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The Negotiation of Plurilingualism by Teachers in a Finnish Heritage Language School

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on teacher agency regarding plurilingualism as exhibited at a Finnish heritage language school in the United States. Heritage languages (HLs) are minority languages that usually exist within macro-systems of societal language policies that marginalize the HL as compared to the dominant language. This situation is especially pronounced in the United States, where English-only practices and policies in education run counter to the plurilingual realities of the nation's large HL-speaking population (Hopkins, 2016; Kircher & Kutlu, 2023; Wiley & García, 2016).

HL schools have been established by immigrant communities to ensure the transmission of the HL to the next generation as a deliberate countermeasure to the influence of the dominant language. HL students are often directed by their teachers to only speak the HL. However, it is not realistic to expect that HL students, who are multilingual by definition, behave as monolinguals even within the walls of the HL school. Moreover, plurilingualism, or the competence in multiple languages and the tendency to value other languages and language varieties (European Council definition as cited by García & Otheguy, 2020), is both a rich resource for global engagement and an important part of an individual's identity.

Teachers at HL schools must negotiate instructional and language policy decisions within these multilayered ideological spaces, which make them an interesting research context for examining language teacher agency. Teacher agency, which can be defined as the "freedom to accomplish what teachers see as valued and valuable tasks" (Molla & Nolan, 2020, p. 69), served as the

main theoretical lens for this study. Li and Shen (2024) argue that research has so far focused on individuals' agency around language planning in more traditional language acquisition contexts, i.e., public schools, and that it has yet to be closely examined in HL educational contexts. This chapter responds to this gap by examining Finnish HL teachers' enactment of their agency regarding plurilingualism in an HL school. The research question guiding the study was, *How do Finnish heritage language teachers enact their agency while negotiating plurilingualism within an HL school located in the United States?*

Literature Background

The term heritage language (HL) has varying definitions in the literature, but most scholars agree it is a refugee, immigrant, or indigenous language that a multilingual individual develops through “linguistic interaction with family members who speak it,” which leads to “any variable degree of minority-language proficiency” (Ortega, 2020, p. 18), and that the HL exists in a “hierarchical minority-majority relation” (p. 19) to the dominant language(s) of the society. Further, Valdés (2014) defined HL learners in the United States as “raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken; who speak or only understand the heritage language, and who have some proficiency in English and the heritage language” (pp. 27–8).

A subset of research has focused on HL schools as a context in which HLs are intentionally developed (e.g., Alsaifi, 2019; Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2016; Tigert, 2019). HL schools are community organizations that aim to preserve and develop HL proficiency by organizing language classes for the members of the community, particularly children. Because these schools are community-run, decisions about instructional practices and language policies may be distributed among parents, teachers, and even students (Liu et al., 2011; Tigert, 2017; Wu et al., 2011). However, when it comes to instruction, HL teachers are the “people with expertise” (Li & Shen, 2024, p. 137) who exert agency over how to apply the wider school community's language policies and ideologies in practice. Often, teachers expect students to use only the HL (Blackledge & Creese, 2008; Dávila, 2017; Lytra, 2012). This is done to erect a bastion against the pervasive effect of the dominant language in HL students' lives outside of the HL school and to offer a space for ample practice of the HL. However, teachers' adherence to the sole use of the HL varies, influenced by factors such as the learning task at hand (Tigert, 2017).

Additionally, there is no denying that HL speakers are multilingual, which is acknowledged in the teaching practices of many HL schools, as research in these contexts demonstrates. For example, Creese and Blackledge (2011) studied community HL schools in the United Kingdom and found that translanguaging, or the fluid shifting between languages, was practiced by teachers as a pedagogical strategy. Similarly, Li and Zhu's (2013) study in a Cantonese HL classroom for university students found widespread pedagogical use of translanguaging in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. As Hornberger (2005) notes, "bi/multilinguals' learning is maximized when they are allowed and enabled to draw from across all their existing language skills (in two+ languages), rather than being constrained and inhibited from doing so by monolingual instructional assumptions and practices" (p. 607). The same serves as an argument for promoting plurilingualism in HL contexts.

