	01/2012	59.44
	Eeva	01/2012	43.07
	Katri	01/2012	1.04.24
	Kaisa	02/2012	49.27
<b>An international nursing student</b>			
Initial interviews, reflecting on ongoing practical training, and final interview with a student.	Sarah	09/2011	45.00
		12/2011	1.06.14
		01/2012	25.59
		04/2013	2.09.00
<b>An international nursing student</b>			
Initial interviews, reflecting on ongoing practical training, and final interview with a student	Daniel	07/2011	47.10
		11/2011	46:41
		10/2012	15.49
		10/2012	21:45
		05/2013	1.17.41
<i>Can do</i> statements	Daniel	01/2012	Level B1
		05/2013	level B2
	Sarah	12/2011	Level B1–B2
		04/2013	level B2

Five vocational teachers were interviewed at the early stage of the study to examine their experiences of teaching and guiding international students. Similarly, interviews with four head nurses were used to explore their experiences of working with international students and workers on the ward. The picture is completed by bringing in the voice of the students: the viewpoints of two nursing students. Interviews are, however, always co-constructed (see Georgakopoulou, 2013, p. 260), and therefore, the researcher should be aware of the dialogical nature of interviews. Hence, my position as a researcher has an effect on the stories the research participants told: the participants knew that I am focusing on Finnish used at work. The *can do* statements were applied to compare students' self-evaluations of their professional language skills at the beginning and the end of the follow-up, including listening, reading, writing, and spoken interaction<sup>3</sup>. All the interviews with the hospital staff and the teachers were conducted in Finnish. The students preferred Finnish during their practical training and English elsewhere, probably because they were used to speaking Finnish at work. The permission for research was gained both at institutional and individual level. The participants had a right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Methodologically, this study draws on narrative analysis by Vitanova (2005, 2010) and de Fina (2013, 2014). Vitanova's (2005, 2010) dialogical narrative analysis aids the exploration of multivoicedness in narratives: the narratives examined are not only the voices of the interlocutors, but the voices of others. Thus dialogical analysis helps to examine who does the talking and whose voice can be heard. Further, the narratives can also be used to analyze how the narrators position themselves in relation to others and the rest of the social world. In this, I draw on de Fina's (2013, 2014) application of Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) positioning analysis. Since positions are viewed as negotiated in a dialogue, narrative analysis aids in exploring circulation of local positioning and macro-level social processes, that is, how wider social processes, such as media discussion or social stereotyping, affect ways in which narratives are told (de Fina, 2013, p. 45, 2014, p. 62).

In conclusion, I analyze the interview talk using the concept of *small stories* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Instead of the canonical, prototype 'big' stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end only, small stories can be co-constructed and recontextualized stories about past, present, future, and hypothetical events, focusing on "underrepresented narrative activities" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 381; Georgakopoulou, 2013, p. 260). Furthermore, in my analysis of students' narratives, I aim at identifying the meaningful turning points that have had an effect on their agency, language skills, and/or social positionings during their studies (see also Pujolar & Puigdevall, 2015). I will also explore the positionings of students by teachers and head nurses and aim at relating these to societal debates and media discussion. I have aimed at making the research participants' voices as audible as possible by providing short verbatim quotations in the running text.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Positionings made by teachers and head nurses

#### 4.1.1 The demand for sufficient Finnish language skills and independency

The authoritative voice behind the demand for Finnish language is evident in the head nurses' interviews, as can be seen in the following excerpt in which Päivi describes her responsibilities as a head nurse when recruiting new employees:

(1)

kyllä mua huolestuttaa se että jos [amkissa] (.) [amkissa] täällä niin (.) nelkyt prosenttia alotuspaikoista on enää suomenkielisiä (.) kuitenkin meillä on aivan mieletön huutava pula sairaan- sairaanhoitajista [ - - ] et mä en saa niinku (.) suomen kieltä osaavia hoitajia (.) et siinä mielessä (.) huolestuttaa tosissaan ja ja niinku sekin että (.) mun mielestä esimiehenä ((a laugh)) ei oo kauheen hyvä jos töitä tulee hakemaan valmistunu (.) kansainvälinen sairaanhoitaja (.) hänellä hän tulee tulkin kanssa hakemaan töihin tänne (.) mun mielestä se ei riitä niinku osottamaan että hän puhuu riittävästi suomen kieltä (.) että pitää pystyä työhönottohaastattelussa selviämään suomen kielellä (.) kuitenkin se että mä oon vastuussa siitä meidän hoitajien osaamisesta myös sitten sen puitteissa että (.) että niinkun pystyy tekemään töitä ettei tuu vahinkoja sitten sen puutteellisen kielitaidon takia (.) mä oon siitä vastuussa johdolle (Päivi, head nurse)

