

Silence and Resistance as Experiences and Presentations of Pupil Agency in Finnish Elementary School English Lessons

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This paper explores the multitude of ways in which Finnish fifth and sixth grade elementary school pupils experience and present their agency in English lessons, with a special focus on pupils' silence and resistance. Pupil agency is often seen as observable action that is oriented towards institutionally accepted goals and norms. In communicative and constructivist understandings of foreign language learning, learner agency is related to the idea of learning by participating. Participation in the classroom is not only individually but also socially constrained. This article is based on a larger, ecologically oriented ethnographic study on fifth and sixth graders' language learner identities in English language learning conducted over one-and-a-half school years in a Finnish elementary school. The data were gathered by questionnaires, classroom observations, pupil interviews, group talks, authentic documents, and a self-portrait drawing task. In this paper, I will mainly make use of the pupils' self-portraits as English learners and their answers to a semi-open questionnaire. Silent and resistant pupils are often seen as problematic and non-agentive in the language classroom. The study shows that the pupils' experiences and presentations of agency may be contradictory, and the expressions of agency cannot always be interpreted in a straightforward manner. The findings suggest that remaining silent and showing resistance in the classroom can be manifestations of complex pupil agency, and they need to be further studied to understand how to promote everybody's participation and positive agency in learning English at school.

Keywords: pupil agency, silence, resistance, affordances, ecological perspective

1 Pupil agency from an ecological perspective

Agency is usually related to individual agents. Gao (2010) defines agency as an individual's will and capacity to act. In this definition, *will* gives room for individual choice, whereas *capacity* refers both to individual ability and the possibilities for action available in the physical, social, and temporal context.

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Ahearn's (2001: 131) definition of agency as "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" includes the socio-cultural idea that individual competences are originated in and mediated through social interaction.

Agency refers to action, but the ways pupil agency is expressed in foreign language learning at school are often taken for granted, and agency is only seen as observable activity that is in line with the institutional goals. One language learning object in the National Core Curriculum is that "[t]he pupils will learn to function responsibly and enterprisingly in language-learning situations" (POPS 2004, 139). *Functioning enterprisingly* refers to activity, and *responsibility* can be interpreted as following the institutionally accepted norms. Institutional norms are reflected in more or less visible and audible expressions of agency and their assessment by teachers and other pupils as pupil activity in the classroom. Individual pupils are often characterized as active or passive and positively or negatively oriented towards studying foreign languages.

Mercer's (2011) idea of agency as "a complex, dynamic system" brings forth the ecological understanding that agency is always linked with *affordances* which are possibilities and constraints for action that are dynamically constructed as individuals act in their environments. In ecological understandings of language learning, learner *agency* and *affordances* are seen as mutually constitutive and constructed in the relationship between the learner and her environment (van Lier 2004). A learner can be active only if there are suitable affordances for action, and if she is able and willing to utilize them. Agency is thus not only an individual property that can be promoted and developed through education, but a situationally constructed, dynamic, and active learner identity that changes from one context to another. The emergence of pupil agency requires affordances suitable to different pupils. Some pupils are, for instance, afraid to participate if they feel insecure and need encouragement and support, while challenging situations seem to activate others. It is important that teachers recognize varying manifestations of pupil agency in order to support and assess pupils individually.

None of the aforementioned definitions of agency state explicitly from whose point of view agency is defined. Pupil agency becomes more complex if we ask whose interpretation counts: the teacher's, other pupils' or the actor's herself. One's acted and experienced agency may contradict each other, which can be problematic for pupil assessment. In this article, the aim is to regard agency from both outside observer's and pupils' points of view to examine what kind of language learner agency fifth and sixth graders experience and present in English language learning at school contexts. This paper focuses especially on the expressions of silence and resistance, which I have found problematic in my work as an English teacher because refusing to talk or cooperate in the language classroom seem to work against the institutional goals of communicative language learning and successful interaction. Pupils who do not participate in the interaction of the language lessons are assessed solely on the basis of their test results and written assignments, although practicing oral skills is emphasized in the elementary school curriculum.