These varying contextual factors, motivations, and even tensions over plurilingualism in HL schools serve to complicate the manifestations of HL teachers' agency. Research has highlighted the ways HL teachers' agency draws on the teachers' pedagogical beliefs and identity on the one hand and their professional relationships on the other (Bao et al., 2020). In this study, I examine these and other factors at play among three teachers in a Finnish HL school located in the United States.

Theoretical Framing

Second language research has come to accept and promote plurilingual spaces and practices as both a socio-cultural norm and a best practice for the learning of multilingual students (Hornberger, 2005; Marshall & Moore, 2018). However, while truly plurilingual educational spaces are potentially empowering and identity-affirming for learners, they are often wrought with tensions related to languages' status and legitimacy within the wider sociocultural context (García, 2013; Hornberger & Link, 2012). In the case of HLs, which often have no official standing in society in terms of educational institutions or policies, "the actors from grassroots and non-official forces are crucial in determining the outcomes of the teaching and learning" (Li & Shen, 2024, p. 138).

Among these actors are teachers, whom Cong-Lem (2021) explains "agently adopt, adapt or even resist newly implemented policies and programs" (p. 718) to continuously make meaningful changes in their practice. Priestley and

colleagues (2013) further define teacher agency as action that can both resist and be limited by contextual constraints—or in the words of Biesta and Tedder (2007, p. 137), “actors always act *by means* of an environment rather than simply in an environment” (emphasis in the original). Agency can be understood as an individual’s choices in relation to the affordances present in the environment (Van Lier, 2002); for teachers, this means interpreting the complexities of classroom environments and responding to these with deliberate agency (Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004). Agency should therefore be understood as dynamic rather than static, and as “constructed relationally in interaction within a cultural context, involving ongoing transformations of both the community and the self” (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011, p. 813). In the United States, HL education takes place within a socio-cultural context where minority languages exist within a heavily English-dominant linguistic landscape. In this context, while the wider society constrains HL teachers’ agency around language by positioning English monolingualism as the norm, HL schools offer “pockets of hope” (de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002) where HL teachers can act agentively to create an alternative space in which the HL, and by extension, plurilingualism, can thrive.

One way language teacher agency manifests is in the creation and enforcement of classroom language policies. According to Spolsky (2004), language policy can be conceptualized as being composed of three dimensions. These are language ideology, or beliefs about language; language practices, or the habitual uses of language; and language management decisions over classroom language use. Teacher agency in HL schools operates across these multiple layers. Li and Shen (2024) further note that HL teachers exert agency over language policy by determining, interpreting, and self-regulating language choices during instruction. According to Tsang (2021), teachers as micro-level language-policy makers have a heightened role in contexts with low regulation and high teacher autonomy. HL schools, especially the kind run by a small immigrant community such as the Finnish School examined in this study, are characteristic of such low-regulation, high-autonomy contexts. Teacher agency around language policies in HL schools is often shaped by the teachers’ explicit goals of developing students’ HL proficiency and identity (Cho, 2014; Creese et al., 2006). A particular act of language management that this chapter illuminates is teachers’ response to students’ translanguaging, or the fluid shuttling between languages (Canagarajah, 2011). The chapter will also examine the ways HL teacher agency in this particular school interacted with the schools’ institutional language policies and the students’ agency, reflecting relational and social aspects of agency (Tao & Gao, 2021).

Study Design

This chapter utilizes ethnographic and autoethnographic methods to examine the formation of plurilingual spaces in a Finnish HL community school located in the Mid-Atlantic United States. This school was partially funded by the Finnish government and partially with tuition and grant monies. At the time of data collection, there were seven teachers and about forty students at the school, with a governing board comprised of volunteer parents. To answer the research question, *How do Finnish heritage language teachers enact their agency while negotiating plurilingualism within a HL school located in the United States?* I draw on my own experiences as a parent of two Finnish HL speakers who, for a time, were students at the school; my reflections as a founder and former teacher of the school; as well as rich transcriptions of classroom discourse, interviews, and field notes collected at the school over nine months.

