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5 **Bridging passion and profession:**
6 **Supporting agency and investment in**
7 **multilingual university writers**
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10 **Abstract:** Throughout the last two decades, scholarship discussing learner de-
11 velopment and autonomy has expanded from viewing the learner as one who
12 possesses intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to a performer who to varying degrees
13 invests as an agent in the learning process, particularly when able to pursue her
14 or his passions. With this expansion in mind, the authors sought to look back at
15 the trajectory of their experiences in a second language communication and com-
16 position course in order to more deeply understand the roles of agency and
17 investment in their own and fellow classmates' learning. As such, this research
18 examines the role of project-based learning activities that attempt to bridge the
19 learners' personal passions and professional interests. Seven student-researchers
20 reported via written narrative how such a bridging approach in the multilingual
21 writing environment supported learner investment and agency. Student responses
22 speak to the need for a stronger sense of connection among their disciplinary
23 studies, personal interests, and even instructors, and highlight the ways in which
24 investment and agency are associated with ideas about learner affect, learner
25 identity, learner autonomy and language acquisition.
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27 **Keywords:** project-based learning, passion-based learning, bridging approach,
28 agency, investment, multilingual learners, academic writing
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1 Introduction

“It seems that because I am the agent in what I am choosing and doing, I feel it more meaningful to invest in it. And investing in the process in this case seems to support the feeling that I’m in control in the process, which in this case means the feeling of agency. So it seems that the agency here implies investment, and that the investment increases the feeling of agency: when I feel I’m the agent, I feel I want to invest in the learning process more, and when I invest more, it intensifies my experience of agency.” Annika, psychology student, project co-author

Throughout the last two decades, scholarship discussing learner engagement and performance has developed from viewing the learner as one who possesses intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to a performer who to varying degrees *invests* in the learning process – one who interacts, gives and gains (Little 1991; McKay and Wong 1996; Norton Peirce 1995). More specifically, the field of language learner autonomy has grown to include conceptualizations of the interdependent, dynamic learner such as Little’s foundational work emphasizing “the learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning” (Little 1991: 4), and examining the significance of *learner agency* – where “the student contributes actively to shape [his or her] own learning” (Carpenter and Murphey 2007: 4; also see Little 1991).

With the proliferation of new technologies, sometimes referred to as “Learning 2.0” (Seely Brown and Adler 2008), that allow learners increasing access to information and opportunities to join virtual communities of practice, another take on the autonomous learner has been introduced, the *passion-based learner*. This concept synthesizes the above constructs – a learner is intrinsically motivated to invest in learning when becoming an agent who pursues a strong personal interest – and emphasizes an affective dimension (Robinson and Aronica 2009; Seely Brown 2006; Woessner 2012). Ito et al. (2013: 4) also advocate a similar approach, *connected learning*, emphasizing opportunity and a supportive environment: “learning that is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity. Connected learning is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement” (4). Thus, the field of learner development considers not only learners’ skills but also their attitudes, choices, contributions, and connections.

With the above expansion in mind, the authors sought to look back at the trajectory of their experiences in a second language communication and composition course that emphasized passion-based learning in order to more deeply understand the roles of agency and investment in their own and fellow class-

1 mates' learning. Key to these students' success was their sense of ownership of
2 the learning process. This ownership, as noted in the students' final reflective
3 letters for the course, was largely attributed to their freedom to focus on career-
4 related research projects, a pedagogical choice that the instructor thinks of as "a
5 bridging approach". As such, this research examines the role of project-based
6 learning activities that attempt to bridge the learners' personal passions and pro-
7 fessional interests and asked the student-researchers themselves to report via
8 written narrative how such a bridging approach in the multilingual writing envi-
9 ronment supports learner investment and agency. Students were asked, "In what
10 ways did our course offer you the opportunity to connect your personal passions
11 and professional goals? More importantly, what impact did this have on you as a
12 language learner/multilingual writer?"

13 The authors of the article are a course instructor and seven students. We
14 begin by discussing the two research constructs, investment and agency, and
15 then consider the needs of multilingual writers. We continue by introducing the
16 setting and methods of our research, including our classroom objectives and key
17 activities that helped learners to bridge their passions and professions. We then
18 proceed to the results and discussion section where we showcase the student
19 voices and their reflections on learning processes. We end with our conclusions
20 and suggestions for further research.

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23 **2 Investment, agency and language learning**

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25 As noted earlier, the focus of the current research is to examine how such a proj-
26 ect-based bridging approach to academic English skills supports both agency and
27 investment, constructs related to language learning that have helped to expand
28 discussion of what it means to be an autonomous learner. Norton Peirce explains
29 investment as follows:

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31 An investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own social iden-
32 tity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space. If learners invest in a
33 second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of
34 symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural cap-
35 ital. Learners will expect or hope to have a good return on that investment – a return that
36 will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. Furthermore, this return on invest-
37 ment must be seen as commensurate with the effort expended on learning the second lan-
38 guage. (1995: 10–11).

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39 Investment in language learning refers to one's commitment to invest one's re-
40 sources and time in the language learning process in order to meet the standards

one sets for one's own success. Likewise, agency refers to the learner's will and determination to achieve his or her own goals; the ability to take action in pursuing those goals. Agency in a language learner can be seen in both perseverance and initiative in the learning process (Carpenter and Murphey 2007; Greeno 2006; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011). Moreover, the term agent refers to a person engaged in the exercise of power in the sense of the ability to bring about effects and to (re)constitute the social world (Morita 2004). In the learning-teaching process, students act as agents when they can set their own goals and identify the means to achieve them; agency shows the student's engagement, participation and self-determination. These aspects lead to students contributing actively to shape their own learning thereby also enhancing their investment in the process (Ahearn 2001; Blair 2009; Carpenter and Murphey 2007; Flowerdew and Miller 2008).

