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## Playing With Theory to Explore Social Language Learning in an Autonomy-Promoting English Course

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This story of practice outlines a practitioner-research project exploring the concept of social language learning on an autonomy-promoting English course at the University of Helsinki Language Centre. Students on the Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) course are required to include a social element into their self-devised plan for the course. The project puzzles about social language learning in two distinct stages: stage 1 inquires how students understand social language learning and stage 2 explores how social language learning manifests on the course through the author's language counselling journal. In both stages, a thematic analysis approach is used to make sense of the data. The first stage problematises the concept of social language learning by revealing a wide range of responses to and understandings of the term, including positioning it variously as speaking practice, group work, learning by doing, supportive, fun, difficult, and central to the learning process. The second stage of the inquiry approaches social language learning from the perspective of actor-network theory, which is critical of pre-determined categories such as social, preferring instead to explore phenomena by tracing the association or interactions between the various actors in a network. The study is conceived of as a playful exploration of the author's own educational practices in relation to the social dimensions in language learning. It has resulted in new approaches to thinking about the course, particularly in relation to the course's skills support groups. Analysis of the data also provides insight into the students' language practices, especially in relation to texts, and their approaches to realising autonomy in language learning.

Tämä teksti kuvaa käytännönläheistä tutkimusprojektia, jossa tutkittiin sosiaalisen kielenoppimisen käsitettä autonomiaan kannustavalla englannin kurssilla Helsingin yliopiston kielikeskuksessa. Autonomisen oppimisen moduuleissa (ALMS:ssa) opiskelijoiden tulee sisällyttää sosiaalinen elementti itse suunnittelemaansa kurssisuunnitelmaan. Tämä projekti tarkasteli sosiaalista kielenoppimista kahdessa eri vaiheessa: ensimmäisessä vaiheessa selvitettiin, miten opiskelijat ymmärtävät sosiaalisen kielenoppimisen, ja toisessa tutkittiin, miten sosiaalinen kielenoppiminen tulee esiin kirjoittamassani kielenohjauspäiväkirjassa. Molemmissa vaiheissa käytettiin temaattista analyysimenetelmää aineiston tulkinnessa. Ensimmäinen vaihe kyseenalaisti itse sosiaalisen kielenoppimisen käsitteen. Tämä nousi esiin laajana kirjona erilaisia vastauksia ja eriäviä tulkintoja opiskelijoille annetuissa reflektio-harjoituksessa. Sosiaalinen kielenoppiminen asemoitiin muun muassa puhumisen harjoitteluksi, ryhmätyöksi, tekemällä oppimiseksi, hauskaksi, vaikeaksi ja keskeiseksi osaksi oppimisprosessia. Tutkimuksen toinen vaihe lähestyi sosiaalista kielenoppimista toimijaverkostoteorian (actor-network theory) näkökulmasta. Tämä teoria suhtautuu kriittisesti ennalta määriteltäviin kategorioihin, kuten "sosiaalinen", ja tarkastelee ilmiötä jäljittämällä vuorovaikutuksia eri toimijoiden välisissä verkostossa. Tämä eksploratiivinen tutkimus sai alkunsa kirjoittajan omista pedagogisista käytännöistä suhteessa sosiaalisiin kokemuksiin kielenoppimisessa. Tutkimusmatkani on johtanut uusiin tapoihin ajatella ALMS-kurssia, erityisesti kurssin taitotukiryhmien osalta. Aineiston analyysi tarjoaa myös näkökulmia opiskelijoiden kielikäytänteisiin, erityisesti tekstien suhteen, sekä heidän tapoihinsa toteuttaa autonomiaa kielenoppimisessaan.

### Keywords

learner autonomy, practitioner research, social language learning, actor-network theory  
oppijan autonomia, käytännönläheinen tutkimus, sosiaalinen kielenoppiminen, toimijaverkostoteoria

This story of practice begins with a puzzle about social language learning in a university English course which promotes learner autonomy. The Autonomous Learning Modules (ALMS) course at the University of Helsinki Language Centre in Finland is a course where students plan, carry out, and evaluate a programme of language learning work (Holec,

1981) to complete their foreign-language degree requirement. One of the few course requirements is that students incorporate a social element into their language learning work. This social element could involve joining one of the many skills support groups the ALMS team runs to help students complete their course and develop their language skills. It could also refer to DIY groups established by students to meet their own needs or other activities students plan where they communicate or interact in English.