2 Research context and data collection

This article is based on an ethnographic dissertation study on fifth and sixth graders' language learner identities in three contexts of learning English in a Finnish elementary school (Skinnari 2012). The contexts studied are English as a Foreign Language classrooms, CLIL classrooms where different subject contents are taught through English, and situations involving special education. In this article these contexts will not be specified or compared.

The study had features from action research as it was carried out by a teacher-researcher studying partly her own pupils. The data were collected over one-and-a-half school years in a Finnish elementary school. All the pupils who participated in the study took part in EFL teaching that started from class three. Since their first school year, most of them had also attended CLIL classes where different content subjects were taught through English. Some of the pupils received extra support in their English learning over the school year, either in separate small groups during the EFL lessons or after school. Language learner identities were studied as short-term pupil positions, more stable stereotypical pupil roles and language learner trajectories through observed action, and the pupils' experiences and understandings of themselves as English learners. In this article, the emphasis will be on different pupil positions and stereotypical pupil roles.

In the beginning of the study, background information was gathered during the school year 2007–2008 from 109 pupils by a semi-structured questionnaire. Since the pupils' written accounts were often short, more data were gathered by a drawing task which offered them a different way to express their experiences. 95 pupils drew their self-portraits as English learners. In the beginning of the following school year, 36 new fifth graders answered the questionnaire and drew their self-portraits to provide additional data for possible new themes to appear. Nineteen pupils were either interviewed or selected for audio- or videotaped group discussions on the basis of their observed differences in participation in and orientation towards learning English at school. All the audiotaped discussions and selections of the videotaped material were transcribed. The language learner trajectories of nine pupils were presented in the study as individual language learner identities that were constructed as a temporal process through pupils' positioning in classroom interaction and experiences thereof. All data were analyzed by content analysis through repeated and comparative readings.

In this paper, especially the self-portraits of the pupils and their answers to the semi-open questionnaire conducted in the beginning of the school year will be utilized. Language learner self-portraits have previously been deployed, for example, by Kalaja, Alanen and Dufva (2008) to investigate how student teachers see themselves as English language learners. In their study, the drawings revealed strong socialization to institutional ways of learning English, represented by the presence of books and notebooks, whereas other learners were seldom present. As a teacher, I have also found that pupils often use drawings as self-assessment to express their feelings in written tests. In particular they use smiley faces to communicate their feelings to their teacher. Collecting pupils' self-portraits for research purposes started out as an

experiment which resulted in humorous, ironic, and strongly expressed experiences of the learners.

3 The “good language learner”

Pupil agency is defined in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for basic education (POPS 2004) as an educational goal that enhances learner participation and is oriented towards institutionally accepted norms and ways of acting. According to the objectives of the National Core Curriculum, the “good language learner” is active, social, courageous, persistent, and studious. In the definition of learning strategies for good performance pupils are expected to “understand the importance of persistent practice” (POPS 2004: 140). Understanding refers to internalized norms and persistent practice to pupil activity. The institutional goals of language learning are also locally interpreted when the ideal role model of a “good language learner” is constructed and manifested in the classrooms. When the pupils were asked in the questionnaire to describe themselves as English learners, some fifth graders reported that they were *happy*. This answer conveys a very positive attitude towards learning English, but it may also be a locally rewarded presentation of a “good language learner”.

The researched fifth and sixth graders had internalized the institutional norms and locally constructed understandings of a “good language learner” (Skinnari 2012). When asked about their active participation in the English lessons, many pupils gave excuses and reasons for being silent and not participating. In some of these explanations silence was seen as having a positive effect on language learning. When the sixth graders were asked about studying in their groups, a boy wrote:

This group is good. Everyone is good at English. The group is very quiet and good at learning.

Being quiet was, in the boy’s answer, associated with studying properly and, as a result, learning English. Although silence may have been an affordance for studying, many pupils seemed to think that they should participate more actively. A fifth-grade girl wrote in the questionnaire:

I don’t participate very actively in the English lessons now, but there will be a day when I will be more active.