I'm worried if there are only 40% of study places for Finnish speakers here at the university of applied sciences (.) we have anyhow a desperate need for nur- nurses [ - - ] I can't get (.) nurses who know Finnish (.) so in that sense (.) I'm really worried and and like as well (.) I think that as a superior ((a laugh)) it's not really good if there is a graduated (.) international nurse looking for work (.) and s/he has s/he arrives here with an interpreter looking for work here (.) I think it's not enough to show that s/he speaks Finnish sufficiently (.) so one needs to be able to use Finnish in a job interview (.) I'm anyhow responsible for our nurses' skills also in terms of (.) their capability to work so that no accidents happen because of insufficient language skills (.) I'm responsible for it to the directors (translated)

By offering this hypothetical scenario, Päivi positions the international workforce as having insufficient Finnish language skills (or no Finnish skills at all). This specific scenario has not necessarily ever occurred on the ward. She reiterates the voice that there is *mieletön huutava pula* [a desperate need] for workforce but international students are the majority group in a nursing program. Here, Päivi speaks in the voice of a head nurse: *mua huolestuttaa* [I'm worried], *mä en saa* [I can't get], *huolestuttaa tosissaan* [I'm really worried], *mun mielestä esimiehenä* [I think that as a superior], *mä oon siitä vastuussa* [I'm responsible for it]. She mentions *esimiehenä* [as a superior] strengthening her position as a sort of a gatekeeper: she seems to underline that she is responsible for ensuring that the staff has sufficient Finnish language skills. However, the laughter in her voice softens her position. In particular, patient safety seems to be the biggest concern when it comes to recruiting international workforce: *ettei tuu vahinkoja* [so that no accidents happen]. In addition to this, it seems that the workplace is not considered to be a place for learning, as Päivi states later in the interview: *kyllä mä siinä odotan kuitenkin niinku että se ei jäis työelämään se kielen opetteleminen* [I do expect that language learning is not left for working life]. This indicates that the students are expected to know the Finnish language needed at work before entering working life.

Additionally, the gap between education and working life is presented in an interview with Kaisa, one of the head nurses, in which the authoritative voice of independency calls for Finnish language skills: *siinä vaiheessa ne ihmiset valmistuvat työelämään (.) niin niitten pitää pystyä toimimaan itsenäisesti siinä työssä (.) ja sen pointin mun mielestä koulu ohittaa niinku (.) liian herkästi* [at the point that those people graduate to working life (.) they have to be able to work independently (.) and that's the thing the school passes over (.) too easily in my opinion]. In general, from the point of view of the head nurses, the responsibility for gaining sufficient Finnish proficiency falls on an educational institution. Previous studies (Strömmer, ahead of print; Suni, 2011, forthcoming; Virtanen,

ahead of print) reveal, however, that professional language skills are contextual and situational and, therefore, learning occurs or continues at work.

However, the issues that the head nurses raise shed light on macro-level processes (see de Fina, 2014, p. 62) that hospital staff face in terms of international workers. The positions that the head nurses take in narration may be due to a larger scale debate regarding the mobility of workers (for more, see Wrede & Näre, 2013). Nowadays, more and more of the students come from outside of Finland, as Päivi states, but the structure of the program's curriculum has not followed this change: it seems apparent that not enough attention has yet been paid to Finnish language education.

#### 4.1.2 The interface between education and working life

Throughout the data, it is made clear that there is a shortage of nurses. Nonetheless, there are hindering factors when positioning international students as a capable workforce. First, the vocational teacher Ritva mentions the difficulties international students have in gaining access to information.

(2)

mutta se varmaan just se nonverbaalinen (.) viestintä nousee uuteen ulottuvuuteen näitten ihmisten kohdalla (.) mut sitten se toisaalta se tosiasia että mitä suomenkielinen opiskelija saa samassa harjottelussa niin on huomattavasti enemmän (.) koska hän pystyy lukemaan papereita hän pystyy tietokoneelle kirjaan asioita koska ne on suomeks (.) englanninkielisiltä tämä jää (.) pois (Ritva, vocational teacher)

but it may be nonverbal (.) communication that gains a new dimension when it comes to these people (.) but then on the other hand it's a fact that a Finnish student gains significantly more in the same training (.) because s/he can read papers s/he can type on the computer because it's in Finnish (.) English speakers are left (.) out (translated)

Ritva speaks in the voice of a professional when she points to nonverbal communication and how it *nousee uuteen ulottuvuuteen* [gains a new dimension], that is, how it becomes an essential tool for the students when dealing with communicative settings, such as taking care of a patient. Thus nonverbal communication is seen as compensation for a lack of language proficiency: friendly and respectful manners make the patients feel they receive good care (see also Andersson, 2010; Duff et al., 2002; Jansson, 2014; Virtanen, 2011). According to Ritva's narrative, it is *tosiasia* [a fact] that international students do not gain access to the same resources as the local ones do when it comes to documentation because of their insufficient Finnish language skills: *englanninkielisiltä tämä jää (.) pois*. [English speakers are left (.) out] (see also Mikkonen et al., 2016). This positioning during practical training leads to limited opportunities to exercise one's agency and practice actual work tasks, and therefore, it may hinder the learning of crucial workplace literacies.