As a teacher and language counsellor on the course, I understand the requirement for students to include a social element to their language learning. It encourages students to add diversity and variety into their work on the course and aims to ensure they use the language in communicative and interactive settings. As a practitioner researcher influenced by the Exploratory Practice (EP) approach (Allwright & Hanks, 2009), on the other hand, I find the idea of social language learning somewhat puzzling. Firstly, social language learning is not a clearly defined concept or an easily identifiable behaviour (see, for example, Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007). It also reveals something of my ALMS colleagues' and my values about language learning. For example, it indicates that we consider autonomous language learning as more than independent reading or self-study grammar exercises. It is also not clear how students understand, react, and respond to the idea of social language learning and the requirement to include it in their course. Thus, the *social* in language learning became a puzzle for me as a counsellor-researcher.

In this story of practice, I recount my exploration of the idea of the social in this autonomous language learning environment, both with my students on the course and for my own theoretical and pedagogical understanding as a counsellor. I first present the educational context, the ALMS course at the University of Helsinki Language Centre, and discuss my own approach to practitioner research within this environment.

I then outline a two-stage project, exploring the concept of social language learning with my students. In the first stage, students were asked at the beginning of an ALMS course to reflect on what social language learning meant to them. This task resulted in a database of 74 responses, which were thematically analysed to explore the variety of understandings of the term social learning.

The second stage of the project was conducted via my counselling journal and using the lens of actor-network theory (ANT) to reflect on the social in my students' learning journeys. The data here comprised journal entries based on counselling sessions with 34 students who were completing their ALMS course.

The story of practice concludes with my reflection on the implications of this inquiry for my practice and my pedagogical literacy and thinking. I suggest that critically reflective and reflexive practitioner research—particularly within the EP framework—can deepen our understanding of learning and learner autonomy and help us better support students in pursuing them.

## Educational Context

The ALMS course at the University of Helsinki Language Centre is an English course, and one of the many options students have for fulfilling their foreign-language degree requirement (Suomen Säädoskokoelma/Finnish Statute Book, 2004, art. 1, § 6). English is widely used in Finnish society and forms an important part of many degree programmes in the country's third level institutions. Even if a degree programme is nominally Finnish or Swedish-medium, students are frequently required to read textbooks and original research in English and work in English with international faculty and exchange students. Thus, many—though by

no means all—Finnish university students are proficient users of English and can be seen as what Kramsch (2009) terms *multilingual subjects*. For a fuller discussion of the role of English in Finnish higher education, see for example, Laitinen et al. (2023, pp. 52-59) or Renfors (2021).

Running since 1994, the ALMS course promotes learner autonomy: that students should take charge of their own learning and be actively involved in the planning, carrying out and evaluation of their own work on the course (Holec, 1981). In the two group opening sessions, students are introduced to the idea of autonomy and reflect on themselves as language learners and users, including their language learner histories and their needs and goals for the future. After these sessions, the students plan their course, which consists of approximately 100 hours of study, recorded and reflected on in a language learning diary, log or blog. The exact method of recording and reflecting on learning is chosen by the individual students, who are offered models such as those presented in Dam (2009) or Mlynarczyk (2006). The main pedagogical support for students occurs through one-to-one language counselling sessions (see also language *advising*, Mynard & Carson, 2012) at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. Here students reflect with their counsellor on their plan and their progress throughout the course.

Counselling is the principal tool in the course's pedagogy for autonomy (Karlsson et al., 2007). The three counselling sessions during the course act as important markers for the students as it is here students verbalise their ideas about, plans for, and experiences of learning (Bradley & Karlsson, 2017). Counselling is also a space for intentional reflective dialogue (Kato & Mynard, 2015), where students find encouragement and validation and face questions and challenges from their counsellor. The counsellors on the ALMS course are also English teachers at the Language Centre and bring their pedagogical expertise to their work as counsellors. However, counselling often involves holding back one's teaching expertise and instead, by listening and asking questions, encouraging and supporting the student to take charge of their own language learning.