More light was shed on the girl’s answer when she reported elsewhere in the questionnaire that she was not good at writing English, but she could speak English well. She explained, however, that this ability never showed in the lessons, and *the teacher will not notice it, anyway*. Thus, remaining silent may have been a chosen strategy the pupil had adopted on the basis of her previous experiences of not having opportunities for participation and presenting her oral competence in the English classroom. If nobody listens to you, why bother. Other pupils also reported that they did not raise their hands in the English lessons because they thought that they would not get a chance to answer. A

fifth-grade boy wrote that he did not get the opportunity to answer in the English lessons because he was a slow thinker and would have needed more time to process his answer. The teacher's role in controlling learner participation was central. Tsui (1996) reported on uneven allocation of turns and teachers' intolerance of silence in language classrooms, which diminished the participation of the weak and shy students. In the questionnaire, many pupils defined their activity in the classroom by writing about raising their hands, which is an institutionally accepted way to get a turn to talk. In some groups, certain pupils talked without permission which seemed to be an interactional style that silenced other pupils. Raising one's hand was an institutional affordance that offered a democratic opportunity to participate and present one's agency in the classroom (Sahlström 1999).

4 Pupil agency and institutional orientation

In the English lessons pupils are assessed by their observed activity, although official pupil assessment still mainly concentrates on written assignments and tests (Luukka et al. 2008: 129; Dufva, Suni, Aro & Salo 2011: 114). The fifth and sixth graders in the study seemed to very well understand what kind of activity was expected of them in order for them to be positioned in a certain way, for example, as a good language learner. Pupil positions were constructed in comparison to the institutional ideal of the "good language learner". By repeated positioning practices, such as interaction patterns and pupil assessment, these positions could become stereotypical roles. Figure 1 shows language learner positions that are related to the pupils' observed agency and institutional orientation from teacher's point of view. These positions also emerge in the data as roles and labels that pupils give to other pupils and themselves, for example when they tell about a classmate who *always disturbs* or name a group of pupils as *language geniuses* or *the silent girls*.

If pupils participate actively and have a positive orientation towards English lessons, they can be positioned as "good language learners". This, however, is not always their own experience and understanding of their position. For example, some pupils reported that they considered themselves as poor in English or not interested in studying English at school, but they participated in the lessons because *one has to be* active. In spite of their internally experienced orientation, these pupils had their reasons for following a strategy where they presented themselves as active. They could gain acceptance and avoid problems by showing agency that was not in accordance with their experiences of meaningfulness. Some pupils wrote that studying English was *boring*, or that English was not important for them in their past or present experiences or imagined future lives. Participating or being silent did not, in any straightforward way, explain the pupils' orientation towards the English language or studying it.