Documentation in the electronic patient record (EPR) is seen as one of the most linguistically demanding tasks for migrant workers, but it is a crucial practice for patient safety (Kela & Komppa, 2011; Virtanen, ahead of print). The students do not have equal access to knowledge and therefore they are not fully legitimated in the work community (see Lave & Wenger, 1991). Similarly, differing positionings and power relations between local and international students are present in the next small story, in which Leena reiterates students' experiences of a lack of opportunities to practice meaningful work tasks.

(3)

nää jotka suomea ei kiitosta ja ole hyvää enempää hallitse mejän opiskelijoista niin he kokee (.) etteivät saa siitä harjoittelusta samaa kuin saisivat jos osaisivat suomea (.) just sitä että heit ei oteta joukkoon niinku tavallaan ja joutuvat kättelemään sieltä (.) sivusta [- -] no just nyt kuulin et samaan aikaan oli suomalainen opiskelija samalla osastolla niin tää ulkomaalainen koki et se suomalainen sai tehdä kaikki ja hän joutu vaan kättelemään vierestä ja seurailemaan perässä (.) että tämmöstä niinku epäoikeudenmukaisuuden kokemusta sitten myöskin (Leena, vocational teacher)

those among our students who aren't able to say more than thank you and you're welcome in Finnish they feel like (.) they don't benefit from the training the same as they would if they knew Finnish (.) it's like they are not taken into a group and they are kind of forced to observe (.) from the outside [- -] well I just heard that a Finnish student who was at the same time on the same ward so this foreigner felt that this Finn was allowed to do everything and s/he was forced to just observe outside and follow (.) so this kind of experiences of injustice as well (translated)

Leena ventriloquizes the student's voice by looking at the situation through the student's eyes (see Bakhtin, 1981; Vitanova, 2005, p. 148), echoing the voice that regrets the lack of opportunities to practice skills: *että heit ei oteta joukkoon niinku tavallaan ja joutuvat kättelemään sieltä (.) sivusta* [they are not taken into a group and they are kind of forced to observe (.) from the outside]. It seems as if the students are not free to exercise their agency: they are positioned to remain passively on the edge of the work community. Consequently, the struggle to negotiate one's own voice with others is present when the students do not have access to a dialogue with a work community. Without gaining opportunities to increase their participation within the work community, the students will not necessarily become socialized into the focal practices of the ward as easily (see Deters, 2011, p. 30–31; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Moreover, the feeling of isolation may decrease students' willingness to take initiative (see also Deters, 2011, p. 29–30).

#### 4.1.3 Gaining sufficient professional language skills: Who cares?

Vocational teachers share the impression that *harjoittelut [on](.) keskeinen paikka (.) missä suomea oppii* [practical training is (.) a situation (.) in which one can learn Finnish] (Veera). However, the mentor is often the only mediator of knowledge and the one who allows students to complete work assignments. When asked what support is provided for international students, one of the head nurses, Eeva, noted that the mentor's English language skills are often a factor: *en mä tiiä onks siinä [ohjaamisessa] eroa jos ei oo suomenkielinen (.) niin (.) emmä tiiä se on ehkä ainoo että on katottu että ne [ohjaajat] osaa englantia*. [I don't know whether there's any difference in it [mentoring] in case someone is not a Finnish speaker (.) well (.) I don't know maybe it's only made sure that they [mentors] know English]. The aim, it seems, is to treat all students equally. However, in cases where no clear guidelines for the staff have been provided, inequalities between the Finnish and international students in gaining access to the same resources and opportunities may increase (see also excerpts [2] and [3]). Staff members would also need tools for supporting international students (see also Mikkonen et al., 2016).

Katri's experience with international students in practical training for pediatric nursing, in turn, differs from other head nurses. At that point of the studies the



students' language proficiency is usually higher than it is at the beginning of their studies. Here, she describes the support provided for international students.