The ALMS course, and counselling in particular, has been an active site of practitioner research (PR) since its inception (Karlsson et al., 1997) with counsellors encouraged to take active roles in producing educational knowledge and engaging in a "scholarship of counselling" (Karlsson, 2015; see also Vieira, 2010). My own inquiry is thus shaped by this culture and tradition of PR, which focuses on exploring the local but also contributing to wider discussions in the fields of language counselling, learner autonomy, and additional language learning.

The ALMS counsellors/teachers also run a series of skills support groups during the semester-long course, where students can practice particular skills, as well as receive input, support, and feedback. (For a fuller discussion of the support group system in ALMS, see Bradley et al., 2023.) The groups are generally small, informal groups of students working together with the support of a teacher on skills such as academic writing, conversation, or giving presentations. We run roughly 35 of these groups each semester with a range of in-class and online groups, both synchronous and asynchronous. Students are generally required to take at least one of these groups as part of their coursework, and this requirement has traditionally overlapped with the requirement to include a social element in their course. This reveals an assumption that our support groups are by default social learning experiences and also a desire for them to be social learning spaces or learning experiences in the traditions of social constructivist ideas of learning in general and in the learner autonomy literature in particular (see, for example, Murray, 2014; Mynard et al., 2020).

## Stage 1: What Does Social Language Learning Mean to ALMS Students?

To explore the puzzle of why students are required to include a social element in their course, I drew on the Exploratory Practice (EP) method of using a Potentially Exploitable Pedagogical Activity (PEPA; see Hanks, 2017). A PEPA is an activity that functions both as a classroom activity and an opportunity to explore one's particular puzzle, in other words to conduct classroom research. Generating data during normal pedagogical activity follows the EP principle of integrating research into practice, not making it something extra, imposed on students or teachers.

In this project, the PEPA was a reflective writing task, where students were asked to free write for several minutes before discussing in small groups. Free writing (Elbow, 1989) before discussion is a task used several times in the ALMS opening sessions, both to afford students time to develop their ideas before discussing them with peers, and to introduce the practice of reflective writing as part of taking charge of one's learning. This free writing task took place during the second opening session of the course, where students had a little knowledge of the course ahead, but before they had made a detailed plan for the course.

The students were asked, "What does social language learning mean to you?" as well as a follow-up question about how they would include a social element in their ALMS course. They were given the choice to write on paper or anonymously in an e-form, with only the latter being saved for use in this study. At this stage, students were also briefly introduced to this inquiry into the social in language learning and invited to participate by sharing their reflections. Those who did choose the e-form option were also free to leave their answers unsubmitted if they so wished. As well as the two groups I was leading, two of my colleagues offered their groups the option to share their answers via the e-form. Thus, five groups of the 11 groups starting that autumn participated. The other six groups did similar activities to introduce the idea of learning socially in the course and our support group system.

In total, 74 students shared their reflections on social language learning. This sample was not intended to be representative of the whole student body but was intended rather to open a discussion about the social aspect of language learning, which the students would continue in groups during the opening sessions and with their counsellor as the course progressed. For my project, it was a chance to sample the kinds of understandings and beliefs students might bring to the idea of social language learning and to explore what might be similar or different to my own understandings. I was keen to hear different voices and not searching for a correct or definitive answer. Table 1 below provides a brief overview of the data used in this stage of the inquiry.

**Table 1.** *Overview of Data in Stage 1*

Question/prompt	What does social learning mean to you?
Number of respondents	74 students
Means of data collection	MS Forms
Data collected (time)	September 2019
Data collected (place)	In class
Data collected (time in course)	2 <sup>nd</sup> opening session (Week 2 of course)

To analyse the responses, I followed a process guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). After multiple readings to familiarise myself with the data, I began coding the responses. I initially used a semantic approach, adhering closely to the students'

own words when developing the codes, and subsequently I also added latent codes which appeared relevant. My aim here was to keep the coding process open and to be cautious with interpretations. The process resulted in 35 codes, with almost all responses receiving multiple codes and some up to eight. Following the coding, I made connections between the codes, grouping similar codes, while trying to also preserve subtle differences. This process resulted in five main themes, which I summarise here supported by extracts from the student responses.