In our experience as a community comprised of learners and their instructor, some of the benefits of clarifying the student-writers' agendas in our classrooms – agendas shaped by personal interest, goals for the future and chosen discipline – has been a stronger sense of investment in the learning process as well as the realization that the learners can play an active role in shaping their learning experiences.

3 The needs of multilingual writers

Leki (1995, 2007) examined the experiences of international students at North American universities and concluded that multilingual students who enroll in ESL and composition courses may find their learning largely irrelevant to their experiences of academic language and literacy in their disciplinary fields. On the basis of her investigation Leki offers a number of implications for teaching writing to multilingual learners which we present below. Although carried out in North America, Leki's research has far-reaching relevance; as the instructor in the present Finnish ESL study has been largely influenced by such research, we feel it important to provide concrete examples from her work that have influenced both his pedagogy and teaching philosophy outside the North American setting. For example, language and literacy researcher Harklau summarizes: “[Leki] suggests that L2 writing class instructors talk with students more about their *own agendas and priorities for learning* and use their classrooms as a place for students to discover and explore ethnographically the literacy demands that await them in coming years” (2008: 454– 455, italics added). This idea that L2 writing instructors might help students to understand the literacy demands of their future studies and professions would suggest that a writing in the disciplines or “WID” approach (see Carter 2007; Kennedy and Kennedy 2008) to L2 and multi-

1 lingual instruction may be beneficial, though naturally such an approach is
2 highly-dependent upon students' linguistic proficiencies and instructors' abili-
3 ties. Leki's earlier study (with Carson, 1994) of 33 students at two North American
4 universities identified five main areas where multilingual writing students could
5 be best supported by their instructors: 1) giving students a variety of writing
6 assignments aside from the standard essays; 2) helping students analyze a variety
7 of writing styles and genres; 3) aiding proficiency in language processing and
8 vocabulary retrieval via repeated acts of language processing; 4) considering the
9 intellectual (as well as linguistic) challenges posed by an instructor's activities;
10 and 5) strongly linking critical reading activities with critical writing activities. As
11 we explore in our methods and results sections below, all five of these recommen-
12 dations served as guides to the current study's instructor when designing his
13 Finnish ESL writing course.

14 More recently, and also foundational to our understanding of the continuing
15 development of ESL writing pedagogies, Canagarajah and Jerskey (2009) discuss
16 shifting perspectives in the discipline of second language writing. They urge
17 instructors working with multilingual writers to consider literacy traditions from
18 non-western backgrounds in re-developing their pedagogical practices as a
19 means of understanding their students' textual and rhetorical traditions and
20 knowledge bases, and recommend a list of paradigm shifts in the field of com-
21 position instruction such as a re-focus from writers' deficiencies and errors to
22 choices and options; from rules/conventions to strategies; and from a focus on
23 text construction to a focus on rhetorical negotiation. While such recommenda-
24 tions are explored in terms of their benefits and purposes, writing instructors may
25 be at a loss as to how exactly to implement such changes: What do such shifts
26 look like in the daily activities of a writing classroom? What is required of in-
27 structors themselves – their beliefs, practices, abilities – in order to enact such
28 changes? How does an instructor integrate new technologies and encourage
29 passionate exploration? And perhaps most importantly, what do such shifts
30 mean for student writers? We believe that the current examination of our own
31 Finnish ESL writing classroom can address such challenges.

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34 **4 The essential aspects of the course**

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37 **4.1 The learning context**

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39 The context for the present research is a mandatory combined academic English
40 skills course taught during one semester to Bachelor's and Master's level students

in social sciences at a Finnish university. The course lasted 8 weeks and included 38 contact hours. The class met twice a week, 4 hours for the first and 2 hours for the second session. It should be noted that students are grouped by specific disciplines such that students from psychology take one section of the course while students from philosophy take another, further reinforcing the WID paradigm. Students are expected to choose a topic for a semester-long project (see section 4.2 below) that culminates in a written text that highlights critical reading and communication skills, and both individual and collaborative oral presentations, while also introducing students to various online platforms for researching, recording and sharing their work. Following Leki's suggestions, academic skills are then practiced throughout as students read, write, speak, listen and present to audiences of their disciplinary peers. Throughout the course, students practice writing a variety of genres including reflections on their learning for their instructor, critical commentary for peers, and documents relevant to the presentation of their work. Students read a variety of texts including pragmatic manuscripts addressing writing anxiety and rituals, developing presentation skills and formatting writing, in addition to content-related texts such as journals and anthologies. Likewise, students continuously build language and communication skills through repeated discussion of their research and reflect on how such activities address their personal learning goals. The official course description and learning outcomes are as shown in Figure 1.

Description: This course is designed to develop academic reading, communication and presentation skills for academic and professional contexts relating to your own field and future profession. Effective strategies for critical reading and research reporting are also included.