(4)

yleensä että ei tässä oo ollu mitään ongelmaa (.) kun nää ihmeesti osaa sitten suomee kuitenkin silleen että pystyy tässä tekkeen sitä harjottelua ohjatusti (.) että ehkä pikkusen enemmän pitää sitten olla niinkun (.) tukena ja ei sanoo et käy tekee se vaan mennään niinku yhdessä tekemään (.) mut et sitten kun näkee et jonkun asian opiskelija osaa niin (.) sitten voi mennä (.) herkemmin että, suomenkielisiltä voi niinku kysyä että osaat sä niinku näin (.) ja sitten annetaan mennä mut näitten kans kyllä lähetään ((a laugh)) aluks porukalla (Katri, head nurse)

in general there haven't been any problems (.) because they know some Finnish in a way they can perform their practical training here with supervision (.) so maybe one has to be there like (.) providing more support and not to say just go and do it but let's go and do it together (.) but then once you notice that the student knows how to do something (.) then one can go (.) maybe it's more that you can ask Finnish speakers can you do this like that (.) and then let them go but with these ones at first we go ((a laugh)) together (translated)

Finnish students seem to be positioned as independent workers from the beginning of their practical training. In contrast, international students need more scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) and they are not allowed to work immediately by themselves: *mennään niinku yhdessä tekemään* [let's go and do it together], *lähetään aluks porukalla* [at first we go together]. It seems like once the head nurse is convinced that international students can manage, *sitten voi mennä* [then one can go]. This indicates that, at least on this ward, international students can potentially receive the support needed instead of being isolated (compare excerpt [3]). This position of legitimated peripheral participants may enable negotiation of students' own voice in a dialogue with others (see Dufva & Aro, 2015, p. 40; Lave & Wenger, 1991). To complete the picture and hear the students' own voice, the viewpoints of two nursing students will be considered as samples in the next two sections.

## 4.2 Gaining agency and independency: Daniel's story

### 4.2.1 The demand for sufficient language skills and independency

Daniel had studied medical laboratory science in his home country, Kenya, before coming to Finland in 2010 for further studies. Saying that nursing is his passion, Daniel says that he chose to apply to the nursing program due to Finland's reputation as a country with free, high-quality education. The follow-up began when Daniel was 24 years old. The first excerpt is taken from the first interview, which took place when Daniel had had his first practical training period in eldercare in 2011. This small story shows the prerequisites of the nursing profession: one must work independently.

(5)

because nursing as a profession requires (.) individuality and independence (.) so everybody is supposed to do (.) er everything by themselves (.) recording from recording to talking to the patient from ordering the medication (.) when people want to make it like independent you don't need to get assistance from people (.) so if you get to know it [Finnish language] (.) er well fluently enough the better for you (.) it will be you easier for you to get into the market (Daniel, the first round)

In Daniel's small story, the prerequisites for the nursing profession are listed on a general level: *everybody is supposed to do (.)er everything by themselves*. This may index that he does not position himself as a nurse yet. Daniel lists a few work tasks tht one should be able to perform and, at the same time, he ventriloquizes (Bakhtin 1981) the authoritative voice of independency. Moreover, the Finnish language can be viewed as a valuable tool when attempting to access the labor market: *if you get to know it [Finnish language] (.) er well fluently enough the better for you (.) it will be you easier for you to get into the market*. Similarly, the demand for sufficient Finnish language skills and independency are echoed by the vocational teachers and head nurses. This reiteration of voices points to the multivoicedness of narratives (see Vitanova, 2010, p. 30–31): the students may recycle these authoritative voices they hear while on the edge of the community.

#### 4.2.2 Exercising agency in given and taken positions

During his first practical training, it seems that Daniel was dependent on his mentor's assistance and the learning opportunities that she provided. The importance of having dialogue with the patients and the mentors when exercising and developing agency are evident in Daniel's narrative on mentoring practices:

(6)

so she would make sure that I do it (.) more often (.) and I learned so much (.) after I realized that if you are given that chance (.) to do something (.) you can do it and once she- she knew I didn't have good perfect Finnish skills but she would still send me to the patients and say (.) go to- (.) I had somehow already known some of the names (.) so she just tell me go to so and so (.) and check maybe the blood pressure (.) and I would go and of course I don't just go and just say- just take the hand I have to say something before I do that so I had to tell the patient I want to take (.) blood pressure (.) and they would understand (.) so I realized if I was to do that (.) often (.) it would stick ((a laugh)) and I would find myself just (.) being doing it naturally without (.) thinking so much (.) so I think as I said more practice and more opportunity given would encourage me to to learn it faster (Daniel, the first round)