### ***Analysis of the Student Responses***

The first theme identified in the responses was that social learning involves *speaking, communication, and interaction*. This idea featured in over half the responses, both in short simple answers where social language learning was defined as “conversation with other people” [Response 2] to responses where this was expanded on, such as

[Social learning means]...having conversations with people around you. You learn almost every time something new fro[m] other people and you can teach or tell something new to them as well... [Response 14]

There is an emphasis here on learning emerging from interactions, and that these interactions can cause or at least create the conditions for learning. Another student noted the different types of interactions afford different learning opportunities:

[Social learning means]... you speak in a different way in different social situations. For example I would speak more freely and with slang to a friend in my age but to a teacher I would put more effort in my speaking. [Response 68]

The speaking practice is seen as important, but the situation and relationships involved are also here seen to offer different learning opportunities. Most students focused exclusively on oral communication in their responses, but a small number also referred to writing as a site of social learning. The following is one example where writing is explicitly positioned as social practice, particularly when a text is shared:

[Social learning means] ...speaking with other people, writing texts and letting other people evaluate them, listening to other people speak. [Response 28]

The second theme generated from the responses was that of *sharing or exchanging*. In addition to sharing situations and texts, as mentioned in the previous extracts, sharing is also explicitly associated with learning in six responses, including sharing thoughts and opinions to directly sharing the learning process, as in sharing progress, strategies, and ideas [for learning]. Related and overlapping ideas here are learning *with* others, learning *from* others, and working in groups.

Social language learning means to me that I can find the courage to learn from others and others can learn from me and the group learns together... [Response 45]

It means working together with other students. Maybe by participating in many support groups or otherwise being active and arranging your own study groups. [Response 47]

Interacting and communicating with both students and teachers. Learning together with other students and learning skills and techniques from other students. Getting to see glimpses from somebody else’s view on things. [Response 50]

The third theme from the responses was the idea of social language learning as a way or method of learning languages. This could be seen from responses coded as *learning by doing* or *learning in authentic contexts*.

It's about learning by using a language to communicate. [Response 72]

Social language learning was often also contrasted with other forms of learning, specifically learning from books and studying grammar. In the following example responses, social language learning...

...means possibility to study English in way, that differs from classic learning ways. It involves interaction between other people in many contexts. [Response 43]

[...is b]etter and maybe more longlasting than reading from a book. [Response 42]

[...d]oesn't focus as much on for example correct grammar, but more on getting more and more comfortable with learning and speaking a language. [Response 37]

But a similar number of students emphasised the centrality of social language learning. Rather than being *a* way of learning, social language learning was *the* way to learn languages:

It's the base for everything else really, since if the language is only written words, it might be intriguing and wonderful but it's not alive. I think speaking, as in thinking of a response and listening, is the core of any language. Social language learning is also the quickest and most motivating way to learn. [Response 73]

The fourth theme revolves around particular adjectives that were associated with the idea of social language learning. One was the idea that social language learning was important. This can be seen of course in the previous extract (*it's the base for everything else really*) and the word *important* is directly used by the students several times. As well as importance, the adjectives *fun* and *nice* are also invoked frequently.

Social learning to me means usually that I can learn new things while doing something fun... [Response 41]

In contrast to this positive attitude toward social language learning, there is also a group of students who feel social language learning is *difficult* or *hard work*. For many of these, however, the difficulty is also connected to the importance and the responses do not suggest these students planned to avoid social language learning because it was difficult.

It's a little difficult for me because I'm not too confident speaking English. It's easier to study alone then. But it's my goal now to have more courage in this matter. [Response 8]

The final theme I identified was that social language learning social language learning is often associated with identity. In some responses, the students describe themselves as social beings so it followed that their language learning should also be social. Others explicitly did not identify with the idea of social language learning, which contributed to the difficulty of learning the language.

