

Struggles of highly educated adult immigrants as identity negotiations through Finnish language learning

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Abstract

This article aims to advance a critical understanding of language learning and identity negotiations among adult immigrants. Through Bonny Norton's (2013) theoretical lens of 'identity as a site of struggle', we argue that immigrants often find themselves in contradictory positions assigned through unequal power relations because of their inadequacy in using the local language. Using narrative positioning analysis, we explore the ways in which highly educated adult immigrants in Finland negotiate their identities through Finnish language learning. Our data consists of initial interviews from a longitudinal study with seven adult immigrants who participated in Finnish Integration Training. Our findings show how the acts of identity negotiations referred to three specific types of 'struggles': struggle for recognition of competence; resistance against immigrant stereotypes; and the balancing act of parenthood in a multilingual context. These negotiations highlight difficulties and inequalities adult immigrants face, but also their empowerment through language learning.

Keywords: identity negotiation, adult immigrants, language learning, narrative analysis, positioning



Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyse how adult immigrants negotiate their identity through language learning. Identity negotiations are interpreted through the lens of ‘identity as a site of struggle’ used by Bonny Norton (2013). Adult immigrants often find themselves in contradictory positions assigned through unequal power relations by discourses related to migration and language. Some such discourses subjectify migrants based on their apparent inadequacy in using the local language as they simultaneously present a sense of national linguistic homogeneity or coherence (c.f. Archakis & Tsakona, 2022). They can also project contradictory ideals of proactive and independent yet compliant migrants, especially regarding linguistic integration. Learning the local language becomes then a process of reconciliation and negotiation of these contradictory positions to find empowerment (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995).

Identity research concerning language learning is important to dispel some of the long-standing and unwarranted myths about the difficulty of learning a language as an adult (cf. Ausubel, 1964). Like Norton and other linguistic scholars, we argue that the deeper processes of identity negotiation and their power relations offer a better explanation of why learning a language as an adult immigrant is difficult (Cervatiuc, 2009; Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995; Peirce, 1994; Reeves, 2009). In research and practice, highly educated adult migrants are often overlooked by homogenising views of the social group ‘migrant’ (cf. Kurki, 2018; Nordmark & Colliander, 2023). We believe that research focused on this particular group will enrich our understanding of the many intersecting aspects that can accompany the category of ‘migrant’.

In the Finnish context, there is a lack of research regarding identity negotiations related to Finnish language learning, especially from the perspective of highly educated migrants and their everyday interactions. Finland has only relatively recently experienced larger immigration flows, and research in this area has focused on other aspects of language learning and integration. For example, teachers’ skills to support immigrants’ language learning (Kärkkäinen, 2017) or the language learning strategies of immigrants (Naif & Saad, 2017). Much of the existing identity research opts for a larger view of identity so it has mostly focused on larger life stories and significant turning points and not on everyday interactions (e.g., Olakivi, 2013; Pöyhönen et al., 2013; Pöyhönen & Tarnanen, 2015; Tarnanen et al., 2015). In this article, we reiterate that, in line with Norton’s findings, negotiations of identity can also occur in these small interactions (Norton Peirce, 1995; Peirce, 1994). Such situated identity negotiations have been researched through narrative methodologies (c.f. Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006).

To better understand how highly educated immigrants negotiate their identities through language learning, in daily interactions, we ask the following questions:

- What kinds of contradictory identity positions are related to adult immigrants’ Finnish language learning?
- How are highly educated adult immigrants positioning their ‘selves’ in their narratives of everyday interactions (small stories)?

To answer these questions, we analyse narrations of everyday interactions and other small stories (Bamberg, 2006a, 2006b) shared by seven highly educated adult immigrants in Finland. These narrations arose in interviews about the early stages of their Finnish language learning in integration training in Turku, Finland. Using narrative positioning,

we have explored their struggles to reconcile contradictory positions related to the migration discourse in these reflections. Although these positions are all related to language learning, they extend beyond it to become negotiations of identities.

Identity, selves, and language

In studies on language learning the concepts of 'identity' and 'self' are often used in parallel to address conceptions of who we are. Norton refers to identity as 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (Norton, 2013, p. 45). In her understanding, identity is not reduced nor bound by contextual boundaries but the term is usually constricted by categorisation (e.g., social identity, linguistic identity, ethnic identity) (c.f. Thesen, 1997). To address the complexities of defining contextualised identity without reducing it to any single category we have chosen to use the term 'self' or rather 'selves'. Selves refers to conceptions of who and how we are in specific contexts, while identity refers to Norton's theoretical understandings.

