

Shared Experience of Reading Literature with Adult Language Learners



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SYNOPSIS

Reading experience has been researched and defined, in various ways and contexts, as an emotional, intellectual, or even physical event. The role of language in reading experience has been recognized, but the way reading experience is connected to language acquisition and plays the role of a formative experience has not been dealt with in literary studies. In this article, I reflect on the shared reading experience of adult learners of Finnish with academic backgrounds in reading circles organized by the research project *Struck by the Unknown: Fiction as Promoter of the Finnish Language among Adults with Im/migrant Background*. In the reading experience as this is connected to cultural language learning in a reading circle, it is impossible to separate cognitive processes and emotions from the intellectual event. An appropriate venue to explore the cognitive, emotional, and intellectual together is a reading circle, where aesthetic experience permeates a learning process. I will bring up some facets of shared reading as experience formation by reporting on how our research team and reading circle participants experienced the project. Facets of this shared experience of reading include a dialogical transborder approach that creates space to articulate emotions. Finally, I reflect briefly on the issue of using or instrumentalizing literature.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA / KEYWORDS

Sdílená čtenářská zkušenost; formování čtenářství; čtenářské kroužky; literatura; osvojování dalšího jazyka / shared reading experience; reading formation; reading circles; literature; additional language acquisition.

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Reading has been a fashionable topic for some time, and there are a number of empirical and theoretical approaches to reading research to emerge lately in various countries. In Finland alone, several teams have been working during the past few years on reading and using the method of reading circles at the universities in Helsinki, Turku, and Tampere. These projects have resulted in the book *Hoitava lukeminen: Teoreettisia ja käytännöllisiä näkökulmia lukemistyöhön* ('Therapeutic reading: Theoretical and practical perspectives on the work of reading'), for example, edited by Päivi Kosonen and Juhani Ihanus (2022), as well as *Lukemisen kulttuurit* ('Cultures



of reading'), edited by Pirjo Hiidenmaa, Ilona Lindh, Sara Sintonen and Roosa Suomalainen (2023).

'Reading experience' can be, and has been, understood and defined in many ways, from 'pleasure and entertainment' to 'self-realization and mind expansion' (Balling 2016, p. 37). In this article, I will discuss shared reading experience in the approach adopted in the research project *Struck by the Unknown: Fiction as a Promoter of the Finnish Language among Adults with Im/migrant Background*,¹ drawing on sources and theories in various fields. The project moves between literary studies, linguistics, language pedagogy, and literature pedagogy. Bridging gaps between disciplines, the project team is composed of both literary scholars and linguists trained in pedagogy, some of whom acquired Finnish as a first language and others who learned it as a foreign language, in each of these fields. The team, furthermore, includes a prize-winning fiction writer who learned Finnish as an adult, studied it as her major at a university outside Finland, and has published mostly in Finnish. The project researchers interact with participants, who are adult learners of the Finnish language, through didactic and pedagogical activities, mainly reading circles and workshops in creative writing. These are reflected upon and analysed in research carried out together by literary scholars and linguists, testing their previous findings and formulating new questions inspired by their interaction with the learners.

When conceptualizing shared, communal reading experience in reading circles, the inspiration came from ideas of experiencing art/literature in the work of John Dewey, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Jiří Levý. We work with Gadamer's tenet that the concept of experience holds both the experience and its result, leaving a lasting impression in memory (cf. Gadamer 1960/1989; Balling 2016, pp. 38–39), which is most important for the event of learning. We also assume that it is impossible to separate cognitive processes, emotions, and intellectual event, which is a viable approach when uniting aesthetic experience with a learning event (ibid.). When conceptualizing the experience of shared reading with the scope of cultural language learning, we draw on John Dewey's (1937/2005, pp. 38–42) insight that practical and intellectual experiences are inseparable from aesthetic experiences, and on his idea that in experiential learning, everything occurs within a social environment. In conceptualizing the literary aesthetic experience, Levý's (1963/2011, esp. pp. 3–21) ideas about the role of functional and contextual perspectives in the reading experience and his examination of various reception theories have given us much inspiration, though