Outcomes: By the end of the course you can select and apply strategies in different reading, speaking and listening situations, distinguishing between formal and informal situations in academic and workplace contexts; work purposefully in groups, negotiating and building on the contributions of others to complete tasks; present information clearly and persuasively to others; locate and retrieve information in your field from a variety of resources (e.g. library catalogues, databases, Internet); identify the purposes of texts, analysing and evaluating how writers structure and organise ideas to shape meaning for particular audiences and readers; compare and summarise information from different texts and use it to form your own ideas, arguments and opinions; use dictionaries and online tools critically for developing your vocabulary and field-specific vocabulary; be aware of different cultural norms and communication styles that may lead to misunderstanding or conflict.

Fig. 1: Course description and outcomes as posted on the university website

Additionally, for all but two of the student-researchers, peer course assistants were present in the classroom. These course assistants were students who had been successful in previous sections of the course and returned in a later section to serve as mentors, to provide models of successful participation and to offer

1 support in the learners' native language (Harrison, Ahtikari, Uusipaikka, Myllys
2 and Rytkönen 2012). Course assistants' learning blogs – which included papers,
3 presentations, reflections, etc – were available to all students at all times and
4 learners were required to consult with the assistants at least twice during the
5 course.

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8 4.2 Connecting learning: The bridging activity

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10 The combined skills course presents an opportunity for students to begin to
11 consider their disciplinary interests and to develop a professional identity as a
12 scholar. In order to scaffold this process, the course instructor employs an activity
13 in the first week of the course whereby students use mind maps to express their
14 personal interests on one side of a sheet of paper and professional interests on
15 the other. The challenge is to combine, or *bridge*, ideas from both sides of the
16 paper into a research question that can be used as the course project's topic. For
17 example, on one side of the paper a student begins by writing his or her name and
18 listing personal interests, hobbies, values, activities, etc. and continues by giving
19 more detailed information about any of these ideas (Figure 2). A similar process is
20 undertaken on the opposite side of the paper but this time beginning with the
21 student's discipline and disciplinary interests (Figure 3). Students complete the
22 activity by formulating possible research questions. Using these examples, “sing-
23 ing in chorus” and “friends” or perhaps “yoga” and “group therapy” might
24 prompt the questions “In what ways do Finnish youth use social music groups
25 such as a chorus to develop new friendships?” or “How can yoga be used in group
26 therapy settings?” Whatever the questions, the focus is on bridging the students'
27 passions and professions to scaffold project topic choice.

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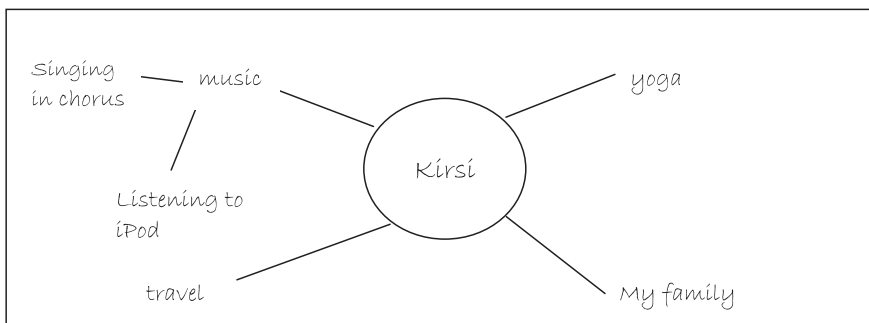
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40 Fig. 2: Example of the “personal interests” side of the mind map

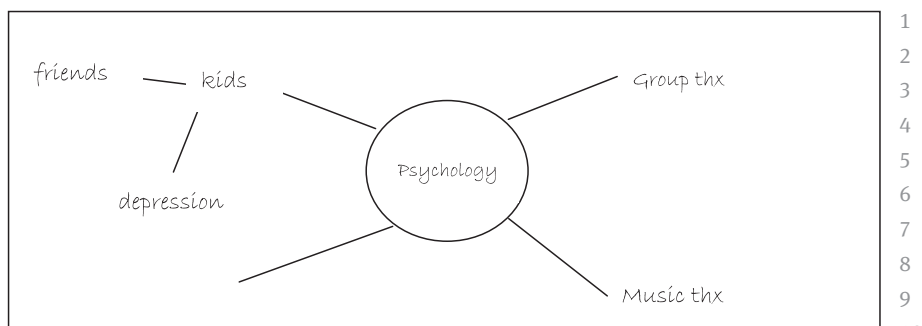


Fig. 3: Example of the “professional interests” side of the mind map

4.3 Project-based learning

Having chosen a topic, students then pursue projects in the form of original research or secondary research, dependent on the number of credits they opt for in the course. Required activities include oral presentations on their works-in-progress and final presentations in the form of collaborative panels. Students also maintain personal blogs where written assignments can be shared and commented upon, and participate in a variety of in-class discussion, presentation and writing activities. This process offers opportunities along the way for learning about critical reading strategies, informal and formal language use, blog writing, peer review and feedback, etc. Such a project-based approach in the multilingual or second language classroom has garnered much discussion throughout the last decade. Mills summarizes:

Project-based learning (PBL) in the foreign language classroom is defined as a practice “in which students are socialized through a series of individual or group activities that involve the simultaneous learning of language, content, and skills” (Slater, Beckett, & Aufderhaar, 2006). Through the completion of a series of authentic tasks, PBL collectively engages language students in the development of an end product (Stoller, 2006). PBL practitioners suggest that meaningful language use and purposeful communication are fostered through the attainment of this end product (Levy, 1997; Slater et al., 2006). (2009: 607)

Therefore daily and weekly activities and assignments aid the larger goal of a completed product with language learning taking a back seat in the overall research process. In this way, language learning itself becomes a by-product of the course project, offering students the opportunity to obtain vocabulary, content knowledge and communication skills relevant to both their disciplinary and personal interests.