The use of the concept of 'selves' also allows for a more detailed understanding of context-situated identity our research requires, by highlighting the reflexive nature of narratives. In the narratives about one's life, the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same (Bruner, 1987). The narrator is an object to her/himself. This view is congruent with the tradition of symbolic interactionism where the 'self' is understood as divided into two parts: 'I' representing the active side of the self, and 'me' the evaluative side (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Both sides of the self are present in the ways one describes and evaluates oneself in language. It can be expressed in terms of what and how the self (I/me) is (Harter & Fischer, 1999, p. 3) in a given context.

As van Lier (2010) explains, it is through the self that we act in certain ways in certain settings seamlessly interchanging as we move from one context to another. As a driver of our actions, the context-situated self also guides our use of languages in interactions through socially acquired communicative rules. From this perspective, language becomes more than signs and symbols used to communicate. Language is history, culture, rules, values, and social cues. It is the vehicle of communication of discourses and how we socialise, learn and become who we are (Norton & Morgan, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). More importantly, for adult immigrants language is power. It can be exerted through different forms of control, such as linguistic integration, and it can be used to become who we want to be in a new society (Cervatiuc, 2009). It is essential to remember that neither selves nor language are static. They are in constant redefinition through one another, especially in interaction. As Weedon (1991) explains, in language and interactions we can redefine the meanings of words but also the meanings of self.

This dialogic redefinition of selves in interaction is best described through the use of positions. Norton uses a similar approach to investigate how migrant women in the United States and Canada struggled to claim the right to speak English. She found that the women in her study found empowerment and legitimacy in work settings through familial, social, and religious positions (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). Positions, according to Harré and van Langenhove (2003), refer to collected 'moral' and personal attributes and expectations. They limit what and how we can speak, and if we should be heard or not. Positions may emerge naturally in interactions, but in some cases, dominant speakers may force their interlocutors, even unconsciously, into specific positions. In turn, the interlocutors may accept, negotiate or reject this positioning and reposition themselves and the other speaker. Harré and van Langenhove (2003) describe this process

as a ‘complex weaving together of the positions (and the cultural/social/political meanings that are attached to those positions) that are available within any number of discourses’ (p. 49).

It is this weaving of positions that can become, for adult migrants, what Norton refers to as ‘identity as a site of struggle’ (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). Adult migrants struggle through positions they assume, and positions assigned to them by power relations in interactions. In their struggle, they find positions from which they can be recognised as legitimate language users and members of society. It is important to note that positions, and their behavioural norms, are informed by larger social and political discourses we are exposed to daily, and are negotiated in terms of our relations to others. Therefore, the sociocultural and political contexts in which adult immigrants learn the local language are key to understand from where contradictory positions emerge.

Migration and linguistic integration in Europe

Most European countries have quite diverse populations and migration flows due to many political and economic alliances. This seemingly natural diversity of Europe is further advanced by policy-driven advocacy for multilingualism and reciprocal language learning amongst nation-states (Council of Europe, 2014). Although many European countries have experienced migration in many forms and for centuries, the social, economic and linguistic integration of migrants continue to be regarded as topical issues. In most cases, learning the local language is assumed to promote the social and economic integration of migrants. It is under this guise, that many European countries have developed policies and programs dedicated to the linguistic education or integration of migrants (Rocca et al., 2019).

The terminology used in these policies and practices, and even in research on this topic, are not without issue. To begin with, the term ‘migrant’ carries with it heavy economic and political inequalities. It makes a clear division between the ‘local’ and the ‘other’ implying ‘preferential social, economic and political rights’ for the former (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2015, p. 15). The term has also been used as a socially constructed, dynamic and unequal way to categorise people, what Tuuli Kurki (2018) calls ‘immigrantisation’ (p. 63). It perpetuates the separation between the ‘majority population’ and ‘immigrants’ and implies that the responsibility of integration falls on the immigrants alone.

The use of the ‘migrant’ and ‘immigrant’ (as anyone coming into a country) in this article is done with full awareness of these power inequalities. They are part of the lived experiences of the participants whose stories we interpret. They are also the basis of our interpretations of their identity struggles to make themselves equal to their local peers and to stand out as model (non)citizens in everyday linguistic interactions.

Learning Finnish as an adult immigrant

Finland is a country that has only relatively recently experienced larger immigration flows. At the end of the 1970s, Finland’s net immigration was still negative. The amount of people born abroad has increased in Finland only after the mid-1990s. While the share of persons with foreign background in Finland was 0.8% in 1990, the corresponding figures were 2.2% in 2000 and 8.0% in 2020 (Statistics Finland, 2021). As a result of the rapid increase of the immigrant population, Finland has developed integration policies and practices to answer to the needs of its newly diverse population.