1 In Finnish, the title is *Tuntemattomalla päähän? Kaunokirjallisuus aikuisten maahan muuttaneiden suomen kielen edistäjänä* (<https://tuntemattomalla-paahan.com/>). The 'Unknown' is an allusion to the canonized Finnish novel *Tuntematon sotilas* (The Unknown Soldier, 1954), by Väinö Linna, but refers also to the process of making the 'unknown' culture known and familiar, by the strategy of shared reading experience. The project has been financed by the KONE Foundation and its members are Viola Parente-Čapková (PI), Riitta Jytilä, Niina Kekki, Hanna Jokela, Lenka Fárová and the writer Alexandra Salmela. The paper refers to the collective work carried out in the project and it is based on my keynote lecture with the same title. I would like to thank my colleagues Riitta Jytilä and Niina Kekki for their comments on my key note lecture as well as the reviewer of *Slovo a smysl* for their insightful comments.



our activities do not include translation — at least not directly.² Since we understand language as the material from which a literary work is made, but also as a concrete phenomenon produced in social interaction, it is no surprise that Mikhail Bakhtin's (e.g. 1981) notion of 'dialogism' has been a major inspiration to us, while theorizing our concept of communal, shared reading as an experience that has consequences. Here, I want to clarify that though we have used the method of shared reading in the sense of reading aloud together (especially when employing the principles of Reader's Theatre, to which I shall return later in this study), what we mean by shared reading experience is an *experience of reading* that is communal: i.e. collective in the sense of being shared by all participants in the reading event.

The Danish scholar Gitte Balling (2016, p. 50) has noted that reading experience is 'a phenomenological and psychological phenomenon that besides cognitive, rational, conceived experiences includes sensuous and unconscious layers of meaning'; at the same time, it is also a linguistic phenomenon, an experience in language. Investigating reading experience vis-à-vis the practical, day-to-day problems connected with inhabiting concrete languages, or with language learning and acquisition, we are working directly with the notion of 'language experience' as a participative practice in language pedagogy. In such practice, reading and writing, speaking and listening are mutually supportive of each other. We developed and adapted some elements of this language experience approach (LEA, see e.g. Hall 1970³) to teaching and learning language into a strategy for reading, discussing, and writing about literature in a second/foreign language, based both on personal and group experience. We subscribe to the method of (critical) cultural language learning to promote the social integration of adults with immigrant background. One aim is to facilitate their ability to read cultural allusions and establish relationships with the surrounding society.

We claim that the shared experience of reading, discussing, interpreting, and writing literature (for clarity, I refer to these collectively as 'shared reading experience' or 'shared experience of reading') offers participants a unique way of learning and developing their language skills, one that also facilitates their deeper knowledge of language and literature as such. It helps them to develop interpretive methods that concern texts in the broadest possible sense, and to feel more at home in various discourses and linguistic registers. By familiarizing them with the historical, social, and political contexts of literary works, it helps them to 'read' the surrounding Finnish reality, feel more at home in Finland, be able to take part more actively in social life, and bring in and share with others their own 'languacultures' (Diaz 2013), i.e. their cultural and linguistic, often multilingual experience. In this respect, reading circles can be a most effective pedagogical tool for adult language learners, and have been used in the United Kingdom, for example, by the scholar and pedagogue Sam Duncan. The process of cultural language learning in a reading circle is so closely

2 Since the participants' first languages or languages into which they can translate differ, we have not included translation in our reading circles or workshops (cf. Parente-Čapková — Fárová 2022). However, many participants have expressed interest in translation, or even a wish to become a translator. Therefore, we have encouraged them to ponder their possibilities to translate the texts discussed in the reading circles.

3 See also https://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/LEA.html.



connected with learning and formation that we can speak, as Duncan does, of ‘experience formation’. According to Duncan (2012, p. 150), ‘[a]ny reading of a literary text is heightened experience formation and reading within a reading circle is experience formation further amplified.’

WAYS OF CONSTRUCTING READING EXPERIENCE IN TEACHING FINNISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: READING CIRCLES AND CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOPS

Literature has been used throughout the development of the theory and practice of teaching English as a second language, though there have been periods when emphasis on the spoken language has prevailed (see e.g. Paran 2008; Keshavarzi 2012; Hall 2015; Quinn — Kleckova 2021). Methods for teaching other languages have often developed from the old philological approach which sees functional language teaching as its opposite (Fárová 2020; Parente-Čapková — Fárová 2022). First, I will give some background on the project and show how it has mapped shared reading experience or experience formation in reading circles, by which I mean structured book clubs or reading groups of fiction with an element of what we call ‘critical cultural learning’. The participants are adult learners of the Finnish language, mostly with an academic background. Next, I show how we have been shaping our reading circles towards empowering (reading) experience. I conclude with some initial results and prospects for the future.