5 Methods

5.1 Participants

Seven students from a university in central Finland currently working towards their Bachelor's or Master's degrees completed written narratives (see Appendix for writing prompts) reflecting on an 8-week intensive, combined academic English skills course delivered by the university's Language Centre. These students also presented their course-related research projects as posters at an international applied linguistics conference held at their university just a few months after course completion. This article was written collaboratively by all seven students and the instructor. For six of the students, Finnish is their native language, and the seventh, Diana, is a native speaker of Spanish. The instructor is a North American English speaker who also uses Spanish and Japanese and has been exposed to basic Finnish. All responses were reported in English. See Table 1 below for a description of the students and instructor.

Table 1: Participants and their roles

Name	Role	Department	Wrote narrative	Self-analysis	Peer-analysis
Marlen	Instructor	Language Centre	No	No	No
Maiju	Bachelor's student	Psychology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Annika	Bachelor's student	Psychology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Diana	Master's Student	Ethnology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reetta	Bachelor's student	Psychology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tanja	Bachelor's student	Psychology and Ethnology	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hanna	Bachelor's student	Philosophy	Yes	No	No
Otto	Bachelor's student	Philosophy	Yes	No	No

5.2 Setting

It should be noted that the participants were all high-proficiency users of English and all participants are multilingual to varying degrees in other languages. The course was a requirement for graduation and as such, not an elective, and one of only two required foreign language classes throughout the entirety of the students' academic experience. In Finland, students enroll in university with the

understanding that they have been accepted to complete both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in their field.

From a linguistic perspective, Finland is a country where English is widely read, heard and spoken. The two main gate-keeping requirements of the university are written theses: the Bachelor's thesis is usually written in Finnish or the target language being studied; the Master's thesis can be written in English in some departments; and many students who go on to write a doctoral thesis do so in English. Additional written defenses are also required by many departments. Students have reported that many of the secondary sources they use are written in English; as one student wrote, "English is the language of science". In short, students are expected to successfully complete two major written research projects in order to complete their education, often using English-language resources and sometimes writing in English.

5.3 Data collection and analysis

As Holmsten notes, "we accept and honor storytelling as a valid representation of our classrooms and our lived experiences there . . . [and] establish our communities by sharing stories" (1999: 41). Using analytical autoethnography (Anderson 2006) guided by a feminist communitarian ethical approach to research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), the student-researchers were asked to spend approximately one hour composing a story in response to the question, "In what ways did our course offer you the opportunity to connect your personal interests (passions) and professional goals? More importantly, what impact did this have on you as a language learner/multilingual writer?" The participant-researchers used a group blog to post all results/analyses and all identities were transparent. For this reason we do not use pseudonyms to refer to the participants.

Upon completion of the initial narrative, students were then asked to a) establish working definitions of agency and investment, b) use these definitions to thematically analyze their own responses in order to identify examples of agency and investment, and c) thematically analyze peers' responses in order to gain additional insight (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data analysis is largely phenomenological and inspired by Denzin's (1969) discussion of the methodological assumptions of symbolic interactionism as necessitating "a two-step process for any study; meanings at both the individual and interactional levels must be examined" (p. 926). Although this peer review process, Denzin's "second step", was helpful to our current study, it lies beyond the scope of the present article and will be explored elsewhere. Because of the impossibility of adopting an emic student perspective, the instructor did not participate in the first two rounds of data re-

1 flexion but did assist in writing the results and discussion section, continuing the
2 use of thematic analysis to summarize participants' own analyses. The students
3 and instructor interactively performed member-checking and peer-debriefing in
4 order to provide greater reliability of analysis and categorization.

6 Results and discussion

9 Due to the length of the narratives and thoroughness of the analyses, we present
10 representative excerpts from the written data as results categorized by five main
11 themes that emerged during the analysis process: 1) absence of agency and invest-
12 ment at the start of the course; 2) power, freedom, opportunities and choices;
13 3) supportive environment; 4) identity development; 5) language learning as by-
14 product. Narratives were written by seven student-researchers and self-analyzed
15 by five student-researchers. These same five also analyzed their peers' responses
16 in order to achieve greater insight and a social perspective on the data. Excerpts
17 from each of the seven writers' self-analyses are presented below and key con-
18 cepts from the student-researchers' writing are highlighted and discussed in rela-
19 tion to agency and investment. Prompts and instructions for the writing may be
20 found in Appendix A while Table 2 summarizes participants' definitions of invest-
21 ment (Norton Peirce 1995) and agency (Ahearn 2001; Carpenter and Murphey
22 2007; Flowerdrew and Miller 2008; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011) and main
23 themes emerging from the data.

27 6.1 Absence of agency and investment at the start of the 28 course

30 All seven writers noted a lack of agency and motivation at the start of the course,
31 mostly through low expectations of what a compulsory English course looks like.
32 For example, Diana writes:

34 "I found my previous English courses not very demanding; the reason for this is that, usu-
35 ally, in those courses students are required to a) participate (very easy for me as a Latin-
36 American, I can talk and talk and keep talking), b) do some exercises in class, which is
37 nothing new, exactly like in my secondary school, and c) give a presentation which is free
38 style, nothing complicated. So I came to the Academic Writing, Reading and Communica-
39 tion course with the intention of getting some easy credits, without any effort, without
40 learning anything new and, of course, with the concept that studying English is a static
thing (studying English at university does not go anywhere)."