As explained by Kurki (2018) integration training in Finland in the 1970s was offered mainly to refugees and focused mostly on language training. Working life guidance was added in the 1990s through existing programs for unemployed Finns. In the early 2000s, integration training was extended from refugees and asylum seekers to include all other immigrants as a response to labour market needs. Later in the 2010s, Finland shifted the responsibility of integration training from the public sector to private companies. Through procurement procedures, private education institutions and centres would present their integration training plans and curricula to the Center for Immigrant Integration (ELY-keskus). They evaluated and selected the training providers based on price first and quality second (Kurki, 2018, pp. 7-17).

As in many other countries, immigrants in Finland have particular difficulties in finding their place in the labour market. In 2021, the unemployment rate among immigrants was 18.0%, while it was only 9.4% among those born in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2023). As of 2021, adult immigrants in Finland were still offered integration training through private institutions. To be eligible one must have lived in Finland for less than three years, be at least 17 years old, and be or recently become unemployed (some exceptions apply). The stated aim of integration training is: ‘for the student to reach working basic proficiency in Finnish or Swedish [...] needed for functioning in everyday life, Finnish society, work life and further studies’ (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2012, p. 24).

Each integration training provider can develop their own integration training curriculum or adapt the National Curriculum of the Finnish Agency for Education to regional needs and opportunities. In their curricula, most training providers include Finnish language instruction¹, Finnish culture lessons, workplace internships, and vocational training guidance.

Finnish integration training programs and curricula present the learner (adult migrant), their motivations, goals, and previous knowledge as the centre and starting point for integration training. Nevertheless, their implementation often perpetuates the broad homogeneous categorisation of migrants who should be responsible for their own integration (Kurki, 2018). Integration training also tends to guide adult immigrants into paths that turn them, as fast as possible, into workers fitting the demands of the local labour market (Levine & Mallows, 2021). This usually disregards their previous knowledge, skills, and interests, effectively socialising them into becoming certain types of socially acceptable citizens (Colliander & Nordmark, 2023).

Local context: Turku, Finland 2021-2023

The city of Turku, Finland is the fifth biggest city in the country, with a total population of around 200,000 inhabitants. It is a port city with a history as the country’s previous capital city and the cultural capital of Europe in 2011. In terms of language, the city is mostly Finnish-speaking. However, due to its proximity to the sea and strong ties to Sweden, Swedish is also part of the linguistic landscape. The diverse population of the city of Turku includes also temporary students from its many universities. Some of them may stay in the city as job seekers or employees after completing their studies. At first glance, the community in the city of Turku is international and inviting. The share of foreign citizens is greater in Turku (8.2%) than in Finland on average (5.8%) (StatFin database, 2024) and navigating everyday life can be done through English or basic levels of Finnish. However, as we will discuss in this article, the realities of living as adult immigrants in Turku can be full of struggle.

During the years 2021-2023, seven adult immigrants living in the city of Turku contributed their immigration and language learning experiences for the study ‘Why Am I Learning Finnish?’. The study explores their processes of identity negotiation through language learning. In introductory and follow-up interviews approximately one year apart, participants shared their views on current language teaching practices, immigration experiences and lives before moving to Finland. They also shared stories of their attempts to use Finnish with locals and foreigners. Visible in these narrated interactions are examples of positioning struggles which we have interpreted as negotiations of selves. The research project, of which this study is a part of, adheres to the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (TENK) and has been approved in 2021 by the Ethics Committee for Human Sciences of the University of Turku.

Methods

In the field of narrative research, there are several ways to approach identity. In this study, we use the ‘small story approach’, in which narratives are understood as performances of a situated identity (c.f. Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). The analytical focus is on how people present themselves and negotiate their social position through narrative interactions. Our aim in using such narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997; Siivonen et al., 2023), is to explore the context-situated ways in which highly educated adult immigrants in Finland negotiate their identities through Finnish language learning.

Our data consists of introductory interviews from a longitudinal study with seven highly educated adult immigrants who participated in Finnish Integration Training between 2020 and 2023. The first author conducted the interviews in English and Spanish. The first interviews took place in late 2021 and 2022. They lasted from 40 to 60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim, simultaneously pseudonymising any personal or identifiable information. The data consists of 154 pages of transcribed text. The first author translated the quotes used in this article from interviews done in Spanish using a mix of literal and sociocultural translations. This method gives a more accurate English version of what participants expressed. The selection of the quotes is explained in more detail in the analysis section.

The interview schedule for the first round of interviews was formulated around the background of the participants. The interviews included their educational, professional, and personal journeys in their previous countries of residence. It also included their experiences of migration to Finland and their first encounters with the Finnish language. The interview questions were formulated openly, leaving space for the interviewees to reflect upon the continuity and change they may have perceived in themselves. Table 1 below provides their general background, although names and more specific details have been changed or omitted to protect their privacy.