The first practice seems to be a turning point for Daniel. It is evident in the narration that the mentor positioned Daniel as an active actor, and she therefore offered opportunities for him to exercise his agency: *she would make sure I do it (.) more often*. These opportunities have potentially made Daniel *realize* that he was able to perform the given tasks. These experiences of success indicate that Daniel's agency has developed through scaffolding. Also the opportunities to communicate with the patients were considered meaningful: *they would understand*. In Daniel's narration, the importance of repeating tasks such as taking blood pressure and of talking with the patients is emphasized: *I realized if I was to do that (.) often (.) it would stick*. This indexes that through accumulated subject positions, Daniel has progressed in appropriating the voice of others and making them his own (see Dufva & Aro, 2015). In Daniel's narrative, opportunities to repeat work tasks play an essential role in terms of learning professional language skills: *I would find myself just (.) being doing it naturally*. Here, repetition refers not to linguistic characteristics only (see e.g., Suni, 2008; Virtanen, ahead of print), but also to themes and phrases that repeat in specific contexts. This implies that Daniel has had the opportunity to be a legitimated peripheral participant on the edge of the group, observing and gradually gaining access to meaningful practices (see also excerpt [4]). This is a contradictory voice compared to the one that points to

language learning as an individual struggle. My presence, as a researcher and representative of a majority, may have had an effect on the positions taken by Daniel when narrating. However, the researcher cannot avoid influencing the small stories that are told, because they are constructed together in the present moment (see Georgakopoulou, 2013, p. 260).

In the following excerpt, Daniel compares his development of reporting strategies at the beginning and at the end of his first practical training period.

(7)

- Daniel: I used to hear one word the one word that I know (.) I try to relate what they say about (.) so if they say something like insulin (.) or diabetes
- Aija: yeah ((laughing))
- Daniel: then I hear I hear maybe it was how much (.) like (.) then I write that amount (.) and then I hear if there is supposed to give more (.) but when it came to something else and I hadn't that (.) so I just listened (.) but I did (.) until later on I could ask my mentor (.) did we did we say that meeting that we should do this (.) then she say yes this is okay (.) this is (.) but no this is not what we said (.) so she would correct me if I got the information wrongly (Daniel, the second round)

At first, Daniel seemed to perceive familiar keywords that helped him to recognize meaningful parts when reporting, such as *insulin* or *diabetes*. It is evident in the narration that Daniel has not learned words only but the use: a specific keyword is followed by *how much* in a report, for instance. Gaining more opportunities and repeated situations (see also excerpt [6]), indicates that Daniel started to perceive more affordances. It appears that he has learned to anticipate the most likely factors to follow in a specific context. After gaining more Finnish language skills, Daniel's ability to anticipate seemed to increase, and he seemed to start exercising gained agency more independently: in his narration Daniel says he wanted to make sure that he understood what was needed by summing up the discussion with his mentor: *did we say that meeting that we should do this*. The mentor provided access to linguistic resources by offering opportunities to participate and by modifying information. In this small story, Daniel's own activity is emphasized more than it was in the stage when Daniel needed his mentor to set him in an active position: *I could ask*. The mentor offered access to the knowledge embedded in the environment: *she would correct me*. Before that, he *just listened*. This indicates that a specific amount of professional language skills and anticipation were needed in order to know what to ask. In this narration about a past event, Daniel positions himself as an active doer, and this position may help him to exercise his agency more freely. Therefore, agency seems to develop in conjunction with professional language skills.

#### 4.2.3 Positions taken in the final practice

I met Daniel for the last time in May 2013 after he had finished his final practical training in a service home. Unlike voices emerging in head nurses' interviews, the hospital environment seems to be the best learning environment for Daniel: *I wanted to practice on my skills and (.) er this was the best opportunity for me*. This aligns with the teachers' perspectives which ventriloquize the voice that the workplace is seen as a learning environment. In the final practical training, Daniel says that he wanted to express directly to the mentor his will to work

independently. He seems to have gradually received more responsibilities, as described in the following excerpt.

(8)

- Aija: but can you say is there some specific moments when you felt like now I know how to do this ((a laugh))
- Daniel: yeah for me that's what I (.) in my final practice (.) the first thing I did was I told my mentor that I want to do things independently(.) [- -] so in every case she gave me a scenario to do (.) I did it and sh- I created that confidence (.) that I can do it also by myself (.) after the first week (.) she had really accepted that I can do most of the things by myself (.) so the only part that was left was for me to know (.) the patients' names (.) which I did also in the first week. so now she created a confidence that I would be told just go and take this go and do that go (.) and do the other (.) which I managed to do (.) and that is what I wanted to do (.) so after I finishing you know this practice I had (.) I had managed to say that I can really be a nurse (Daniel, the last round)

The voice of the demand for independency seems to be appropriated: *I want to do things independently*. This independency is accomplished by developing professional language proficiency. First, he had to gain trust: *I created that confidence*. In contrast to the beginning of the follow-up (see excerpt [5]), here he positions himself in an active role instead of merely reiterating others' expectations: *I want, I created, I managed, I wanted, I can*. The last practice seemed to offer an experience of success for Daniel: *I had managed to say that I can really be a nurse*. This points to accumulated agency, which Daniel shows by making his own choices and by gaining more power to put plans into practice within this specific environment. This is a major change that has occurred during the observed period.