In this chapter, I focus on three of the school's teachers: Anna, Hannele, and Jonna. Table 15.1 provides background information on each of them. All three focal teachers had Master's degrees from universities in Finland (Jonna, Hannele) or Sweden (Anna), and their own children were enrolled as students in the school.

In total, the data set for this study consists of seven hours and fifty minutes of in-person observations in the three classrooms, two thirty-minute interviews with each of the focal teachers, conducted before and after the classroom observation, and a twenty-minute interview with the school's President. All

Table 15.1 Teachers' Backgrounds

Teacher	Student group taught	Teaching credentials	Teaching experience	Years at Finnish school
Anna	5-year-olds	Bilingual education	Finnish to adults in the US	Less than a year
Hannele	8-9-year-olds	Mathematics education	Math to middle and high school students in Finland	Less than a year
Jonna	10-11-year-olds	General education	No teaching experience except for teaching practicum	Less than a year

Table 15.2 Final Codes and Themes

Code	Theme
Official language policy	The construction of a plurilingual space
Language use at school-wide events	
Adult stakeholders' use of language	
Explicit messages about HL during instruction	Explicit and implicit messages about language
Implicit messages about HL during instruction	
Maximizing time spent on using the HL	Pedagogical beliefs related to language
Language choice as related to student proficiency	

data were collected in the 2015–16 school year. Observations were documented with transcriptions of audio recordings and detailed field notes, and interviews were likewise audio recorded and transcribed for coding. In the findings, excerpts from interviews and observations have been translated to English. The interviews mainly focused on the teachers' perceptions of the use of multiple languages for literacy learning in the school (for the teacher interview protocol see Tigert, 2017). The first interview protocol was constructed based on previous literature on multilingual literacy practices and focused more generally on the teachers' perceptions, the second included clarifying questions about language and literacy practices the author had observed in the classroom. In addition, personal journal entries and memos from my time as a teacher at the school from 2010 to 2016 served as autoethnographic data.

Coding was an iterative process, focusing on salient moments when data revealed aspects of teacher agency around plurilingualism, and employed both deductive and inductive initial codes (Saldaña, 2021). Three themes emerged from the data, which were drawn from the final codes as explained in Table 15.2. The three themes were the construction of a plurilingual space, explicit and implicit messages about language, and pedagogical beliefs related to language.

Findings

In HL education taking place in English-dominant contexts, teachers often grapple with decisions related to differing ideas of the goals of HL education among the adult stakeholders of the HL school, as well as the pervasiveness of English in student discourse. The findings demonstrate how the Finnish

HL school was institutionally constructed as a plurilingual space, while in the classrooms, teachers practiced their agency over language policy and practices by curbing students' English use.

Construction of the HL School as a Plurilingual Space

That the HL school existed as a plurilingual space and not an HL-only oasis was clear from the documents and discourses constructed institutionally by the adults of the community—the teachers, parents, and board members. For example, the school's website, maintained by the school's volunteer Board, was almost entirely in English. Names of student groups—named after forest animals—were the only words appearing monolingually in Finnish. In addition, the following note on the landing page was given both in English and in Finnish, briefly stating the official language policy of the school:

P.S. We use English when communicating administrative matters since we have some parents who are not fluent in Finnish. However, at school, we aim to use only Finnish with the children.

P.S. Osaamme suomea erinomaisesti, vaikka nettisivumme ovatkin englanniksi. Englanti on koulumme virallinen viestintäkieli, jotta voimme palvella myös suomea taitamattomia vanhempia. Koulutiloissa pyrimme käyttämään pelkästään suomen kieltä.

During family events such as the Christmas pageant and Mother's Day celebration, this institutional policy was clearly visible. Printed programs, speeches, and announcements were in English, while children's performances such as songs and skits were in Finnish. As these were designed by the teachers, they provided evidence of teachers' agency in separating the uses of each language at the school by their purpose and audience. Structural elements of the events, such as English programs, offered family members a way to understand them, while the students continued to be expected to use Finnish for their performances.