Table 1. Participants of the study

Pseudonym	Age bracket	Region of previous residency	Highest education level (area of studies)	Number of languages (including Finnish)	Interview language
Karim	30-39	Asia	Postgraduate (Social Sciences)	Multiple, not specified	English
Lidia	40-49	Europe	Undergraduate	4	English
Marta	40-49	Latin America	Undergraduate (Psychology)	3	Spanish
Ana	40-49	Latin America	Undergraduate (Education)	3	Spanish
Laura	30-39	Latin America	Undergraduate (Business)	2	Spanish
Juan	30-39	Latin America	Teaching certification (Arts) Undergraduate (Engineering, not finished)	2	Spanish
Lucia	30-39	Latin America	Undergraduate (Tourism)	3	Spanish

We interviewed 5 women and 2 men, whose ages ranged from 30 to 50 years old (see Table 1). The interviewees arrived in Finland between 3 months to 2 years before the first interview. They had been participating in Finnish language integration courses for 3 months to 1 year. The courses were arranged in person or online depending on COVID-19 restrictions at that time. At the time of the first interview, two participants attended their second course in an institution different from their first language course. One participant had attended private lessons before their first course, and one had attended a course for retail workers (in Finnish) before being transferred to integration training². The remaining three participants were enrolled in their first language course.

Analysis: Complementing thematic and narrative positioning analysis

The first author started the analysis by familiarising with the interview data, reading through transcripts, and identifying initial codes using a grammatical approach (Miller, 2014). This method entails identifying statements which use subject-predicate elements, I/me or the more general one or you. It also includes statements in which the subject could be deduced from the immediate context (Miller, 2014). We then sorted the initial codes into tentative themes which related the self (I/me) to Finnish language learning. Afterwards, we refined the initial themes according to their coherence with the idea of

identity struggles. Mainly the struggles between positions of ‘subject of’ (I) and ‘subject to’ (me) used by Weedon (1991). We labelled these themes: competence, immigrant-ness (Kurki, 2018), and parenthood.

After the thematic reading of data, the first author identified ‘small stories’ from the interview accounts. Small stories refer to short fragments of the interview speech, like incomplete narratives, descriptions and fragments about the past, present and future (Siivonen et al., 2023; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). They are produced in particular social contexts and can be defined as fleeting interactions. They are often considered to be about seemingly inconsequential incidents and wider social surroundings (Bamberg, 2006a, 2006b; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Their thorough analysis highlights undetected aspects of negotiations of selves (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006).

The initial coding using subject predicates, and their thematic grouping into subject positions, served as the foundation for our more detailed positioning analysis. Narrative positioning analysis focuses on how the interviewees narrates these small stories. It pays attention to how they position themselves and others at different levels: as characters in the narrated story; as narrators and audiences (like the interviewer or the imagined audience), and as part or counterparts of ‘master narratives’. Master narratives include the personal and socioculturally created discourses which inform our actions (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). An important analytical question in narrative positioning is: what is the narrator trying to accomplish by sharing the story (Bamberg, 1997)?

We contextualise participants’ positioning struggles against social discourses of migration (master narrative) which minimise individuals to their migrant status (cf. Kurki, 2018) and measure migrants against imagined nationalistic standards (cf. Archakis & Tsakona, 2022). These discourses intersect with many aspects of their identity, including language learning. They create an array of positions participants can assume, be assigned or negotiate in their narrations. We interpreted participants’ uses and changes between positions and subject predicates (I/me, one, you) as markers of negotiations of identity. In what follows, we share some of the interviewees’ small stories about their identity struggles related to Finnish language learning. We selected the stories in which the positioning struggle most clearly represented negotiations of identity. In this way, we present the personal struggle of one participant in relation to the common thematic struggle of all participants.

Results

Identity negotiations of the adult immigrants who participated in this study can be described by referring to the specific ‘struggles’ related to their Finnish language learning as highly educated migrants. First, they associated the requirement of learning Finnish with the theme of recognition of their qualifications and capabilities, as highly educated with professional careers before their move to Finland. Second, Finnish language learning was associated with their immigrant status and comparisons between the immigrant self, other immigrants, and local Finns were another common theme. Third, the identity negotiations through language learning extended to family relations as participants navigate parenting and role modelling in a multilingual environment in the third common theme. For clarity, we are presenting each theme separately. In reality, these struggles to position oneself are all connected and often overlapping.