Table 2: Summary of responses with excerpts from student-researcher data

	Main themes	Definitions (see sources below)	Agency and investment	
Annika	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Freedom and choices – Access to opportunities assumed unavailable – Academic/Professional identity development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Investment: 1 – Agency: 1, 4 	<p>“Agency and investment in my story are firmly linked to my feeling of doing something important to me, and something important to my future. . . . It seems that because I am the agent in what I am choosing and doing, I feel it more meaningful to invest in it.”</p>	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
Diana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Connection with core subject studies – Increased confidence in self-expression – Self-directed learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Investment: 1 – Agency: 2, 3 	<p>“I was no longer a merely receptive student but an active one, choosing the topic I needed to research and getting guidance on my topic from my teacher in English; these aspects increased my motivation as I felt that I was learning relevant things about my field, I started shaping my knowledge in a field that I am very passionate about.”</p>	12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21
Hanna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increased confidence and language fluency – Established field-specific focus – Validated academic identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Investment: 1 – Agency: 2 	<p>“I actually felt good and able for the first time in the university. And it didn’t stop there: shortly after the course I continued my research and wrote my bachelor’s thesis on the same subject with excellent grades. I also attended a poster session with my research from the course. I’ve found my academic self and improved my language skills on the side too.”</p>	22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
Maiju	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Choice of how to participate and topic – Ownership of learning process – Validated academic identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Investment: 1 – Agency: 1 	<p>“According to my story the increased agency in the course had an impact on my agency more generally in my life, also. I feel that I can control the things I want to do and that my opinion and views count – both as a student, a person and a researcher. . . . To sum up, the course gave me the experience of being a valid actor on the scientific and academic field.”</p>	32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40

1 **Table 2** (cont.)

	Main themes	Definitions (see sources below)	Agency and investment
2			
3			
4			
5	Otto	– Learned to	“[It was] the first time I’ve combined my expertise in my fields of interest and academic communication in English (as it happens, it was also the first time I got to do primary research). Having written a neig-publishable research paper built up my confidence as a writer and a scholar, as well as increased my feeling of control over my professional career. Through writing I also attained stronger self-awareness and identity.”
6	– communicate in own	– Investment: 1	
7	field	– Agency: 4	
8	– Increased expertise in		
9	field		
10	– Feeling of control in		
11	career, self-awareness		
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18	Reetta	– Connecting various	“Because of bridging approach, investment and agency both grew. It started when I decided my research topic. When personal issue was connected to learning academic English, I started to invest on it. . . . Because [my] study became so close to me in different areas in life, investment was important. I started to be an agent of my own learning instead of a receiver.”
19	identities	– Investment: 1	
20	– Supportive atmosphere	– Agency: 1, 2	
21	increased motivation		
22	– Language learning as		
23	byproduct		
24			
25			
26			
27			
28	Tanja	– Combine two different	“I did the most work that I’ve ever done for a course but I was happy to do it. I got so invested in the project that I didn’t mind the work. My interest in further improving my English skills is now motivated by the desire to communicate well with fellow academics. And that’s because I want to present my ideas properly, not because of being scared to look silly or stupid when speaking English.”
29	fields in one course	– Investment: 1	
30	– Increased motivation	– Agency: 1, 2	
31	and confidence to		
32	participate in field		
33	– Built professional		
34	identity		
35			
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It is a disappointing commentary on the general English language learning context that none of these writers expected to either enjoy the course or get that much out of it. Reetta describes her lack of interest and agency:

“In my case agency was zero at first. I had signed up to the course because it was compulsory, not because I wanted to improve my English. The lack of agency comes out well in comments where I tell, I wasn’t aware of the tasks or exams required in that course. I took very passive role, even before the first lesson: ‘It was a compulsory course, so I haven’t checked out what this course included and I wasn’t aware what we are supposed to achieve.’ Because of bridging approach, investment and agency both grew. It started when I decided my research topic. . . . I started to be an agent of my own learning instead of a receiver.”

Other writers report being “fearful”, “not wanting to take the course”, having “false expectations”, having “little or no motivation”, or the expectation that the “obligatory English class would be the easiest one”. When learners approach the classroom with such low expectations of engagement and ownership, both agency and investment may be missing from the overall learning process.

6.2 Power, freedom, opportunities and choices

For a number of the writers, the bridging activity initiated the process of adopting an identity as an agent and investing emotional and psychological energies in the course, as Reetta noted above. Annika, who at first noted little investment in her English studies, explains how her freedom to direct her own learning had an impact on both her identity as an agent and her level of investment:

“However, it seems that both my agency and investment in the course increase later on when I grasp what the course is really about. The thought of doing research in the course, on a topic freely chosen, makes me interested in the course, since it makes me realize that I have pretty much power to decide on what I will be focusing on during the course. . . . [The instructor’s] way to emphasize that I can do whatever I want and find interesting, and succeed in it, seems to affect my feeling of agency, which affects my investment in the process. And it is not only the thing that I could do research on whatever I wish, but also that because of the course I was exposed to a much wider range of opportunities, that made me excited of the course. My agency really seems to increase when I understand, that I can do stuff I didn’t think I could be doing.”