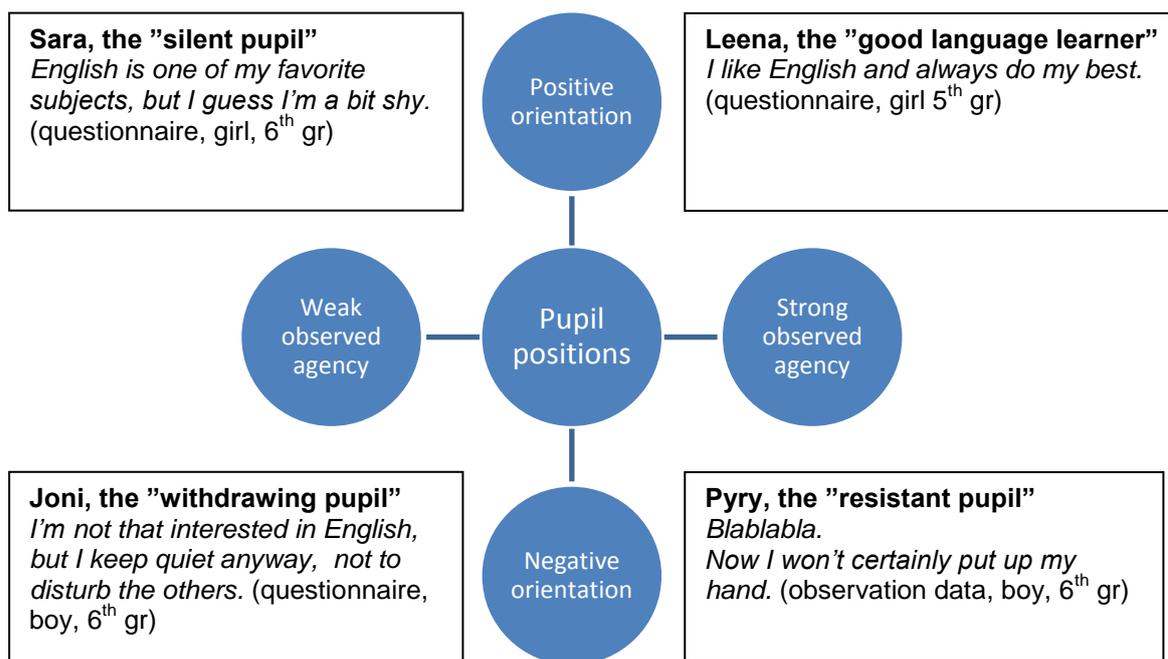


Figure 1. Stereotypical pupil positions in relation to observed agency and orientation to institutional goals

The exemplary extracts from the data in Figure 1 illustrate stereotypical pupil positions where the pupil's activity and attitude towards learning English are presented. However, during one English lesson the pupils could temporarily shift from one position to another, depending on their investment in the task at hand or who they were working with. Norton Peirce's (1995) term investment seems to be more suitable than the idea of constant motivation in describing the pupil positions and agency presentations which were in the state of change during the school year. Pupil positions could turn into more stable pupil roles through positioning practices as repeated action and experiences enforced certain positions in relation to the other pupils' positions in the classroom. For example, the "silent girls" or the "rowdy boys" were stereotypical pupil positions that were not only constructed on the basis of observed activity but also on generalized understandings of gender.

Sara, who exemplifies the "silent pupil", explained the reason for her silence to be a personality trait (shyness). However, in the group discussion data another reason for the girl's silence came up; her classmates told that she had no friends in her English group where some boys silenced other pupils by laughing, joking, and causing disturbance. Yet, Sara stated that she had a positive orientation towards studying English at school.

Joni, the "withdrawing pupil", was also silent and passive, but his orientation towards studying English was negative. Withdrawing fifth and sixth graders had very varying language competences. Some pupils told that studying English at school was boring, although they did well in their studies. Others seemed to withdraw because they were not successful in their studies, and found English too difficult or their investment in it too low.

In Figure 2, taken from the pupils' self-portraits as language learners, a passive fifth grader wrote in Finnish: I'd rather ride than study English! This reveals a contradiction in meanings the pupil gives for studying English and self-chosen free time activities.



Figure 2. I'd rather ride than study English

The interviews show that for many pupils learning English at school and using English in their free time are separate activities, and out-of-school language learning is not considered as "real learning" (see Nikula & Pitkänen-Huhta 2008). Socialization practices at school can also restrict children's agency (Mick 2011, 568). Pyry, the "resistant pupil" in Figure 1, showed openly his negative attitude towards studying English at school, but in the interview he told about using English in his free time in a very positive manner.

The "good language learner" was described by the pupils as one who shows her ability and eagerness to study English, like Leena in Figure 1, who openly tells about her positive attitude toward English. When asked about being active in the English classes the activity the pupils especially reported was raising hands. Volunteering to answer also occurred in the pupils' self-portraits as English learners, as in Figure 3, where a sixth-grade girl presents herself as a good language learner in institutionally accepted ways. She sits straight behind her desk with a happy smile, holding up her hand. On the desk there is a book as a symbolic artifact of studying, and the light bulb over her head expresses inner activity and competence. In the picture, studying and learning English are presented in a positive light as both visible and inner activity of the pupil.



Figure 3. The “good language learner”

Speaking English and presenting positive orientation towards studying the language were seen as presentations of being a “good language learner”. Especially the fifth graders reported about their interest in and enthusiasm about studying English. Some of them described themselves in the questionnaire as happy English learners, which suggests that they had positive attitudes towards studying the language. Although the sixth graders seemed less open about reporting their attitude, most of them regarded learning English as important. In spite of this, it was not always fun, which caused contradicting feelings and investment. For some pupils, the reluctance to express their opinion might have been affected by the fact that the researcher was also their teacher.