Struggle for recognition of competence

All participants in this study had attended tertiary education in their home countries, and most of them have years of work experience. Additionally, most participants spoke two more languages besides Finnish. They could position themselves as multilingual, highly educated and competent professionals in their respective fields. Since their immigration to Finland was not for professional reasons, participants did not have employment secured upon arrival. They soon realised that learning Finnish is a prerequisite for finding a job. More importantly, it is a requirement for being recognised as competent professionals.

Highly educated illiterate

The dilemma is that I am an educated person. I have flown here in a plane to here and just in one- in one night, I became illiterate, so I cannot work anywhere, any office. No office will accept me, then the choice is skilled labour. (Karim)

Karim holds a master's degree and speaks multiple languages. The struggle to find a graduate-level job without Finnish language proficiency forces adult immigrants to rethink their career expectations ('then the choice is skilled labour'). It puts into question their identity as highly educated professionals. Especially at the start of their integration training, participants struggle to negotiate their professional identities with their understanding of who they are in this new situation. In the short story above, Karim narrates his struggle between his position as highly educated ('I am an educated person') and the contradictory position of illiterate assigned to him because of his lack of Finnish language skills. The position of illiterate ('I became illiterate') can be interpreted not only as being unable to use the Finnish language but also as having all previous education and work experience invalidated, overnight. In his struggle Karim still reaffirms his position as highly educated, implying that the issue of (in)competence does not lie with him, but with those who will not accept him as a professional and competent worker ('no office will accept me'). Even if he was a competent, highly educated professional in his previous country of residence, Karim is redefined in the Finnish language-speaking context as illiterate and unskilled.

The following small story further exemplifies the struggle beyond the labour-related recognition of the self as a highly educated professional. The Finnish language learning itself re-enforces a sense of incompetence for participants, as they struggle against aspects of their Finnish learning which position them as 'illiterate' regardless of their multilingual capabilities.

(In)competent multilingual

I mean, at the beginning you don't know and you go even happily ((fake laugh))3 yes I-minä olen ((translation: I am)) {Ana} and then you realise that they teach you things that even the teacher tells you, yes that is very good but you don't use it. (Ana)

In Ana's story of an interaction with a teacher, she struggles to position herself as a competent language learner and user. Ana speaks Spanish fluently and uses two other languages to an understandable level. When she attempts to perform in Finnish as an experienced multilingual, she is invalidated by her teacher. This is based, not on Ana's use of grammar or vocabulary, but on the fact that she is not using the abbreviated version associated with colloquial speech. Ana's and other participants' utterances in Finnish are not evaluated based on their overall understandability but on their status as non-fluent speakers. This status is directly associated with their status as migrants. In this way, the

discourse of migration restricts participants' position as competent users by constantly comparing them against an imaginary 'native' national fluency with unwritten linguistic nuances (Archakis & Tsakona, 2022).

Interestingly, all participants actively resisted the position of incompetent Finnish users during the interviews. They all incorporated Finnish words, explained grammatical rules and pointed out the differences between the formal and colloquial uses of the language to the interviewer. This metalinguistic awareness reflects the participants' struggle as multilingual and increasingly competent users while still being positioned as incompetent.

Enduring learner

Or sometimes I tell my {partner}, oh how do you call this thing and I say it in Finnish, because I forgot in Spanish, and eh there are things like- or sometimes with the {child} like- since {they} respond to everything in Finnish, well it sticks to me too, or sometimes I am with- {latinx} and they ask me something and I jo kyllä ((translation: yes, yes;)), si, si ((translation: yes, yes)). (Laura)

In this narration, Laura is a competent Finnish speaker but not always by choice. Forgetting words in Spanish, or Finnish words sticking to her from conversations with her child are not Laura's own efforts to practise Finnish ('I forgot in Spanish / it sticks to me'). Laura's story demonstrates how unavoidable the position of language learner and its supposed lack of competence is for adult immigrants. Laura uses Spanish with her family and friends. Regardless, the Finnish language permeates these interactions, as exemplified in the quote above, leading her to endure constant learning and practising, even on her time off from studying Finnish.

Although the position of learner may be temporary, it triggers identity negotiations for participants in this context because of intense exposure. Even if they had experienced language learning as adults, most of them had not done so as migrants. The struggle stems from the contradiction between feeling like enduring learners in constant 'incompetence' and their own standards of independent communicative competence expected of highly educated multilingual adults.

Struggle as the immigrant 'other'

As participants develop competence in the Finnish language, they also struggle to position themselves against the discourse of immigrant-ness as developed by Kurki (2018). This form of migration discourse implies that the local majority views migrants as a homogeneous group of 'others'; different from the locals, but not necessarily different from each other. Participants' struggle shows their loss of individuality in favour of the 'otherness' of being an immigrant in Finland. But it also reveals that they may unconsciously perpetuate it on to their migrant peers in the hopes of being recognised as exemplary migrants.