Among parents, including the three focal teachers, interactions were in Finnish unless a non-Finnish parent was present; in that case, they were in English. Ethnographic memos written after whole-school events and board meetings revealed that parents' opinions on the importance of Finnish in the school varied: some wanted their children to speak only Finnish, while one Finnish father said he hoped his daughter was having fun regardless of learning the language. However, parents rarely expressed such notions to teachers, leaving instructional and language policy decisions to them. This mirrored

the wider socio-cultural background of the public school culture in Finland, where teachers enjoy broad pedagogical freedom and responsibilities (Toom & Husu, 2016).

During an interview with Salima, the school's volunteer president, I asked what she thought the school's mission was. Salima stressed the importance of Finnish language input in her response:

The school is definitely for [...] letting children hear Finnish from more than one person [...] so that it wouldn't appear so extraordinary. And of course I hope that the Finnish School is a joyful place to learn [...] so that it would be a fun place to go learn and play in Finnish. [At the Finnish School] children can be around Finns more so that they hear more of the language.

Salima's response reflected the desire to offer as much Finnish language input as possible, and she did not acknowledge the existence, purpose, or importance of other languages in the HL students' lives in this or her other interview responses. Salima's answer, compared to the father's comment described above, reflects the complex notions around language policy held by different actors within the school. The fact that teachers participated in the construction of plurilingualism through such practices as hosting family events bilingually showed evidence of them acknowledging the reality of the HL existing within wider societal structures where English was the dominant language. However, in their interactions with students, particularly during instruction, teachers enacted their agency by offering as fully immersive an HL environment as possible, as the following section demonstrates.

Teachers' Agency through Implicit and Explicit Messages during Instruction

During the teachers' instruction, implicit messages about language were often delivered to students by teachers in two ways, both of which promoted the use of Finnish as the only language at the HL school. The first of these was the so-called "minimal grasp" strategy (Lanza, 1992) whereby teachers pretended not to understand what their students were saying unless students used Finnish. The second, more frequent strategy was recasting English or "Finglish" (anglicized Finnish) words and phrases used by students by providing the correct Finnish version. These recasts were particularly frequent during instructional discourse rather than during other tasks such as clean-up or lunch time.

An example of this in the data appeared in Hannele's class, where one of the students started talking about her plans for later in the day, using the Finnish word *sluipouveri* (the English word *sleepover*, pronounced in a Finnish manner, with the addition of an *i*-suffix as is typical for loan words ending in a consonant). The recast is bolded in the excerpt below.

Iina: *Tänään mulla aikoo olla sluipouveri.*

(Today I'm gonna have a sleepover.)

Hannele: *Sää meet yökylään, niinkö, vai tulleeks joku sun luo?*

(You are going to a **sleepover**, is that right, or is somebody coming over?)

Iina: *Joo, Sofia, minä en oo nähny häntä pitkään aikaan.*

(Yes, Sofia, I haven't seen her in such a long time.)

Here, Hannele conveyed an implicit message about which language was to be used in the classroom, as she modeled back to Iina how to say "sleepover" in Finnish (*meet yökylään*, literally "go for a night visit"). This was an example of a teacher enacting their agency around language use in a subtle way, communicating implicitly that Finnish was not acceptable for the HL school, while also providing continuous Finnish input for language development purposes.

At times, teachers stated their language policy more directly by asking students to speak only Finnish. An example of this took place in Anna's class, where students were starting a drawing activity on small whiteboards. While waiting for Anna's directions for the drawing, the five-year-olds were getting restless and started singing in English. In response, Anna stated her language policy (see bolded).

Anna: *Laittakaa oma nimi kulmaan, vielä ei piirretä mitään.*

(Put your name in the corner, and don't draw anything yet.)

The students start spontaneously singing "happy birthday to you, cha cha cha" while they're waiting for directions.

Anna: *Mulla on teille uutisia, me ollaan suomikoulussa, niin **eihän me silloin lauleta englanniksi mitään paljon onnea vaan.***

(I have news for you, we're at the Finnish School, so **we don't sing happy birthday in English.**)

The students sing the song again but this time in Finnish.