Maiju also emphasizes the power of choice in her level of investment and decision to take on a larger workload than she initially anticipated:

“Two things contributed the most to my agency and investment. Firstly, I was able to choose whether I wanted to take the essay or research option. This made me in control of my own learning and when facing difficulties, I could do a conscious and controlled decision to

1 continue. Secondly, the fact that I was able to choose my own theme, my passion, had an
2 impact on my investment and agency. Because I felt that the learning was related to my field
3 of study and was thus meaningful for me, my investment grew. Through the feeling of the
4 expertise in my subject the agency increased. These two factors then created a positive
5 chain of events in my learning, which made me confront the challenges instead of bailing
6 from them.”

7 This “positive chain of events” as Maiju describes it is mentioned in some manner
8 in all of the seven writers’ responses and ultimately reflects the relationship be-
9 tween choice, power and ideas about agency and investment.
10

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13 **6.3 Supportive environment and modeling**

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15 Another factor that aided investment and agency was the environment of the
16 learning context. Maiju, who noted little initial interest in the course – “I wanted
17 to get through the obligatory English course with ‘as little effort as possible’” –
18 also explains that

19

20 “. . . in the context of the classroom my agency and investment, however, started to increase.
21 I describe the atmosphere in the course as motivating and state that this could be due to the
22 open and active communication with the teacher and the classmates. This “motivateness”
23 could actually be me feeling more agency in the course, when able to participate in this
24 interaction.”

24

25

26 For Maiju, feelings of being connected to her classmates via course blogs and in-
27 class discussions, as well as the constant support from her instructor, are associ-
28 ated with an increase in both feeling like an agent in her own learning and her
29 desire to invest effort in the process. Reetta continues this idea by writing:

30

31 “I have never studied like this and I think this is quite unique. After the course I have won-
32 dered why in usual classes student role is so passive. Probably because being active student
33 requires motivation. I think now that teachers most important job in academic world is to
34 help students find their motivation. [My instructor’s] role was important; he created a moti-
35 vating atmosphere and he supported you to give your best. Overall, I feel that this method
is the best way of learning.”

35

36 This idea that the instructor can motivate the learner to play a more active role
37 in his or her learning process is also echoed by Tanja: “Any doubts I still had
38 whether or not I’d like to do the research were gone after the individual meeting
39 with our teacher. He was so genuinely interested in my topic that I finally let my-
40 self to get really excited as well.”

But the students themselves can also play a large role in increasing learner motivation. In the context of the classroom in question, students who have previously completed the same course are invited to mentor their peers by working as course assistants in future classrooms. Tanja also reports that the presence of such a peer had a significant effect on her level of investment in the course:

“When asked whether I would do the easier essay option or the research paper I was certain that I would do the easier option. My mind was changed during the first lesson. It was the open and enthusiastic talk of the teacher that made me think that this could be fun. Hearing the presentation of a student who had done the research project gave me an idea of what it was going to be like. I thought that if she could do it and be happy to have done it, I could do it too.”

The presence of both a successful peer who illustrates agency and investment at the start of the learning process, and an instructor who expresses excitement and enjoyment in the learners’ ideas can have a profound impact on the way learners view their opportunities and possibilities.

6.4 Identity development

As noted earlier, agency means feeling like an agent in one’s own learning. It could be noted that “agent” is an identity that is constructed in the learning process, and as the writers note, it was just one of many. In fact, the word “identity” shows up 28 times in the data. For example, Reetta writes:

“During the course I did things that I’d never done before. I read academic journals, did one presentation in English by myself and other one in a small group, used the APA style, did a peer-review etc. All that built my professional identity and increased my self-confidence. I think these experiences will be very helpful in the future when I start to do bachelor’s and master’s thesis.”

This construction, “professional identity”, is also noted in all of the six other writers’ responses, sometimes in terms of an “academic identity” and other times in terms of a “researcher identity”. While some of the writers, like Reetta, Annika, Diana, Maiju and Otto, actually use the word “identity”, others use synonyms like “actor”, “expert” and “professional” or hint at a new and different part of themselves as members of their academic communities. Otto writes:

“It should also be noted that doing primary research increased my expertise on my field – philosophy, religion and education – and also greatly added to my motivation as an academic. Having written a neigh-publishable research paper built up my confidence as a writer and a scholar, as well as increased my feeling of control over my professional career. Through writing I also attained stronger self-awareness and identity.”

1 It seems that the ability to participate in university studies as an individual who
2 is thought to be able to identify, develop and present his or her own ideas also
3 increased the writers' confidence to see themselves not just as agents, but agents
4 in relation to their disciplines. They went from seeing themselves as "students"
5 to an expanded perspective that validated their ideas of themselves as profes-
6 sionals, researchers and participants in their disciplines.