Exemplary immigrant

Juan: it's something I was chatting with my {partner} about and it bothers me a little that a lot of people come here and abuse the system, like in comparison with people who come, you are a good example. You have studies and keep on studying, you are taking advantage of it, but for good. And I, for example, I when I was in the other school, I saw a lot of foreign people that arrived to do this ((crosses arms)) not interested at all.

Interviewer: I will sit here and they will pay me for sitting here.

Juan: Exactly

In this story, Juan struggles to negotiate several positions: first, against the dichotomy between good and bad immigrants; and second, against a discourse that merges his individuality with the amalgam ‘migrant’. Juan positions himself at a distance from other immigrants, including his peers by sympathising with the sentiment of annoyance (‘it bothers me a little’) towards passive immigrants. Throughout his interview, Juan positions himself as hard-working, explaining how his proactiveness has earned him personal and professional success. Consequently, Juan interprets the passivity of his immigrant peers as ‘abusing the system’, not earning their opportunities. He ratifies this by positioning himself and the interviewer as ‘good’ examples, who ‘takes advantage’ for ‘good’ by actively studying and learning the Finnish language. The contribution from the interviewer is a preliminary interpretation of Juan’s expression ‘abuse the system’ and his use of body language which is later ratified by Juan himself (‘they will pay me to sit here’). We do not see this as a leading comment, but we acknowledge that it perpetuates the view of passivity as ‘abusing the system’.

In this positioning struggle, Juan is part of the immigrantisation (cf. Kurki, 2018) process as ‘subject to’ and as ‘subject of’ it (Weedon, 1991). He is a subject to this migrant discourse because of his residency status in Finland and his experience of dominant immigrant categorisation. He is also a subject of immigrantisation because he perpetuates it, unintentionally. He positions passive migrants as a homogeneous group collectively ‘abusing the system’ from which he wants to disassociate. All participants made similar references to trying to perform as ‘good’ proactive immigrants, carrying a similar implicit exclusiveness which separates other migrants as opposites.

Proper language learners

Go figure that my classmates ((laugh)) I mean, every time that they teach something I am the one who’s like, and why like this? Why do you say this? Why did you add I? and why? I mean, I do look at the details and my classmates don’t. Sometimes I say, well- or they say any questions? And they start joking because they call me {nickname}, oh {nickname} has a question ((laugh)). (Marta)

Marta is multilingual, has a higher education degree and defines herself as a diligent learner. Like Juan, Marta also struggles to position herself as an active and thorough learner. As she compares herself to her peers, she positions herself as a student who participates and pays attention in class. This affirms her position as highly educated with certain expectations of how a good learner should behave. Marta sets herself apart, as Juan does, by positioning her classmates as collectively not attending to details (‘I do look at the details and my classmates don’t’). Since they do not perform according to Marta’s expectations of active learner behaviour, they are positioned as her opposite: passive and disinterested learners. This dynamic with her peers turns into a recurring joke in the classroom, and Marta is recognised by her peers as the active learner she seeks to portray.

Since all participants were enrolled in language courses at the time of the interview, most described or positioned their selves as active or actively integrating. However, performing as an active learner is not always so straightforward. Karim’s contribution below shows us how immigrant-ness and passivity, including that perpetuated by Juan and Marta, overlooks other struggles immigrants may be facing.

So people like me, they sit in class for 6 months, one year, then they listen noise. And after, what {government agency} do, they put you in the toughest class, for six months, until graduation, then they bring you down to the other level, then they bring you down to the other level, and then to the basic level. (Karim)

Before this narrated small story, Karim explained he believes that if a person cannot understand a language, the language becomes only noise. He ('people like me') is not able to participate in his Finnish language classroom because he cannot decode the 'noise' due to his lack of Finnish language skills. Karim's story can serve as an example of a mispositioned passive learner by the expectations associated with motivated, active, and experienced learners. In this story, the government agency, an almost omnipotent character, positions people to specific courses ('they put you in the toughest class') and by default into specific positions in these courses. Karim and most other participants were assigned to a fast-track, intensive language course most likely based on their ability to learn, previous education, and linguistic skills (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2012, 2022). What he expresses in this quote shows the struggle to demonstrate the expected behaviour of an active immigrant and a highly educated individual. Instead of participating in class or progressing rapidly, he sits and listens. These are the behaviours that peers like Juan and Marta, may interpret as a lack of interest and demotivation or 'bad' immigrant behaviour.