The basic tenet of the project is very simple: that literature, apart from being a key carrier of meaning in culture and opening a window to various societal and emotional phenomena, is also language. The project *Struck by the Unknown* started from the idea that with the exception of Finnish philology studies outside Finland, and sporadic works within Finno-Ugric Studies (today ‘Uralistics’ — see Parente-Čapková 2022, p. 48⁴), literature has been used mostly instrumentally in Finnish adult language teaching. The project tries to contribute to correcting this situation by being the first in Finland to use reading circles for advanced adult language learners with participation of linguists and literary scholars. The closest take on teaching Finnish language and literature together is the research of Heidi Vaarala (2009) and Jyrki Kalliokoski (2007; 2022).⁵

So far, there have been nine reading circles, from 2020 to 2023, conducted for the purposes of the project. In five of them we read novels; in four, short texts (e.g. very concise short stories), poems, and comic strips. The duration of each reading circle is a bit less than one semester, usually running over a 12-week period. Our primary target group has been academically educated (some currently studying at

4 Parente-Čapková refers to Janne Saarikivi: Fennougriistiikka — lingvistiikkaa vai filologiaa? Kommentti edelliseen puheenvuoroon. *Virittäjä* 105, 2001, no. 2, pp. 267–270.

5 Other scholars, such as Aino Mäkikalli (e.g. Launis — Mäkikalli 2020) and Satu Grünthal (e.g. Grünthal — Hiidenmaa — Tainio 2022), have combined research on the use of literature in teaching Finnish mostly as a first language at upper secondary schools and led projects on this topic.



the university) adult learners of the Finnish language with immigrant background and living in Finland. For some participants in our reading circles, Finnish is their first language; others have learned Finnish as a second language (sometimes among a number of other languages), of which some studied Finnish as a ‘foreign’ language (i.e. while living outside of Finland). Their linguistic competence levels range from B1–2 to C2 on the scale proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).⁶ These are advanced learners for whom there are usually no higher language-acquisition courses available. Finnish is the only language used in the reading circles: that is, both in the texts we read and in related activities (discussions, creative and other writing assignments, interviews, preliminary and feedback forms, etc.).⁷ Creative writing workshops have given the participants an opportunity to express themselves more freely in Finnish, writing short pieces of creative fiction, playing with the language, and expressing their opinions on literature, Finnish culture and society, and other issues, including their position as speakers of Finnish as a second or foreign language (i.e. as ‘foreigners’ vis-à-vis the Finnish language).⁸

Due to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in which work on our project began, all reading circles were held online. This was at first rather challenging, but eventually turned out to be a positive and enlightening experience, enabling us to involve participants from elsewhere in Finland and abroad, as far-ranging as Germany, the USA, and South Africa. Thus, the original idea to include only participants living in Finland gave way to a much more inclusive activity. The participants’ highly varied backgrounds and ways of looking at Finnish language, society, culture, and literature contributed most fruitfully to the debates about their shared reading experience and experience formation. Some had spent only short periods of time in Finland or were newcomers, while others had lived in Finland for decades. In the online environment, two or three teachers acted as both facilitators and participants, organizers and observers, using the material from reading circles for research purposes and investigating the reading experience they observed and participated in. We have aimed at keeping the hierarchy as flat as possible, with emphasis on dialogue and on the fact that all participants are learners: language learning is understood as a lifelong process, in any and all languages one happens to speak. All participants (both ‘facilitators’ and ‘students’) exchange views on language, literature, and society and reflect on their interpretation of the text they read together (Jytilä — Kekki 2022).

6 The CEFR comprises six levels, from A1 to C2, which can be regrouped into three broad categories — Basic User, Independent User and Proficient User — that can be subdivided according to the needs of the context. See e.g. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>.

7 For a detailed description of the reading circles, see Jytilä — Kekki 2022, and Parente-Čapková — Jytilä — Kekki 2023.

8 A more detailed description and account of the creative writing workshops, lead by Alexandra Salmela, is beyond the scope of this article.