At the beginning of the follow-up, Daniel was more dependent on the positions that mentors set for him (see excerpt 6). In contrast, at the end, he had started to take more initiative. However, his past experiences seem to affect the choices he makes. International professionals struggle when trying to find employment in their own field: *most of my friends (.) have er (.) they would like to do also (.) something else like surgery or homecare (.) but the demand of the language it requires that you do everything by yourself* (2013/5). Daniel points to his friends' experiences, aligning himself with them by pointing out the power structures they encounter as a group of international students (see de Fina, 2014, p. 50). This alignment indexes the multivoicedness of narratives, the shared stories that are told (Vitanova, 2010, p. 30–31). As shown in the head nurses' narratives (see e.g., excerpt [1]), the power relations are present when the demand for Finnish language and independency are reiterated: one should know the Finnish language before entering the labor market. However, as shown in excerpts (2) and (3), it seems that no sufficient scaffolding is provided during practical training because the international and local students are positioned differently (see also Mikkonen & et al., 2016). Daniel seems to resist this given position by underlining his own experience of success in his small stories by indicating that he has planned his path. He tells that if he had chosen to perform his final practice somewhere else he *would have not gotten the opportunity to get work as easily*. Daniel got a summer job in the place where he did his final practical training. The *can do* statements he filled in indicate that his language skills developed during the follow-up period, particularly his writing skills, which rose from level A2 to B1–B2. Despite having reached the intermediated level of Finnish proficiency and gained agency, Daniel sees the

Finnish language as a barrier hindering his opportunities to choose a field within nursing. Having discussed how Daniel has appropriated the voice of an independent nurse, the following section will focus on Sarah and her path.

### 4.3 Finding one's own voice: Sarah's story

#### 4.3.1 In between of school and "real life"

Sarah initially studied biology at a university first in the United Kingdom and then moved to Finland with her Finnish boyfriend and continued her studies in 2004. The follow-up began when Sarah was 29 years old. She says that after finishing her master's degree, she wanted to change careers and eventually started her nursing studies in 2010. She states that she had taken several Finnish language courses before the program started. At the beginning of the follow-up, Sarah's Finnish language proficiency was in between B1 and B2 according to her own self-evaluation. Sarah appears to be an active language user: she has been looking for opportunities to use Finnish, such as talking with her spouse's parents, having coffee with Finnish friends, and using Finnish in her hobbies.

For the first practical training that took place in a service home, Sarah says that she wanted to use Finnish as much as possible and ask in English, which is her mother tongue, only when in need of clarification. Surprisingly, Sarah's mentor was from Poland and knew no English, meaning Finnish was their common language. Sarah describes the mentoring practices as follows:

(9)

so we had to get by anyway (.) but she was she was really because she was enthusiastic and like I guess that she knew how difficult it was to be a nurse (.) a foreigner kind of thing (.) so (.) she was always kind of (.) taking me around and show me things and. like (.) wh-like saying like what is this in Finnish (.) you know (.) just kind of (.) she was really nice (Sarah, the first round)

Sarah aligns herself with the mentor *who knew how difficult it was* to be a foreign nurse. Sarah seemed to have an opportunity to negotiate her position and agency with someone who shared the perspective of being an international nurse. Here, she positions her mentor as someone who enables participation: *taking me around, show me things, saying what this is in Finnish*. The mentor seems to be the active doer who offered opportunities to practice work tasks and helped Sarah to improve her Finnish language skills, as Daniel's case showed as well. Oftentimes, the international students do not gain this access (see excerpts [2] and [3]). When I asked what kind of support Sarah received for practical training from the educational institution, she brought up the differences between the educational institution and the hospitals:

(10)

every different workplace has different (.) like like rules and how to do things (.) and every every nurse knows a different way of (.) like how to wash the patients or change the diaper then you do it the way you learn in school and they say like we don't do it like that (.) we do it like this and then (-) nurses the other way is okay (.) then the one says well (.) actually if you do it this way it's a lot easier (.) ((a laugh)) so it's kind of (.) it sometimes feel like the course is so different from (.) real life [- -] in a way (.) in a way it's nice because you can learn all the different ways and you can find your own way (Sarah, the first round)