As explained before, migrants are almost always considered as lesser others (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2015) and as solely responsible for their integration (Kurki, 2018). This sets certain expectations about how migrants should integrate and perform in integration training. The background of participants as highly educated sets the standard even higher. Consequently, behaviours outside the expected, like passivity and silence, are interpreted in a much more critical way, even by peers.

Struggle as parents in a multilingual context

Changes in family dynamics accompany the participants' move to Finland and integration processes. Participants face their own integration, changes, and learning and that of their family members, especially their children. Participants struggle to reconcile contradictory positions related to parenthood that are created as they learn Finnish alongside their children.

Lagging learner

{they} had to go from learning Swedish to learning Finnish. But children learn amazingly fast. This is the age thing again. By Chris- so {they} went in and all that and by Christmas {they were} able to simply communicate. By the end of the first year, {they were} close to fluent and after two years you would never know there was a difference. (Lidia)

Lidia is fluent in Swedish and is part of a multilingual family of four. When they first moved to Finland, they lived in a predominantly Swedish-speaking area. Linguistic integration for Lidia was not an issue until they moved to a predominantly Finnish-speaking. She experienced, for the first time, constant exposure to a new language alongside her family. Unsurprisingly, she often compared her learning progress to her children's, and other younger learners, during the interview ('the age thing again'). In the small story above, she implicitly compares her children as learning Finnish faster than she is ('children learn amazingly fast'). She is left lagging as a language learner but also as a migrant parent. In this role, she is expected to educate her children and to be a model

of integration. Try as she may, her children surpass her own knowledge and abilities in Finnish. She then becomes unable to guide their education in a Finnish context.

Most other participants also perceived their age as a factor affecting their learning, often comparing themselves as slower or worse learners than younger peers. For participants with children, this setback attributed to age, also contests their position as more knowledgeable in the parent-child relationship. While surpassing the abilities of parents may be seen as a natural development in any family as children grow older, the process is highly accelerated for migrants. It may create power and dependency shifts, especially with underaged children (cf. Norton Peirce, 1995). Participants experience that 'the age thing' challenges their capabilities as learners and as parents; roles in which they should be, by experience alone, more advanced.

Articulate parent

Yes, yes, my children right now I am like joking like, hey, very soon- you and I won't be able to communicate, you don't speak Spanish anymore, you are speaking only Finnish
Yeah right, stop, not true ((imitating children)).
But obviously I am saying it joking because they do speak Spanish. (Juan)

Juan and his family, including his Finnish spouse, used mostly Spanish to communicate before moving to Finland. In this narrated small story, Juan positions himself as a protector of this first language which used to be shared ('you don't speak Spanish anymore'). He is forced into this position because, like in Lidia's story, Juan's school-aged children are progressing much faster in their Finnish language than he is. This creates communication barriers, but only for him ('you and I won't be able to communicate') not between the siblings or the other parent. Even if he mentions twice that the interaction is a joke, the struggle is visible throughout the interview and past his light-hearted manner. He mentioned the issue several times and stressed how much he wants to preserve his language and its cultural practices with his family.

Lucia experiences similar struggles caused by the language progress gap. In her case, it expands from maintaining communication to preserving authority.

But my {child} also doesn't want to speak to me in Finnish, sometimes I scold {them} and {they} start speaking in Finnish, so that I don't understand. And I say, hey, what are you saying?
No, nothing mama ((laugh)).
But yes, I do understand, {they} teaches me some things when {they} feel like it. (Lucia)

In this small story, Lucia struggles to reaffirm her position of authority because the language learning gap is more than a communication barrier. Finnish is becoming a tool for the children to undermine her authority ('I scold {them}' / '{they} speak Finnish' / 'so that I don't understand'), a secret language they can use against Lucia. Like Juan, she shares this interaction in a light-hearted way, but the struggle is visible and complex. Lucia's children were both born in Finland. This means that, even if the language used at home is Spanish, their main language everywhere else has been Finnish. Lucia struggles to catch up with their natural language development in an environment which is not natural to her. In Lucia's story, the shifting dynamics in the family also demonstrate how parents can become dependent on the children for their own Finnish language learning ('{they} teaches me some things when {they} feel like it').

Migrant parents are faced with the challenge of learning a language which may ultimately create a communicative and emotional gap between them and their children. It

may also lead to their losing authority over underaged children, especially if they become dependent on their more advanced language skills.

Present parent

And they told me, no, we'll accommodate you in a course, I think you could go to an intensive course. And I said, I don't want to go to an intensive course because I have children, I can't study all day. (Marta)

In this small story with government officials as 'they', Marta negotiates her position as a good mother, present in her children's lives. Marta negotiates being a mother as a role model by seeking to learn the local language, and being a present mother who spends most of her time caring for her children ('I have children, I can't study all day').