PHILOLOGICAL CLOSE READING

During the past three years, the project has developed the method of philological close reading (Parente-Čapková — Jytälä — Kekki 2023, esp. pp. 45–47). The method draws on the concept of modern philology as the study of contemporary languages, combining the study of language and linguistics with literature and literary scholarship, taking into account historical, political, and social context. We define philology, borrowing Jan Ziolkowski's description (1990, p. 5), simply as a 'love of learning and literature; the study of literature, in a wide sense, including grammar, literary criticism and interpretation, the relation of literature and written records to history.' Since participation in our reading circles is voluntary, our participants like literature and do not need a particular motivation to read it. In our view, philology encompasses a love or even passion for literature, language, and culture, including literature as language and language as literature (Parente-Čapková 2022, p. 49).

By taking seriously the linguistic aspects, we draw on linguistic criticism in literature studies, namely by Roger Fowler (1986), who is inspired by Russian formalism, the Prague linguistic school, and by the English linguist M. A. K. Halliday. Fowler distances himself from linguistic formalism and claims to treat literature as discourse, emphasizing the interactional dimensions of texts (Fowler 1981). In using the term 'close reading', we are not referring to the New Critical method with the decontextualizing emphasis on the 'words on the page' or 'on the paper' (Richards 1930, p. 4), but simply to attentive, thorough reading, taking account of as many linguistic and stylistic aspects as possible (see e.g. Kortekallio — Ovaska 2020). Here, the material qualities of language are also considered important: the way they may appear 'strange' and unfamiliar to a learner of the language in which the literary work is written can inspire first-language readers to see them anew, through the prism of a certain 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarization', to refer to the famous concept known from Russian formalism (Shklovsky 1917/1965). All in all, philological close reading means a way of reading and interpreting the text, while analysing its linguistic and literary aspects, and contextualizing them in a versatile manner. In this way, we connect the broadly conceived philological approach to those contemporary theories of learning, according to which knowledge is socially and culturally constructed and language is to be learned by using it in various situations and environments.

LITERATURE AS AN AESTHETIC ARTEFACT AND LANGUAGE AUTHENTICITY EXPERIENCED IN THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

We consider literature to be an aesthetic artefact, that is, as a form of art. This goes without saying among literary scholars, but not necessarily among scholars of language learning. Therefore, our approach is close to what Gitte Balling (2016, p. 37) has called 'literary aesthetic experience', referring to Jan Mukařovský's ideas (*ibid.*, p. 41), which understands reading literature as 'meaning making'. Drawing on the approach of constructivist learning theory, we want our participants to use their previous experience and engage with the aesthetics of the text. Given our participants'

high level of linguistic competence, we refer to Lev Vygotsky's theory of the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1978, esp. p. 84–91) which he developed in the 1930s. Vygotsky defines this zone as

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult [we can say teacher's] guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (ibid., p. 86, italics original)

In other words, this zone is the space between what a learner can do without help and what they can do with a teacher's guidance or in collaboration with more advanced peers. Practically all reading circle participants claimed that this strategy was an empowering experience (we collected feedback midway through the semester and at the last session). The texts read by participants might seem difficult, especially some of the novels; however, the need to 'work hard' on the texts seemed to be productive. The prerequisite, of course, was ideally B2 language proficiency according to the CEFR. This aspect of reading experience is in tune with what Balling has called 'challenging reading experiences' (Balling 2016, p. 48).

Challenging our participants, we never use easy-to-read materials or books 'translated' into easy-to-read or simple Finnish,⁹ but rather literary texts that we consider aesthetically appealing in their (linguistically) authentic form (see MacDonald — Badger — Dasli 2006), i.e. in their original version. A narrow understanding of the functional approach to language teaching with its emphasis on everyday communication has often eliminated the use of literary texts from language teaching as not authentic enough, or as unable to offer authentic linguistic experience. Apart from linguistic authenticity, which we understand broadly based on the research in 'sociolinguistics, pragmatics, identity, culture and agency' (Chung 2016, p. 86; Compernelle — McGregor 2016), we subscribe to the idea that the text is authentic when it touches the learner's life in a meaningful way (Aalto — Mustonen — Tukka 2009). Therefore, engaging with a literary text via shared reading experience represents an exceedingly authentic and versatile linguistic experience.

DIALOGICAL AND TRANSBORDER EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

Any reading circle brings about dialogical experience. The concept of reading is dialogical per se: readers are in a dialogical relationship with the text(s), with the world behind or outside the texts, and, in a reading circle, with other participants. With Gadamer (1989) and Bakhtin (1981), we view the shared reading experience as emphasizing articulation and dialogues in language in many ways. The dialogical approach has permeated everything done in the project. Bakhtin's concept of dialogue 'to cap-

⁹ Recently, there has been a boom within this field in Finland, and easy-to-read materials have been used also in the teaching of Finnish as an additional language. See e.g. Kastari 2019.



ture the meaning making process by which the historical and the present come together in an utterance' and as the essence of language (Hall — Vitanova — Marchenkova 2005, pp. 2–3) is at the basis of our understanding of literature as both language and discourse, and of the shared reading experience in the reading circle.