7

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9 **6.5 Language as by-product**

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11 All seven writers mention their surprise at how their English language acquisi-
12 tion, improvement, confidence and repertoire increased throughout the project.
13 Moreover, these writers noted their additional surprise that they actually forgot
14 they were studying English because the focus was on the project, not the language.
15 For example, Reetta explains, "I was pregnant during the course, so I decided to
16 do an auto-ethnography about identity transformation and pregnancy. This kind
17 of approach was brilliant, because my personal and professional interests were
18 combined. I got so excited about my own project that I didn't realize I was study-
19 ing English." Otto writes: "In a way, studying the English language came on the
20 side and I didn't pay much attention to it. Instead, I mostly spent my time on per-
21 fecting my research. In the end I noticed I had improved my English significantly,
22 and what's best, I learned to communicate in my own field." Hanna offers similar
23 commentary:

24

25 "Before taking the class, I thought that I was going to a traditional English course with
26 classes in reading, writing, grammar and oral communication – just like the ones I've took
27 before for years. But somehow, as I actually entered the classroom, I wasn't in an English
28 class. I was in an academic writing class, which just happened to be in English. I never
29 considered [the] course as an English course. The language learning itself just sort of hap-
30 pened as an extra particle – alongside with the whole learning to write an academic paper.
31 I did improve my English, a lot actually. My language skills, especially spoken, became
32 more and more fluent and most of all I actually wrote an academic paper in English."

32

33 Tanja's appraisal of her language acquisition and increased confidence reinforces
34 Hanna, Reetta and Otto's reports:

35

36 "This course showed me that improving my English skills doesn't have to be boring or dif-
37 ficult. I'm amazed at how much my skills and most importantly my confidence in my skills
38 improved during this course. And it all happened without me even noticing. I did the most
39 work that I've ever done for a course but I was happy to do it. I got so invested in the project
40 that I didn't mind the work. This kind of project based learning is the most effective I think.
Our class consisted of people whose English skills were high already and I think that a

traditional kind of language course would have had little to offer us. . . . My interest in further improving my English skills is now motivated by the desire to communicate well with fellow academics. And that's because I want to present my ideas properly, not because of being scared to look silly or stupid when speaking English."

All seven writers reported noticing significant increases in their linguistic abilities, awareness of "areas that need additional improvement", "comfort using English", "confidence in my English skills" and "desire to make more ability and get better" in English.

7 Conclusions

"Before the course, I was facing crossroads: I wasn't sure at all about my major and thought about switching my study program or even drop out. According to SVT, in Finland, 6.2% of University Students drop out annually. The percentage has been pretty much the same for a while. In other sectors, like upper secondary, vocational school and colleges of applied sciences, the drop-out rate is getting lower every year. For the past two years in Jyväskylä, the numbers have been even higher: in 2006–2007, 8.2% dropped out from the university entirely and 7.1% dropped out from their study programs. I was about to be one of those statistics, but the course helped me realize that I was actually in the right track and I could form my academic self even closer to my personal interests and identity. A course like this could help students and universities to prevent drop-outs by creating academic self-esteem and feeling of agency, as it did for me." Hanna, philosophy student, project co-author

This excerpt from Hanna's response to the present research question serves to underscore the need for greater connection among students' personal and professional selves, a connection that can lead to greater motivation for university-level studies. Flowerdew and Miller write, "In order to tilt the balance in favor of agency over structure and to encourage more 'investment' on the part of learners, more attention needs to be given to creating opportunities for 'creative discursive agency' in and outside the classroom" (2008: 201). In this project we sought to examine the function of a project-based bridging approach to English language and communication studies in a multilingual, ESL, university writing classroom in Finland. More specifically, considering contemporary paradigms of learner autonomy, we were interested to discover how such an approach to learning supported both investment and agency by capitalizing on learners' passions. By providing opportunities for extensive reading, writing and presentation about a topic related to both their personal and their professional interests, students were able to practice "creative discursive agency", or

1 ... how individuals are able to initiate or take advantage of opportunities for the creative
2 development of their discursive practices. Following on from Bourdieu's notion of subjective
3 action and objective conditioning (cited in Livingstone and Sawchuck, 2000), Collins
4 argues that subjects are cast in a reactive role, unable to initiate positive action because of
5 the power of social structure: class condition, capital composition, habitus, and so forth.
6 Creative discursive agency is a notion which allows for individual agency as a counter-
7 balance to the weight of social structure. (Flowerdew and Miller 2008: 204–205)

8 Students were asked, “In what ways did our course offer you the opportunity to
9 connect your personal passions and professional goals? More importantly, what
10 impact did this have on you as a language learner/multilingual writer?” In our
11 data analysis, we examined multilingual writers' stories about a specific *passion-*
12 *based* learning experience in order to better understand how learners become
13 agents who actively direct and invest in their learning. We conclude that the two
14 key concepts – investment and agency – are also associated with perceptions of a
15 burgeoning professional identity; perceptions of power in the classroom; the abil-
16 ity to make choices as learners; consistent and experienced support; and for the
17 ESL student-participants in this study particularly, accepting gains in the target
18 language as a by-product of academic, discipline-based inquiry.

21 7.1 Limitations

23 As all seven of the project's student-participants were successful in their academic
24 skills course and later expressed an interest in presenting their research at an
25 international conference, they may not be representative of all the instructor's
26 students, and for that reason it is difficult to generalize these results to the wider
27 population of students at our university. Likewise, as all data was written in
28 retrospect and in anticipation of publication, it is possible that the learning expe-
29 rience has been idealized. Finally, in order to develop a broader view of such
30 teaching approaches as the one presented here, it would also be useful to under-
31 stand how or for whom such an approach is not successful.