The answers to the questionnaire and class observations suggest that the sixth graders resisted studying English at school more often than the fifth graders. However, their expressions of resistance were frequently disguised and manifested in humorous comments and ironically ambiguous self-portraits. In Figure 4, a fifth-grade boy has portrayed himself as a language learner with two contrasting voices. The “good language learner” with a pencil in his hand speaks out: English is such fun! Simultaneously the character thinks: Boring. He is surrounded by potato crisps and sweets that belong to more attractive free-time activities. The contrast between studying at school and having fun is highlighted in the mad gaze of the character that seems to question the reliability of his comment.



Figure 4. English is such fun! Boring

The drawings seemed to invite more ironical, ambiguous, and multi-voiced representations of being a learner than written questionnaires and interviews. This could be due to cartoon and comic strip styles that the pupils were familiar with.

Towards the end of the school year, before moving to the upper school, some sixth grade pupils also showed collective resistance by sulking, complaining, making faces, and being less active in the English classes. Resistance in a group could be safer for an individual pupil and offer feelings of belonging to the group.

Not all pupils wanted to be positioned as “good language learners”. This may follow from their different interests, but also from the fact that presenting certain pupil positions might have been rewarding. In some groups, social pressure restricted presentations of activity, but presenting a resistant or nonchalant attitude could also have been admired by some peers. Irony and contradiction between the experienced and acted pupil positions was expressed, in particular, in the self-portraits of the pupils. A resistant attitude was part of adolescent life and adopting a new upper school student identity.

The rest of this paper will focus on two pupil positions in Figure 1, the “silent pupil” and the “resistant pupil”. These are constructed and presented in relation

to other pupil positions, especially to the “good language learner” as an institutional model and goal.

5 The “silent pupil”

Silence was understood by many pupils as a manifestation of not being active. When the pupils were asked to write about their active participation in the English lessons, they gave many reasons for their silence, both individual and social. Individual reasons for not being more active were often linked to personal traits and interests, exemplified by the following extracts from the questionnaire data:

I don't know why I don't participate. I guess I've always been a bit shy.
(girl, 6th gr)

In the English lessons, when I should speak, I feel nervous. (boy, 6th gr)

I'm not so interested in English. (boy, 5th gr)

Shyness and nervousness that the first two pupils reported can be signs of language anxiety, often seen as a personal trait. Language anxiety can, however, also result from the social context of language learning (MacIntyre 1995, 97). The third pupil's reason for not participating is personal since he does not seem to find learning English meaningful. As Harun (2009, 24) has found, the learners' reasons for not participating in language lessons may be personal, and cannot be always interpreted as related to language anxiety or low self-esteem. Learners perform their agency by participating in activity that is meaningful to them (Duff 2002, 312). My data show that there were also more temporary and situated individual reasons affecting the pupils' participation, such as being tired or hungry, or disliking certain tasks and ways of working. Some pupils also reported social reasons for their silence:

I don't have the guts to speak. (boy, 6th gr)

When I should say something in English, somebody might start to laugh.
(girl, 6th gr)

I don't like working with somebody who is not so competent. (girl, 5th gr)

Not having *the guts to speak* refers to being afraid to perform in the social context, the anxiety being linked either to the possible reaction of the teacher or that of other pupils. Laughter by others was mentioned by many fifth and sixth graders. Especially girls reported that boys' laughter, or even its threat, silenced them. The pupils' participation became also socially restricted when they were positioned by their classmates in the groups of “silent girls” or “indifferent” or “resistant” pupils. Stereotypical group identities were socially constructed, and maintained by outsiders and the group members themselves. Fear of public assessment and criticism by teacher and their peers also silenced pupils when

they told that they would not speak English unless they were sure about their answer. In Figure 5 from the self-portrait data, a sixth-grade girl is sleeping at her desk until the teacher demands her to answer a question. The pupil wakes up startled and gives many wrong answers before finding the right one. When she has finally managed to get it right and the teacher moves her attention to another pupil, the girl sighs: *Phew...*



Figure 5. Phew...

This comic strip illustrates the pressure of answering and speaking up in the classroom which many pupils, even those who were good at English, claimed to be the reason for their silence. Although most of the pupils who reported being afraid to speak in the lessons were girls, also some boys admitted to their language anxiety in their answers to the questionnaires. This finding resonates the observations by Pihko (2007; 2010) which suggest that even those pupils who managed well in EFL and CLIL lessons could remain silent because they experienced anxiety in English lessons.