The excerpt sheds light on the multivoicedness of the hospital environment in which one can appropriate one's own voice (see also Dufva & Aro, 2015, p. 40). Knowledge and language are embodied and embedded (see Atkinson, 2011, p. 143–144) into the ways of working, meaning that they are contextual: *every different workplace has different (.) like like rules*. In ecological terms, every workplace forms its own ecosystem in which one needs to find his or her niche by gaining access its (linguistic) resources (Sunni, forthcoming). Sarah seemed to have the opportunity to be a peripheral, legitimated participant and observe other nurses' ways of working and gradually appropriate her own way of performing her work. When she compares the ways in which nurses work at the hospital with the ways in which she was taught at school, she positions herself in between the school and the workplace. Sarah positions school as being separate from the *real life* that the hospital represents (see also Sandwall, 2013). Similarly, this gap emerges from teachers' and head nurses' narratives, as shown in the excerpts (1) and (2) above. However, it seems as if Sarah views the situation as an opportunity to negotiate with others in order to potentially find her own voice by appropriating the voice of others: *you can find your own way* (see also Dufva & Aro, 2015).

#### 4.3.2 Gaining access to resources

On the last interview round, Sarah said she had been on a practical training in Tanzania where she worked in a rather multilingual environment: paperwork and communication with doctors was in English whereas daily conversation and communication with the patients was mostly in Swahili. Even though she could work with the doctors in her mother tongue, the four-and-a-half week practice seems to have given her belief that she can get by in Finland: *I guess the good thing is at least I just (.) anything that happens is just ah it's gonna happen ((a laugh)) it's kind of maybe more laid-back* (2013/4). When working as a nurse in Tanzania, it seems, Sarah had the opportunity to exercise agency and it strengthened her sense of belonging and her position as a capable nurse in Finland.

After being in Tanzania, Sarah looked for a summer job in 2012 as a practical nurse. Due to her high number of ECTS credits, she found a job as a nurse in a service home. It could be that Sarah was given a position she was not prepared for: *I said I don't really know what that involves*. Nonetheless, for the recruiter, Sarah was a potential and capable employee. She completed one week of training and then she appeared to be on her own: *it's kind of like trying to trying to manage the language skills and manage your professional (.) things as well (.) (well like) quite stressful ((a laugh))*. Again, language skills and professional skills go hand in hand. In the next excerpt, Sarah describes the difficulties she had.

#### (11)

you have to deal with the families (.) and then like organize things and kind of there's just so many things to do (.) and then everyone expects you to know everything ((a laugh)) and I didn't (.) because I didn't know what I was supposed- I didn't know what I was supposed to do (Sarah, the last round)

Sarah was responsible for taking care of patients on two floors in a service home, but she did not know what was expected from her: *I didn't know what I was supposed to do*. It seems like she did not really receive support from her colleagues. Similarly, this expectation to know everything and the demand to work independently is

evident also in the interviews with head nurses (see excerpt [1]): international workers are expected to know the language and the skill before entering working life. In contrast to Daniel, Sarah has had a chance to work independently. Daniel had to convince the mentor during the practical training before he got a summer job whereas Sarah was given a position without question. In addition, her European appearance may have had an effect on attitudes and expectations. In terms of access to the labor market in Finland, migrants who are the furthest away linguistically and culturally are in the weakest position (Kyhä, 2012, p. 18). This indexes the power relations that may increase inequalities when attempting to access the labor market.

In the final excerpt, Sarah describes her practical training in an operating room in spring 2013. She used Finnish only with other workers, and she describes what her strategies were when she had difficulties in understanding.

(12)

- Aija: how you then solved these kind of (.) situations ((a laugh))  
 Sarah: I usually had to say what ((laughing))  
 Aija: mitä? [what] ((laughing)) (-)  
 Sarah: I ask them to speak louder (.) ((a laugh)) yeah (.) and then sometimes like the other nurse helped me like ohjaaja [the mentor] (.) she kinda said well she said tatadada (.) but then like in. when you get to know like what (.) information is likely to come you kinda know (.) what to expect (.) like if (.) like if (.) the patient has stitches and you know that the doctor's gonna say that stitches should be out in two weeks (.) and put this (.) (bandage) on or (.) the patient is going to the ward so and so (Sarah, the last round)

When Sarah did not hear what people were talking about, she asked for repetition. It appears that she started to perceive more affordances after receiving scaffolding provided by her mentor. Similarly, as was evident in Daniel's narrative (see excerpt [7]), through accumulated experiences, Sarah has learnt to anticipate what information is likely to come in this specific environment: *you kinda know (.) what to expect*. This indexes that knowledge is embedded in and extended to the physical surroundings as a resource and it may be perceived as affordance in some context (see Atkinson, 2011; Dufva & Aro, 2015; van Lier, 2004; Virtanen, ahead of print). Therefore, it seems, in contrast to the voices emerging from the head nurses' narration, adequate language skills cannot be acquired at school only. In opposition to the beginning of the follow-up, Sarah has gained adequate language skills for an instrumental nurse: *I guess the good the good feedback I got was like the the language is not the problem* (2013/4). According to her own self-evaluation, her language proficiency is B2. She says that she still has difficulties following discussions in meetings, for example, and when something unexpected happens. Nonetheless, Sarah has learned to anticipate context-specific language use through both given and taken subject positions.