...I think it's nice to learn together because I'm social and I like to speak with others. [Response 12]

What struck me most about the students' responses was their diversity. While oral skills and communicative activities seemed to be the most prevalent in the responses, their answers

touched on a whole range of activities from group learning, to input from diverse interlocutors in varying contexts, giving and receiving feedback, learning with and from others, as well as learning by teaching. Social language learning was referred to in connection with both classroom activities and authentic real-world activities. It was also referred to at various stages of the learning process, such as in relation to input, practice, and feedback, as well as finding motivation, moral support and meta-learning techniques. Although speaking is seen as central, writing and even “just reading together silently” [Response 59] were also seen as social language learning activities.

While the diversity in response is both inspiring and encouraging, showing our learners to be active thoughtful participants in their own learning process—one of the goals of a course promoting learner autonomy—it does also raise the question of how our requirement to include social language learning is understood by students. The term social language learning certainly has meaning and resonance for the students, but it is also understood differently and provokes sometimes strikingly different reactions among them.

## **Stage 2: Social Language Learning in Counselling Through the Lens of Actor Network Theory (Ant)**

To develop the initial inquiry, I recorded and reflected on how social learning materialised in my students’ courses over the next few semesters. I did this by writing in a counselling journal, updating it after each counselling session or group of counselling sessions. A section of this counselling journal forms the data for Stage 2 of this story of practice, where I explore social in language learning in the ALMS course through the theoretical lens of actor-network theory (see, for example, Latour, 2005). I first introduce the counselling journal as a tool for continuing professional development and a method of practitioner research. I then present the specific section of the journal which forms the basis for this story of practice. Following this, I outline how and why actor-network theory came to be used as a lens for this stage of the project. The story of practice concludes with analysis and discussion of the counselling journal, as well as some implications and limitations of the inquiry.

My counselling journal is both a tool for professional development and a research instrument. As a record of and a reflection on the counselling sessions, the journal generates data and is also a first step in the analysis process (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). I take a free writing approach (Elbow, 1989), not aiming at a text designed for other readers, but rather attempting to engage myself in a dialogue with my counselling experiences and with my reading of literature in and around the field of language education, a dialogue between theory and practice. The journal can be seen as a form of reflective practice (Farrell, 2015; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Schön, 1983), critically reflecting on the counselling encounters, and a form of autoethnography (Bochner, 2012; Canagarajah, 2012; Pinner, 2018) or autoethnographic field notes from the counselling sessions. The approach is influenced by the principles of Exploratory Practice (EP) (Allwright & Hanks, 2009, pp. 149-155) in that it integrates research into pedagogical practice and mirrors the reflective writing that students do in the opening sessions of their ALMS course and in their logs, blogs, or diaries throughout the course.

For this stage of the study, I focus on the journal entries from the final counselling meetings in spring 2023. I chose the final counselling session as this is where students recount and reflect on how the learning happened during the course. The data for this stage of the story were thus generated during April and May in 2023, based on 34 counselling sessions with 34 students spread over 12 days. The resulting journal was an 8-page Google doc containing 4,425 words.

My writing in these journal entries considers the final counselling sessions through the lens of actor-network theory. The following is an entry from my journal showing how I arrived at this theoretical lens. The entry is dated (Journal, 7.3.23), showing that it was written before the final counselling sessions in April and May of the same year. It demonstrates how my reading around the idea of social learning influenced and shaped my reflections on the students' learning practices.

I'm coming back to Latour [2005] after a while of not reading and it's interesting mostly as a lens to reflect my own thinking and approach. In *Reassembling the Social* (esp. Chap 2) he's talking about how sociologists of the social can be forcing the actors into certain pre-existing categories. I feel I could be guilty of that here even as I am trying to get away from it... I think I'll focus on it especially on the final counselling. (Journal, 7.3.23)

Latour's *pre-existing categories* refer to the idea of labelling things as social or not social, before examining them and deciding how the various human and non-human actors interact to form networks. My own feeling of guilt refers to my attempt to *identify* social learning in the students' practices. Here the journal shows me finding a theoretical hook to hang my dissatisfaction with the idea of social learning on. Throughout the project, I had found social learning to be both everywhere and also not easy to distinguish from other forms of learning, as something stable and distinct in and of itself. The ANT lens thus offered a way to refocus my inquiry and renew my thinking.