Anna: *No niin hyvä, osattehan te sen.*

Well good, you do know it.

While students were often the ones to switch to English or Finglish, thereby asserting their plurilingual identities in the HL space, at times they also supported teachers in enacting their HL-only language policies. One example was students simply complying with teachers' policies, as in the excerpt above with Anna's students switching to Finnish. Other times, the students' support was more pronounced. The following instance occurred during an observation in Hannele's class:

Eelis comes in and asks if they can watch a YouTube Minecraft video. Hannele asks what language it is in. When the boys say it is in English, she says she can look for one in Finnish and maybe they can watch that some day. As they sit down, the boys continue talking about Minecraft in English. Iina says loudly, ***Puhukaa suomea, puhukaa suomea pojat, puhukaa suomea!*** (Speak Finnish, speak Finnish boys, speak Finnish!)

However, this type of explicit siding with the teachers' language policy happened much less frequently than students using English in the classroom. Typically, teachers were the main agents pushing for Finnish use. This agency, in part, was based on their pedagogical beliefs regarding language acquisition, as described in the next section.

Pedagogical Beliefs as the Underpinnings of Teacher Agency

In the interviews, I deliberately asked teachers about having observed them asking students to speak only Finnish. A pattern across teachers' answers reflected the belief that since the school only met for three hours every other week for the duration of the school year, there was no room for languages other than Finnish. Teachers strongly equated time spent solely on Finnish use, without interference from English, with the students learning a maximum amount of the HL. For example, Anna stated:

I try to use Finnish the whole time, because I want the children to understand that speaking Finnish goes with attending the Finnish School. While they're living here (in the United States), they have such few opportunities for hearing Finnish in real life situations, so I think we need to take advantage of every opportunity.

Similarly, Hannele stated that since the school was in session for only three hours at a time, it was necessary to use only Finnish during that time. It is clear that the school's instructional time was limited—approximately forty-eight hours across the whole school year, minus time spent on lunch for all and short outside recess for the youngest students. What is less clear is how much instructional time

would have been sufficient in the teachers' minds to open up a space for more plurilingual practices such as translanguaging.

The teachers also felt that their students' Finnish proficiency was such that they were able to accomplish their pedagogical goals without having to resort to using English themselves. For example, Jonna, who taught the oldest and most advanced students, responded:

Because I have the most advanced group, it's been fairly natural to use only Finnish. It's been possible to explain even difficult words in Finnish to them, or use synonyms for example. I have not used English to help them because it might lead to them using more English in the classroom.

Similarly, Hannele felt that her students' proficiency in Finnish aided her in exerting her agency over HL use:

If someone doesn't understand a word, I can explain it in Finnish using other words. Students in my group understand Finnish well, so I have not felt it necessary to explain words in English when I can do it in Finnish.

What remains unclear based on these responses is what proficiency level, in the teachers' minds, would have justified the use of languages other than Finnish. A feature of the school that allowed teachers not to have to grapple with that question was the fact that students were fairly clearly divided into groups: the so-called "total beginners" group, which contained multiple ages, and the groups of emerging Finnish proficient students who were divided by age. During my time at the school, I taught the beginner group, and the students often conversed in English because, while most of them understood Finnish, their productive skills were not as strong. Personally, I allowed the use of English in that group as an aid to comprehension, though I also encouraged students to use as much Finnish as possible through activities such as choral reading and singing.

I also asked teachers what they thought about research that has presented translanguaging as a way to develop bilingual competence in the classroom (e.g. Martínez, 2010; Reyes, 2004; Sayer, 2013). Anna, who had a degree in bilingual education, stated that she had heard about these theories but felt that translanguaging was more useful for students who were older than her five-year-olds: "I believe this type of simultaneous learning (of two languages) works well especially with older students when you're dealing with more abstract concepts." However, Jonna, who taught the oldest students, felt translanguaging was unnecessary for her students as well. She posited that limiting language use to Finnish made "learning language more authentic and deeper. It makes the student construct word meanings in their mind rather than being given a ready translation." Interestingly, Hannele referred to the English-only practices in the

students' weekday schools as a parallel to emulate: "After all, the students don't get translation of words into Finnish in their regular schools; rather, words are explained using alternative words so that they'll understand it." Teachers believed that when students did not understand a word, it presented an opportunity for further Finnish input in the form of synonyms and explanations rather than an occasion for drawing on the students' English knowledge.