34 7.2 Humanizing pedagogy, connected learning and 35 recommendations

37 The classroom in question is a design that is based on over ten years of teaching
38 in three different international contexts – Japan, USA and Finland – and three
39 different learning contexts – EFL with beginner and intermediate learners, col-
40 lege and research writing in the North American context, and ESL for advanced

multilinguals. As noted earlier, the ability to pursue a curriculum that is project-based, inspired by the learners' own interests, and that incorporates research as the main learning objective is also tied to both the curricular environment and the instructors' ideas about *passion-based* or *connected learning*. We feel that the success of such approaches in university-level ESL writing classes is highly dependent on the proficiency levels of the learners and perhaps more importantly, the abilities and interests of the instructor. Essentially, the classroom described in the current study employs a humanizing pedagogy, one in which the learner is as significant as the instructor or the subject:

What Elbow [1994] is arguing for amounts to a student-centered humanizing pedagogy, one in which the teacher relinquishes authority to the students, allowing them to craft their own way. His hope (and others who embrace this paradigm) is that students will continue the tradition as they find themselves in positions of power outside the university. These humanized classrooms typically view the student as the *real* subject, while the course material functions as a means to that end. In effect, these courses do not only study "English" or "Writing," but add a new element, the "Self." When teachers focus on the identity, experiences, and valuable contributions of students, they often find avenues for learning that typical instruction does not allow. (Messekher, Reilly and Harrison 2010: 111, italics in original)

Future research can offer multiple perspectives on classrooms where the instructors are in a humanizing transition, re-thinking their curricular designs and placing students at the center not only in language education, but in other learning environments as well. We advocate participatory research designs where multiple voices can be considered. With regard to language learning specifically, additional longitudinal research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of how a learning paradigm such as the bridging approach presented here serves the students themselves, especially when the classroom in question is largely an isolated experience in the overall university experience.

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Appendix: Prompt and instructions

Time: This should take approximately one hour of your time and you will have the opportunity to revise your writing after Marlen reviews it. When you are ready

1 to share, please post it to this blog as a “blog post” and title it “[Your name]’s
2 story”, e.g. “Marlen’s story”.

3

4 **Due:** Please have your first draft posted by July 7th.

5

6 **Activity:** Consider our course, your progress as English writers and researchers,
7 and your current level of confidence/understanding of your abilities (for exam-
8 ple, as reflected in your willingness to participate in the New Dynamics Con-
9 ference). This paper will concern itself with the idea that by building a bridge
10 between passion and profession, college-level multilingual writers may sense a
11 heightened level of investment in academic work.

12 Bonnie Norton describes investment as “the complex relationship of lan-
13 guage learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to
14 speak [or use] it. The notion of investment conceives of the language learner, not
15 as ahistorical and unidimensional, but as having a complex social history and
16 multiple desires” (1995, Abstract).

17 Investment is often discussed (see McKay and Wong on our sources page)
18 along with the concept of agency. My friend Chris writes, “Agency is about the
19 degree to which one makes choices that impact oneself and the world. We can
20 see, talk about and measure the results of those choices out here in the world.
21 Whether or not we make these choices has to do with whether or not we believe
22 we have some efficacy to impact the subject of these choices. Questions like, do
23 you believe that you can change this situation by taking this action, reveal a lot
24 about the amount of agency an individual has” (2011, personal correspondence).

25 In English, compose a short story or response to the following question: In
26 what ways did our course offer you the opportunity to connect your personal
27 interests (passions) and professional goals? More importantly, what impact did
28 this have on you as a language learner/multilingual writer?

29 The following may be useful ideas to help you get started. You are not re-
30 quired to answer all of them nor are you limited to only these questions; they are
31 only starting points.

- 32 – What were your goals when you first started? Expectations? Fears?
- 33 – What did you gain from the experiences as multilingual writers and
34 communicators?
- 35 – Describe your learning process in our course, specifically
- 36 – How do you feel your passions (personal interests, identities) were bridged
37 with your professional interests/identities/goals, if at all?
- 38 – How would you describe Marlen’s teaching philosophy and practices, and
39 how does it relate to current research in multilingual learner/writing
40 education?

- What contributed to your success in our course? *(How do you define success?) 1
- Regarding multilingual learners, what do you think about this content-integrated/project-based approach? 3
- How has this course influenced the ways you look at your other learning experiences? 5

Analyses

Step 1: Please go re-read your response and make any edits you feel appropriate no later than Friday July 15th. (Re-read the writing prompt and ask yourself, “Have I clearly responded to the research question/prompt?”) Approx. 15 minutes.

Step 2: The next step, after July 15th, is to analyze the data

1) I would like each of you to establish working definitions of a) language learner agency and b) language learner investment. In the same post as your own narrative, after your story, define these two concepts as you understand them in just a brief sentence or two. You can develop your own short definitions or use definitions from relevant literature (see our sources page or browse the blog’s other pages; make sure to cite your work if necessary). Approx. 15 minutes.

2) Look at your story: In what ways do you discuss investment and agency in your writing, either directly or indirectly? How do the words you used, the examples you provided, etc. illustrate investment and/or agency? In other words, how does your writing reflect how a bridging approach supports learner investment and agency? Approx. 45 minutes.

Please complete this by July 22nd. If you cannot analyze your own writing, that is fine. Please let me know. In terms of authorship, those who do the most amount of work will be listed first.

Step 3: The final step

1) I would like each of you to read someone else’s work and to repeat steps 1 and 2 above for a partner’s story. Your responses can be posted on the story’s page, just underneath your partner’s self-analysis. First, provide your definitions for investment and agency again. Next, describe how your fellow writer discusses agency and investment, as above. Approx 60 mins.

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Otto Tuomela is a Master's student in the department of philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Otto is also interested in education and religious studies.

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