Being silent in the English lessons was considered as both positive and negative by the pupils. One reported positive experience was, for example, that because the group was silent it was nice to study there. Silence thus meant listening and concentrating on the task, and not disturbing others. When asked to describe their activity, attentive listening was brought up by many pupils as an explanation for not being more active in the classroom. These pupils experienced that they were active during English lessons, although from the viewpoint of an outside observer they seemed quite passive. A boy from the sixth grade, who did not express interest in studying English at school, described himself:

Well, I'm not that interested in English, but I keep quiet anyway, not to disturb the others.

Silence in the boy's answer can be interpreted as conforming to the institutions norms, although there was a lack of motivation which might have caused expressions of resistance. The boy exerted some positive agency in his decision of "not disturbing" in spite of his negative orientation towards studying English.

Although remaining silent in the classroom was usually interpreted by the pupils as a sign of passive personality, sometimes silence was presented as a chosen strategy. Classroom observation indicated that in some groups especially the girls were silent whereas some of the boys adopted the role of active and courageous speakers. Because of their accommodating silence the girls were sanctioned less for their behavior in the classroom (see Devine 2003: 18), but sometimes they wanted to express their opinions, criticize classroom situations or seek for a contact with the teacher after the lessons.

6 Manifestations of resistance

In the data, the pupils opted more often for subtle rather than very visible expressions of resistance. Open expressions of resistance included shouting, talking or moving about without permission, making faces, using foul language, turning one's back to others, avoiding eye contact, withdrawing from an activity, and not answering upon request. Laughter was a very strong way of positioning oneself or others in the classroom. Often it was also a collective way to resist something or somebody during the lesson.

The fifth and sixth graders targeted their resistance towards the teacher or other pupils, the ongoing activity, material used, English language or studying it, and school in general. Resistance could be exhibited by individuals or groups. Resistance was also revealed in temporary situational ways in pupils' ambiguous talk, smiling, and eye contact, which were not always easy to trace or interpret. Often resistance was related to social situations in which the pupils had no choice, such as being divided into groups by the teacher.

As already mentioned, the manifestations of pupil resistance in my data were not always overt. Tainio (2005: 190) points out that students' resistance is often expressed in subtle and hidden ways, for example through humor. This is understandable because of the power positions at school where pupils need to secure their position by not criticizing their teachers very openly. As a teacher-researcher, I might have gained some additional insight into the pupils' roles and their individual and collective ways of expressing their agency and resistance. Participating in research seemed to trigger criticism with some pupils as they were given permission to have their voice heard. Yet, I think that much of the resistance remained hidden, perhaps just because of my position and the pupils' fear of being sanctioned.

Collective resistance was very strongly presented by three sixth grade boys in the classroom, but also when they were interviewed for the research. Remaining silent for long periods, scarcely answering, and laughing together showed the boys' resistance towards me as their teacher in the beginning of the interview. The situation changed when the teacher-student positions were less prominent at the end of the interview. A trigger for this change was changing the topic from studying English in the school contexts to using English in their free time.

Resistance comes up in the next extract from the boys' interview, where K stands for me as the teacher-researcher:

- 1 K: What comes to your mind when you think of English lessons?
- 2 [Silence]
- 3 K: Don't think too much. You can just say what comes to your mind.
- 4 B1: English lessons come to my mind.
- 5 K: Ok. What do you think of them?
- 6 B1: Teaching!
- 7 K: Well, yeah...[B2]what comes to your mind?
- 8 B2: Mm...a long lesson.
- 9 K: Is it any longer than the others?
- 10 B2: Mm... mm... YES!
- 11 K: What about the two of you, is it long...or short?
- 12 B1: --well...not so long...it's quite fun.
- 13 K: [B2] Tell me why the lesson seems so long
- 14 [Silence]
- 15 B2: Dunno
- 16 K: You don't know...is it so boring...or so much to do, or...
- 17 B2: Oh yes!
- 18 K: Yes, what?
- 19 B: Dunno
- 20 K: Can you, please tell me a little bit more
- 21 [laughter]
- 22 B1: Well...it's not so boring 'cos you can laugh there
- 23 K: Laugh all the time. Yeah...what makes you laugh?
- 24 [Silence]
- 25 K: Is English such fun?
- 26 B1: Well...naah
- 27 K: Ok, tell me a little about what makes you laugh
- 28 B1: Mates [laughs]