It was clear that teachers held fast beliefs about the benefits of maximizing the amount of time Finnish was used in the classroom and using only Finnish to explain new words and concepts to students. These beliefs then shaped the way teachers enacted their agency through the enforcement of certain classroom language policies and the enactment of instructional practices.

Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter demonstrates the way Finnish HL school teachers negotiated a complex sociolinguistic landscape in which the HL was being developed within a system where English dominated students' lives outside of the school and even permeated the school during school-wide events and through students' own language use. Teachers enacted their agency in the HL school flexibly, by allowing plurilingualism in limited cases while adhering to their Finnish-only policies most of the time. The construction of the HL school as a plurilingual space was mostly done by teachers in instances where they deliberately catered to non-Finnish-speaking parents' needs by switching to English during both formal events and informal chats. At all other times, teachers attempted to adhere to their HL-only policy, particularly during instruction, and communicated this policy continuously to the students both explicitly and implicitly. This was at times supported by the students' actions around HL use, at other times somewhat constrained by it. However, teachers possessed strong pedagogical beliefs about HL development, which undergirded their agency in implementing teaching practices that aimed for the maximization of the use of Finnish within the walls of the school. These practices matched the school's official language policy of using English with those who were not proficient in Finnish while maintaining Finnish as the main language of instruction.

The study demonstrates how strongly HL teachers were able to enact their agency over decisions regarding language policy and pedagogy in the HL school, even while the school formed only a small Finnish-speaking oasis within the wider English-dominated society. The study demonstrates how teachers were able

to enact their relational agency by continuously interpreting their sociocultural context of the HL school, and in particular, by responding to its institutional language policy through their own construction of what constituted best practice in HL education. This agency was likely shaped by a few different factors, each of which would deserve further study. First, the teachers were all trained in the Nordic (Finnish and Swedish) teacher education programs, where teachers are guided toward independent decision-making and broad pedagogical freedom (Toom & Husu, 2016), and therefore trusted themselves to make language policy and instructional decisions independent of parents' or students' influence. Adhering to the same culture of teacher independence, the school's parents and board members left such decisions to the teachers. Second, while language education research has demonstrated the usefulness of translanguaging and other plurilingual practices for language development even in HL contexts (e.g. Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Creese et al., 2006; Dávila, 2017), the three teachers in this study held firmer beliefs about the effectiveness of providing the maximum amount of HL input possible within the constraints of the HL school schedule.

Without such teacher education, firmly held pedagogical beliefs, or an HL school culture where teachers trust themselves and are trusted to make independent decisions regarding instruction, the tensions regarding plurilingualism vs. HL use might be greater, and the teachers' opportunities to enact their agency reduced. Research has demonstrated that HL teachers are often constrained in their agency by such influences as parents' role in HL school decision-making, inadequate pedagogical preparation, lack of curricular materials, and weak professional identities (Kondo-Brown, 2010; Li, 2005; Wu et al., 2011). There are some things teachers can do on their own to agentively take on tasks that are "valued and valuable" (Molla & Nolan, 2020, p. 69), such as collaborate with others to implement effective practices for HL school management, organization, and instruction. However, more structural changes are also needed. I agree with Carreira and Kagan (2018), who recommend that the fairly young field of HL education make concerted efforts to institutionalize HLs within the educational systems of dominant language contexts and thereby improve such aspects of HL education as teacher preparation, curriculum development, instructional materials, and teaching practices. In particular, this study points to the need to establish HL teacher education systems which are based on current research on the development of plurilingualism and grounded in the realities of HL schools. With better structures in place, I believe plurilingualism will no longer be seen as a threat, but a strength in HL schools by teachers, students, and parents alike.

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