The structure of a reading circle session was as follows: participants got the texts in advance, so that the reading circle session could be used for discussions. Participants were assigned either a portion of a novel in the novel circles, or a very short text, such as a prose piece or poem, in the short text circles. They were also given several questions in advance. The questions would concern formal features of the texts (mostly grammatical phenomena), as well as its literary and contextual aspects; sometimes, these were separated, but they were often brought together in one question. For example, when reading Pajtim Statovci's novel *Kissani Jugoslavia* (2014, *My Cat Jugoslavia*, 2017), participants were asked to ponder the meaning of the conditional mood in the text. They were given additional questions, some in advance, others at the beginning of the reading circle: Which character uses the conditional most often and in which situations? What does the frequent use of the conditional tell us about the character? Since in Finnish, the conditional sometimes stands for the future tense (non-existent in Finnish as a grammatical form), how can we differentiate between those cases and others when it really expresses a condition? How does this compare with your first or other languages? How would you translate the passages? The participants would first discuss the questions in small groups (2–3 people) in breakout rooms. Their dialogues were summarized in the main session, so that the facilitators and other participants could comment on and discuss them. Some useful links and grammar exercises on the Finnish conditional were provided in the Moodle platform (Parente-Čapková — Jytilä — Kekki 2023, p. 48).

In the reading circle, we as facilitator-participants have been learning new things and getting ideas for new research questions, both multidisciplinary and in our respective disciplines. Within this approach, we test 'various forms of pedagogical interventions to determine most effective way to facilitate learners' assimilation of new systemic knowledge into known knowledge structures', as Hall, Vitanova and Marchenkova (2005, p. 1) have suggested vis-à-vis Bakhtinian inspirations. Although the project team organized and executed the reading circles and workshops, they consider themselves to be participants as well, eager to learn from the shared reading experience in this dialogic process (Jytilä – Kekki 2022).

The dialogue we promote is transborder in various ways. For us, transborder experience is not synonymous with multilingual or multicultural in the way that these adjectives have sometimes been used: i.e. as monolithic, separable categories. We emphasize how these multiple categories can entangle, intermingle, and overlap, as e.g. Pollari et al. (2015) or Petrbock et al. (2019) have shown in literary studies. This also helps to 'avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity' (Byram et al. 2002, p. 5). We show how Finnish literature has participated in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the national identity, or Finnishness, while being transnational, multilingual, and transborder (cf. Risager 2007). We encourage the participants to view both the culture(s) they are most familiar with and Finnish culture as multiple and entangled. All this is in tune with the ethos of encountering the other, or various others within and beyond



Finland's borders (be it Finland's 'historical' or 'new' minorities¹⁰), while pondering how they fit into hierarchies. Our approach is intersectional, with sensitivity to the issues of identities, their intersections, and the dynamic of power.

The dialogical approach and the pedagogy behind it (Jytälä 2017) were amplified by reading aloud. We mainly use the method of Reader's Theatre, used to improve oral literacy, reading fluency, and reading comprehension in language learners (e.g. Lekwilai 2014). First, the text was divided into segments and participants read the respective segments one after another. We had tested this method, introduced to the project by our colleague Niina Kekki, in an online summer course for foreign students of Finnish language and literature in 2021, and applied it in one of our reading circles of short texts. Each participant would read a paragraph or a short section of the text aloud; first, they would practice in pairs in breakout rooms, then they would read aloud in the main session. We did not use theatre plays¹¹ but very concise short stories or poems. The method turned out to be very productive, since the participants would realize more fully the material qualities of the language, and, of course, could practice pronunciation and intonation. Reading aloud is often important for interpreting the text. Even at times when we did not use Reader's Theatre, we would encourage the participants in short text reading circles to read the text to each other in breakout rooms. All this brought new dimensions to the way students debated the texts with each other in both breakout rooms and main session, and how they interpreted them.

CULTURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH CONTENT AND CONTEXT

Content and context are at the heart of our reading circles. Apart from identity and language, our central themes are those we see as key for social integration of the adults with immigrant background in Finland. We depart from the 'brand' images, stereotypes, and 'myths' attached to Finnishness. These include the tenet that Finns are close to nature (which, nowadays, goes hand in hand with a presumed sensitivity to environmental issues) as well as the story about Finland as a promised land of gender equality and more general social equality.

All these aspects of the shared reading experience contribute to building up knowledge. In our reading circles, we understand experience not only as self-knowledge, but also as acquiring knowledge of and competence in the language and culture. Though we do not lecture in the reading circles, facilitator-participants would occasionally provide explanations at times on Finnish history, politics, folklore, or

10 Swedish speaking Finns (Finland Swedes), the Sámi, Jews, Tatars, Roma and Russians are usually considered 'historical' or 'traditional' minorities in Finland, i.e. those who had lived on Finland's territory prior to the 1990s. The two groups mentioned last belong both to the 'historical' and to the 'new' minorities, since a considerable number of Roma and Russians have moved to Finland after 1990.

11 Theatre plays are an area of activity we would like to develop in the future, given that our team member Alexandra Salmela has a degree in dramaturgy. We have been inspired by the drama seminar at the Institute of Czech Studies, developed by Ilona Starý Kořánová (see Starý Kořánová 2022).



mythology, and at others on linguistics, rhetoric, literary, or cultural studies. For instance, we would give brief input on war-related events important for Finnish history and still omnipresent in Finnish literature today, or on the concept of the social climber or *parvenu* — *nousukas* in Finnish (see Parente-Čapková — Jytilä — Kekki 2023, p. 49). This notion is of key importance especially in one text we read: Kari Hotakainen's *Ihmisen osa* (2009; *The Human Part*, 2013). However, it is implicitly present in a number of texts on the reading list, and an important matter in discussions on the topic of class. While the status of minorities, wars, and social mobility have a particular place in Finnish society and literature, these are universal themes. More specific information had to be given in conjunction with Johanna Sinisalo's *Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi* (2000; *Not Before Sundown*, 2003), a kind of 'sociofantasy' drawing on Finnish folklore and tales about trolls, and offering frequent intertextual allusions to Finland's 19th century 'national epic', the *Kalevala*. Even this kind of specific knowledge could be introduced on a more universal level, when the participants discussed the role of myths and folklore in the cultures they knew best. All background information, which was provided to the reading circle either through short introductions held by the facilitators or by internet links, gave participants a good opportunity to compare their extralinguistic and extraliterary knowledge and experience.

FEELINGS AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE SHARED READING EXPERIENCE

A major theme in reading experience is the relationship between reading a literary work and the feelings, affects, or emotions it provokes (I recognize that this terminology presents certain challenges; to effectively confront them here, however, would fall outside the scope of this article). Readers' feelings have been researched recently in a number of empirical studies (see, for example: Ameel 2019; Rossi 2023). In our reading circles, feelings can be provoked by the material qualities of language (the 'beauty' or 'ugliness' of Finnish words), or debated when interpreting the texts. We ask our participants to look for the words denoting emotions in the text and to name their own emotions provoked by the text. The challenge of expressing emotions is amplified by having to express them in an additional language. In this respect, we discuss the ways language both communicates and constitutes emotions, the way communicating in an additional language amplifies or subdues emotion expressed in that language, and the (im)possibility in general of rendering emotions in language. We may refer here to words in Finnish that are often difficult to differentiate from one another, especially for native speakers of certain other languages: *tunne* (feeling, emotion, sensation, affect, sense, sentiment, affection) and *tunto* (touch, feeling, sensation, sense), for example; or *myötätunto* (sympathy, compassion, commiseration, understanding) and *sääli* (pity, commiseration, compassion; cf. Parente-Čapková — Jytilä — Kekki 2023, p. 52).