Silence, laughter, and ironic (line 12: *it's quite fun*) and cheeky comments (line 4: *English lessons come to my mind*) are ways of showing resistance towards the interview situation and, as I interpret it as a teacher, towards studying English at school in general. *Dunno* (lines 15 and 19), which the boys used a lot in the English lessons as well, expressed reluctance and a refusal to answer the question rather than not knowing the answer. In the interview, the boys' resistant agency was collectively constructed and maintained, but when they started to talk about using the computer in their free time, interaction became more like a discussion where individual experiences and opinions were shared.

In Figure 6, from the self-portrait data, a sixth-grade boy has drawn a class situation where resistance can be traced as different kinds of pupil activity. In the first picture there is an object, perhaps a paper aeroplane flying around the classroom, the route of which is marked by curved arrows. The teacher asks: *Are there flies flying about here?* and the pupils answer: *NAA*. The next picture depicts the research situation where the teacher gives a task: *Anyway. Draw your own picture*. Now a pupil resists openly: *No way. D'oh!* Next, the teacher gives another task: *And after that you'll surf* (i.e. practice for an exam). The pupil shouts: *You can't be serious!* The last box closes the classroom episode with *The end*.



Figure 6. Are there flies flying about here?

In this self-portrait, the pupil expresses both his individual frustration and collective resistance targeted at the institutional norms of not disturbing the lessons and complying to teacher's instructions. This kind of resistance might have gone unnoticed in a classroom situation, but the comic strip made it visible because the genre allowed it.

Some pupils showed their frustrated resistance by commenting or drawing sad faces on their test papers when they were asked for feedback. Sometimes tasks and related materials were resisted, especially routine-like individual work and hand-outs with no social contact with other pupils. More open and habitual resistance was expressed by those who had already acquired socially constructed and maintained roles as rowdy pupils. Classmates called these pupils *clowns* or *noisemakers* and often they were referred to as *bellowing boys* (in Finnish *mölypojat*), which was a role-like group identity, similar to the "silent girls". These stereotypical positions show how pupil identities often become gendered, although resistance and silence were expressed by both boys and girls.

7 Silent resistance

Silence in the English lessons was multi-faceted and had many causes. One reason to remain silent in the classroom was resistance that could be targeted towards different things and persons. Sulky faces, turned backs, and hiding

under a sweatshirt hood were especially sixth graders' ways of expressing that they did not want to participate. Some sixth graders resisted speaking English in the classroom, and particularly reading aloud textbook texts that they found uninteresting or *embarrassing*. Many fifth graders, in contrast, reported that they liked their English books and reading aloud in the classroom. Generally, the pupils' self-consciousness seemed to increase from the fifth to the sixth grade, although some pupils began to present their agency more strongly when they were sixth graders as their language competence increased, and new meanings for studying and using English emerged. Sometimes silence that started with individual pupils spread into the whole group and became collective during the school year. The reasons for collective resistant silence were not obvious as they could have been partly constructed outside of the classroom situations. When I asked a group of sixth graders for the reason for what I experienced as silent resistance during the English lessons, they told me, for example, that they were hungry because they always had a late lunch after the lesson.

When the pupils' agency did not meet suitable affordances for action in the English lessons, they sometimes reported on being tired or bored. Figure 7 from the pupils' self-portrait data shows a sixth-grade girl sleeping at her desk. In her mind, there goes on endlessly *Englishenglishenglish* while the teacher keeps on talking: *Englishenglishenglish*.