## 5 Conclusions

Drawing on sociocognitive and ecological perspectives, this article focused on international students studying in an English-mediated degree program in nursing in Finland. The data from teachers and head nurses showed that international nursing students are expected to be independent and have sufficient professional Finnish language skills before entering the Finnish labor market.

These expectations can have an effect on whether the working community views a newcomer as a capable employee or not. Due to their insufficient Finnish language skills, international students may be positioned differently in comparison to their Finnish peers: they are given fewer responsibilities, and therefore, fewer opportunities to perform work tasks independently (see also Crawford & Candlin, 2013; Mikkonen et al., 2016). Accordingly, international students seem to be set in unequal positions in terms of accessing the labor market. This is also the lived experience of the international students. The longitudinal data from nursing students indicate, however, that after being positioned as active actors by their mentors, international students can be potentially able to exercise their agency and promote their professional language skills. From this position of a legitimated peripheral participant, the students may have an opportunity to appropriate their own voice gradually instead of recycling those of others only (see also Dufva & Aro, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The results further suggest that from the hospital's point of view, the responsibility for guaranteeing that students have sufficient professional Finnish language skills seems to lie with the educational institution. The educational institution, in turn, appears to view language learning as occurring mostly during practical training. Consequently, learning the language needed at work is regarded as an individual struggle (see also Virtanen, 2011). Nonetheless, interviews with the students show that agency and professional Finnish language skills are developed at work: they can be regarded as interconnected and reinforcing each other. The students may perceive and utilize more affordances (van Lier, 2004) in the hospital environment as their agency and professional language skills accumulate. Moreover, anticipation can be regarded as a form of exercising agency: scripts or models at hand can help to anticipate what is likely to occur next. Therefore, the students need more opportunities to practice work tasks that develop professional language skills in order to be able to anticipate situations. Agency can also be considered as linked to positioning in interactions. Accumulated subject positions and repeated work tasks potentially help the students to reach the stage in which they can position themselves as active actors and exercise their agency independently. These results show that positionings are tightly interconnected with the development of agency and professional language skills.

It should be noted that these findings cannot be extrapolated to all international nursing students: more systematic follow-ups related to the development of Finnish language proficiency would be crucial. Nonetheless, as this study has shown, there is a definite need to pay more attention to the ways in which developing professional language skills could be integrated into English-mediated programs. More cooperation would be needed between these institutions (see also Mikkonen et al., 2016). Staff members would benefit from tools for supporting the language development of international nurses, particularly ones that aid mixing languages and gradually increase the use of the local language.

The results align with the ongoing discussion on language learning at work (see also Strömmer, ahead of print; Suni, 2011). They also support the notion that agency is accumulated and socially constructed with the help of others in a dialogue (see also Dufva & Aro, 2015). Nevertheless, structures change slowly, and this article is one attempt to promote discussion. Narrative analysis (de Fina, 2013, 2014; Vitanova, 2005, 2010) helped explore the intertextuality of the stories told and identify the social processes emerging in them. In its sociocognitive and ecological framework, this study potentially offers a new perspective on the ways



in which agency is negotiated and professional language skills are developed in their actual context. These skills are highly embedded in the environment, they are contextual, and necessary at every stage of one's professional development: they cannot be fully appropriated before entering working life because learning develops at work only through hands-on practice.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Dialogical analysis of beliefs on media discussion (Virtanen, 2011), narrative analysis on motivation, identity, and agency (Virtanen, 2013), and a nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) on workplace literacies (Virtanen, ahead of print). The data is implemented as a part of the project, Finnish as a work language: a sociocognitive perspective to work-related language skills of immigrants (University of Jyväskylä, 2011–2013, Emil Aaltonen Foundation). Funding came from Finnish Cultural Foundation 2014–2015.

<sup>2</sup> It includes interviews with the students, teachers, and hospital staff, observations at a university of applied sciences and at the hospital during the practical training, as well as audio-recordings of mentoring practices.

<sup>3</sup> Modified from forms drawn up in a cooperation between Evaluation & Accreditation of Quality in Language Services (EAQUALS) and the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE). The *can do* statements are a part of the self-assessment section on European Language Portfolio (EAQUALS).

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Transcription

and	emphasis
(.)	pause
(-)	undecipherable talk
mi-	cut-off word

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