The position of parent, specifically of mother, which Norton (2013; also in Norton Peirce, 1995) found to be empowering for migrant women in Canada, seems to become a point of contention for the participants in this study. They struggle to reconcile the expectations associated with the role, particularly between being role models and being educators for their children or other family members. Even participants without children expressed a struggle to present themselves as a 'role model of success' for their family abroad while experiencing being an excluded minority in Finland.

Discussion

In this article we have explored how narrated small stories related to Finnish language learning represent negotiations of identity for highly educated immigrants. We have categorised these negotiations into three themes: competence, immigrant-ness, and parenthood in a migratory context. We have interpreted them in the hopes of answering: what kinds of contradictory identity positions are related to adult immigrants' Finnish language learning? and how are they positioning the 'self' in their small stories?

Concerning competence, we have found that participants struggle to reconcile their competent highly educated professional and multilingual selves against the disregard of their qualifications and experiences which is based on their Finnish language skills. Karim expresses the stark comparison between being highly educated and becoming illiterate, which showcases a negotiation of self that surpasses educational qualifications (cf. Ndomo, 2020). The illiterate position also neglects participants' multilingual abilities. Through constant exposure to the Finnish language, they find themselves as enduring language learners and forced multilinguals, which produces a cycle of incompetence in both Finnish and their more dominant languages as they are slowly forgotten. Participants' positions as Finnish language users are restricted or even denied, not because of their skills, but because their legitimacy as users is negated (cf. Ahlgren & Rydell, 2020).

As highly educated, participants have created expectations about their selves in terms of knowledge and learning. These are at odds with how they are able to perform and advance in their Finnish language learning. It makes them evaluate themselves as incapable based on interactions with the dominant fluent Finnish speakers (Harré & van Langenhove, 2003). Despite the difficulties, participants develop and display their Finnish linguistic competence. They continuously struggle to reposition themselves as legitimate speakers, seeking empowerment in being able to understand their surroundings better.

Around the theme of immigrant-ness, we have found that participants struggle to position themselves as individuals against the broad categorisation of ‘migrant other’ (immigrantisation; Kurki, 2018). Participants create for themselves the position of good immigrants against a discourse of migration that views them as collectively lacking (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2015). From this position, they present themselves as active, motivated and independent (non)citizens (cf. Nordmark & Colliander, 2023). Unfortunately, in their quest to stand out, participants must position others around them as different, something to be compared to. This effectively reproduces the idea of others, particularly the less active migrants, as collectively ‘bad’ in comparison to the projected ‘good immigrant’ self. In this negotiation, participants redefine their idea of who they are, and reclaim their individuality from the collective ‘migrant’. But, if they are unable to perform as is expected of a ‘good immigrant’ they may not be recognised as individuals and may find themselves again in the immigrantisation cycle.

In their theme of parenting in a migratory context, we have found that language plays a significant role in the shifting familial dynamics. Participants' positions as educators and authority figures are contradicted by their children's faster progress in language learning. As adults underperform as language learners, the children may become educators, helping their parents learn. The children may also turn the Finnish language into a ‘secret language’ which excludes and undermines their parents. As role models of integration, participants also struggle to continue their language learning, at the cost of quality time spent with their children. As both parents and children progress unevenly in their learning, participants also assume the role of preserver of their first shared language. As they negotiate their selves as parents, participants have to reconcile their ideals of parenthood with shifting familial dynamics and modelling a linguistic practice which may cause a communicative and emotional divide with their children (see Armstrong, 2013, for similar familial dynamics regarding heritage language learning).

These findings, and our interpretations, bring to light some ways in which highly educated adult immigrants negotiate their identities through Finnish language learning even in small interactions. In line with Norton's (2013) ‘identity as a site of struggle’, some positioning struggles our participants experience have empowered them beyond the constraints of the sociocultural discourses of migration mentioned. However, this empowerment often comes at great personal cost. Additionally, their own empowerment can result in perpetuating cycles of immigrantisation of others. In the end, these findings further demonstrate that migrants are not the passive homogeneous and unchanging group they are made to be in relation to discourses of migration and language learning.

Notes

- ¹ Even though Swedish is an official language in Finland and is an option in integration training in the national curriculum, most of the population in the country uses Finnish as a primary language. This applies to the city of Turku, where the research project is being carried out which means that adult immigrants are encouraged to learn that language.
- ² This participant was originally not offered language integration training because their residency in Finland extended the 3-year requirement.
- ³ The transcript conventions used in this article are adapted from ten Have (2011): {Anonymised/pseudonymised content} and ((Transcriber's descriptions/notes))

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