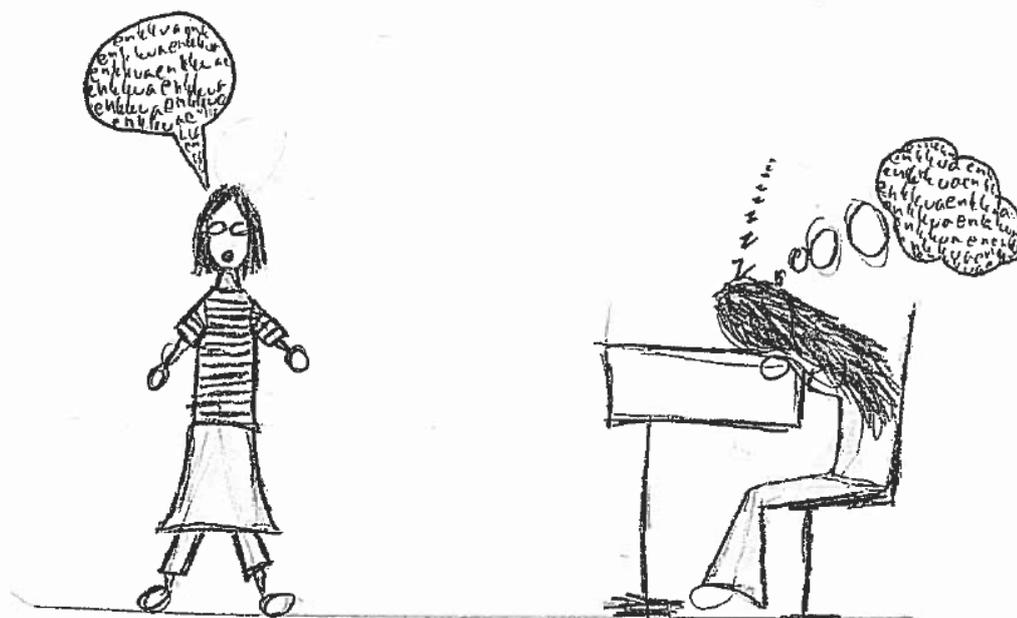


Figure 7. Englishenglishenglish

The teacher's talk did not work as an affordance for this girl's agency as she experienced boredom in the English lesson. There seemed to be no contact between the teacher and the pupil, and the meaninglessness of classroom interaction led to the pupil's passive silence. Although the teacher's talk was echoed in the pupil's mind, this cannot be interpreted as learning because the pupil seemed to lack any agency. However, by drawing the picture the pupil may have expressed her resistant agency that did not show in classroom situations.

8 Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the stereotypical positions of silent and resistant pupils, and tried to clarify what is considered to be agentive behavior in elementary school English lessons by drawing on data from classroom observations and pupil experiences. As a result, the concept of pupil agency in learning English at school has become problematic. Enhancing pupil agency is generally seen as an educational goal. Agency thus seems to include positive orientation towards the institutional goals and practices.

This study has illustrated that there often is a contradiction between presenting and experiencing pupil agency. There are types of agency which are invisible to external observation. Many seemingly passive pupils see themselves as internally active, and experience that listening attentively, concentrating on a task, and being positively oriented towards studying English are ways of active participation in the English lessons. Some pupils prefer to present their learning through written tasks and exams, especially if they experience language anxiety or lack of opportunities for participation in the classroom. Silence in the English lessons was problematic for pupil assessment, and may also have been a hindrance to learning. However, since silence was sometimes a self-chosen strategy that could be an affordance for learning and have social advantages, it could also be agentive behavior from the part of the pupil (Duff 2002, 312).

Resistance can also be an expression of pupil agency, but it is oriented against the institutionally accepted goals, norms, and practices. Resistance was more or less openly expressed by the fifth and sixth graders. Although expressions of resistance may negatively affect the atmosphere of the classroom, they might be important in signaling that something has to be done differently to avoid experiences of meaningless activity. Silent and resistant pupils are very easily labeled, which means that these negative pupil positions are hard to shed. Silence and resistance in English lessons can be agentive or non-agentive, and must be individually interpreted in the context where they occur.

This leads to the conclusion that pupil agency is a matter of constructing meanings, personally and socially. Externally similar activity in the English classroom may be experienced meaningless or meaningful by the pupils when affordances meet with individual agency. Thus, affordances for action in the classroom are very different for different pupils, and pupil activity cannot always be judged in any straightforward manner by external presentations of different language learner identities.

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