According to their feedback, our participants considered the reading circles as an emotionally safe space to express and discuss their feelings. This text was written by a participant who has lived in Finland for about five years:



Tunteisiin vaikutus kielellä on ollut suurin minulle kun kielellä on ollut vahva asema jokapäiväisessä kommunikaatiossa ja ihmisten kanssa suhteiden rakentamisessa. Myös sillä on ollut vaikutus paikkaan kuulumiseen tunteeseen, joka mulle on ollut tärkeänä. [lukupiirissa] olen myös ymmärtänyt paremmin miten suomalaiset puhuu omista tunteista. [...] Omien tunteiden kuvaileminen ja ilmaiseminen aikuisena opituilla kielellä on ollut vapautuva ja on auttanut minua ymmärtämään mun oma persoonallisuutta eri tavalla. Jotkut tunteet on helppo kuvailla suomeksi koska Suomessa puhutaan tunteista ja mielenterveydestä avoimesti. Olen kokenut, että sen takia osaan kuvailla tunteita suomeksi paremmin kuin ensimmäisellä kielellä. (Participant X, April 2023)

[Language has affected my emotions hugely, because language has played strong role in everyday communication and building up relationships with people. It has also had influence on the feeling of belonging to this place, which has been important to me. [In the reading circle], I have also understood better how the Finns talk about their own emotions [...]. To describe and express emotions in a language learned as an adult has been liberating and it has helped me to understand my own personality in a different way. Some feelings are easy to describe in Finnish, because in Finland people talk openly about feelings and mental health. Therefore, my experience is that I am able to describe feelings better in Finnish than in my first language.]

We discussed emotions in conjunction with many texts read together, including short ones such as Mikko Rimminen's prose poem 'Tuska', first published in 1999, then again in 2000 (the title of the prose poem can be translated as 'distress', 'agony', or 'pain'):

Nukuttu hyvin, herätty, tankattu auto, ajettu metsään, poimittu tatit, kerätty marjat, tunnettu linnut, kiiwetty puuhun ja vedetty keuhkot täyteen virheetöntä sineä, kävelty, reippaasti kävelty, juostukin, kukkulan laelle kävelty ja katsottu laaksot, joet, lampien linssit, laaksoihinkin kävelty, sammalet kosketeltu, polut tallattu, jäljet peitetty, ajettu kotiin, paistettu pihvit, laitettu muhennos, pakastettu marjat, nukuttu hyvin. (Mikko Rimminen: 'Tuska' 2000)

[Was given rest by sleeping, awoken, car was fuelled, driven to the forest, mushrooms picked, birds recognized, a tree climbed, and lungs filled with pure blue, carried along by walking, by brisk walking, even running, walking on the top of the hill, where valleys, rivers, the lenses of the lakelets were all viewed, valleys were walked through, moss touched, paths trampled, traces covered, driven home, steaks fried, stew prepared, berries frozen, given rest by sleeping.]

The poem is written in passive past participle which, in Finnish, expresses that something has been done, but it does not reveal the doer (see e.g. Kelomäki 2019). In the reading circle session, the participants had the assignment (on the Moodle platform) to pick up unknown or 'difficult' words and to learn about the passive voice and the passive past participle in Finnish (at the B2-C2 level, they would have probably only needed a refresher). They were asked to ponder the phenomenon of passive voice in



general and compare it across languages. They were then invited to introduce the reflection on the passive voice into their interpretation of the poem. How did the passive voice affect the poem's rhythm and structure? What is the position of the subject? Who might be the doer and how is it relevant for the interpretation of the poem? We discussed the poem within the section on the theme of nature, which raised other questions: How do you define nature? Can we say that the poem is about nature? If so, why is the poem about nature written in the passive voice? And if the text is about nature, what does this tell us about it? About nature and Finnishness? Why is the title 'Tuska'? Does the poem evoke any experiences of your own, and what is the experience of reading, discussing, and analysing it? What feelings does the poem evoke? How could the poem be translated into your first language, or the language you feel most comfortable translating into?

The participants read the poem aloud to each other in the breakout rooms and discussed these questions, after which everything was discussed in the main session.

CONCLUSIONS

The Problem of Articulating Reading Experience Formation

Empirical researchers of reading experience remind us that 'there is both difference and an intimate connection between experiencing and articulating experience, between its corporeal, sensuous, and affective, and cognitive and linguistic dimensions' (Skjeringstad — Rothbauer 2016). These scholars often mention how difficult it is for interviewees to articulate their experience. In our research, the participants' difficulty to voice the reading experience and the experience formation was clearly amplified by their language difficulties (see Jytilä — Kekki 2022). Therefore, following the initial set of interviews at the beginning and end of the first reading circle, we opted instead for interviewing the participants only before each reading circle and asking for feedback afterwards in writing, via electronic forms. This way of mapping the result of the circles proved to be most fruitful. We also received precious feedback through the learning diaries kept by most of the participants; some were rather extensive, 1–2 pages per session. Some of our participants are language teachers themselves and use our method in their own teaching:

Lukupäiväkirjaan olen kirjoittanut, mitä ajattelen ja huomaan lukiessani suomen kaunokirjallisia tekstejä. Niin ymmärrän sekä omaa elämää, yhteiskuntaa, jossa asun, ja tekstejä paremmin. Opettajana haluaisin antaa omille oppilaille saman mahdollisuuden lukemiseen, vapaasti ajattelemiseen ja nopeasti kirjoittamiseen. (Participant Y, April 2023)

[In the study diary, I have written what I think and notice when reading Finnish literary texts. Now I better understand my own life, the society in which I live, and the texts. As a teacher, I would like to give my students the same possibility to read, to think freely, and to write quickly.]

Authority of Experience and Experience of Authority

Our aim in organizing the reading circles has been to provide the most versatile reading experience possible: to unite acquisition of knowledge with linguistic, cultural, and symbolic competence (or capital), to make a lasting impression, to provide a tool for approaching literature critically and with appreciation, but also to critically reflect on identity, and to relate to oneself and to others.

The criteria for a ‘good reading experience’, as discussed by Gitte Balling (2016, p. 44), were fulfilled, at least according to the participants’ feedback: ‘to gain knowledge about the world and oneself, experience recognition and identification with the characters, to become emotionally involved, to forget time and place, to enjoy a book that is well written, to activate the reader’s imagination.’ Such experience formation is creative, affective, social, and intersubjective. The participants told us that the reading circles gave them an experience of significant empowerment: knowledge is power and cultural knowledge of the local language even more so. The participants felt that their expertise in different fields and earlier life experience were taken seriously in the dialogical atmosphere of the reading circle.

Though some of the participants had difficulties voicing how their command of Finnish developed, others mentioned advancement of their conversational skills, enlargement of their vocabulary, or the acquisition of new idioms. They gave high marks as answers to the questions on how much they learned about Finnish society, Finnish literature, and literature in general, as well as the Finnish language and language in general. Preferences with regard to novels or short texts was split roughly evenly: for some, reading a whole novel in Finnish felt like a very empowering experience, for others, the short texts felt more productive since it was possible to analyse them more deeply and to get acquainted with more authors during a single semester. Many participants especially appreciated the combination of reading, interpreting, discussing, and writing; some emphasized that reading alone is much less productive than reading with others. Some participants highlighted the importance of the contextual and societal knowledge they acquired; others mentioned aesthetic aspects of the texts and intertextual knowledge. Some appreciated the fact that the ‘Finnish brand’ was problematized and the voices of minority groups (e.g. Roma) could be heard in the selected texts. The reading list selection was commented on positively; participants felt it would have been difficult to find these texts by themselves.

By developing our dialogical method of shared reading experience, we hope to inspire teachers of language and literature more broadly. Some of our colleagues feel encouraged to use authentic (not simplified) texts at lower levels of language teaching; success here depends on the capacity of the teacher to find suitable texts (see Fárová 2020). We believe that our method, if appropriately adapted, can be used outside the language-acquisition context. Our next step is to organize a reading circle for a group composed of first- and second-language Finnish speakers, with first-language speakers being students of Finnish language and literature at the University of Turku. Some of them would like to specialize in teaching Finnish as a second language, and are interested in learning our method; others would like to experience the reading circle and learn new ways to approach ‘their own’ literature. At the moment, while planning this new form of the reading circle, one of the





biggest challenges seems to be maintaining the dialogical, non-hierarchical atmosphere in the group, so that people with different levels of Finnish can participate on an equal footing.

In our reading circles, we departed from the instrumental use of literature, i.e. as a mere means of teaching language, as sometimes happens when literary texts are approached only formally and used for teaching grammar. However, we do not view the instrumental use of literature as such to be a problem. Here, I agree with Laura Karttunen (2022), following John Dewey, that the instrumental use of literature does not necessarily mean its commercialization or trivialization: e.g. in therapeutic work (see e.g. Kosonen — Ihanus 2022). In our reading circles, we have addressed a number of difficult subjects, including inequality, traumatic experience deriving from past events, loneliness and longing to belong, and linguistic vulnerability in a context where language is power. Political issues, namely conflicts between cultures and communities (see e.g. Armstrong 2021), are, of course, notoriously difficult. In the future, we would like to expand our activities and understanding of reading experience and formation in this direction, with the help of professionals trained to tackle these subjects.

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