### ***A Brief Introduction to ANT and Its Relevance for This Story of Practice***

Actor-Network Theory originates in the late 1970s and the work of social scientists such as John Law, Michael Callon, and Bruno Latour (Latour, 2005). While exact definitions are contested, ANT approaches can be seen as ways to explore and unpick complex phenomena, and they have been widely used in disciplines, such as science and technology, business, healthcare, and indeed education and linguistics. While few ANT-inspired studies focus on language learning directly, Carroll's (2018) case study of the implementation of a Computer Assisted Language Learning curriculum at a university language centre springs from a similar context to my own study. Carroll argues that ANT "[allows and perhaps encourages us] to look beyond the conventional register for ways of telling [a story] so as to reveal what would otherwise remain hidden" (p. 253). This aptly describes my own use of ANT in this story of practice: an approach to use theory creatively in exploring the idea of the social in my students' language learning.

ANT approaches view the world as composed of actors—both human and non-human—acting on and with each other to form networks. In Law's words "entities take their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relations with other entities" (Law, 1999, p. 3), implying that networks affect and construct actors as much as the other way around. Central to ANT is the idea that pre-existing categorisations should be disregarded or at least distrusted. ANT, thus, rejects an essential difference between human and non-human actors, which is not to say that interacting with a human is the same as interacting with an object. The key point would be instead to examine the actors and how they interact rather than placing them into pre-determined categories like human and non-human. Likewise, the non-human actors are considered essential to the interaction and not merely tools, props, or contexts which support interaction between humans. Indeed, they are seen to act on and influence interactions as much as the people in the network.

While the ANT literature contains a host of concepts and terms, a thorough introduction of them being beyond the scope of this story of practice, two terms struck me as particularly useful for examining my students' language learning: mediators and intermediaries. *Intermediaries* are uncomplicated actors in the network, "transporting meaning or force without transforming it" (Latour, 2005, p. 39). *Mediators* by contrast "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour, 2005, p. 39). Important too is the idea that the boundaries between mediators and intermediaries are not stable. An example here would be the Zoom platform over which most of my counselling practice takes place. In some counselling sessions, it is a simple intermediary facilitating the practice of counsellor and student discussing the course. The software, however, can easily become a mediator in particular circumstances, dramatically affecting the counselling session or a student's learning network. This effect could be positive if it allows students to complete the course remotely or negative if a bad internet connection makes it difficult to talk. This contrast is evident in the journal entries analysed in this study. Writing about one counselling session, I remark:

The counselling changed things - meeting and talking, face to face, allowed me to see the human and the person there and indeed his reflection and not just judge based on my preconceptions. (Day 3 of 12, Johannes [pseudonym])

whereas later that day, in another counselling session, I note:

maybe here it's affected by us not really engaging in the counselling. It feels hard to talk and to remember here and to establish the communication via Zoom. (Day 3 of 12, Lotta [pseudonym])

In the first extract, counselling is the mediator and the fact that it takes place via Zoom seems merely incidental. Indeed, I refer to it as "face-to-face" communication. In the second, however, Zoom has transformed into a mediator, seemingly limiting a discussion between student and counsellor.

From an ANT perspective then, the idea of social learning cannot be accepted as a distinct concept and then looked for and identified in my counselling encounters. As seen from Part 1 of this enquiry, the idea of social learning has multiple meanings and evokes a variety of intellectual and emotional responses. My approach in this part of the story of practice was instead to borrow the ANT idea of *tracing associations* (Latour, 2005) or interactions between things. Thus, I examined the actors in my students' courses: who or what were my students interacting with on the course and in the support groups, and what did their learning networks look like? Which actors seemed to be mediators and which intermediaries of learning? These questions served as research questions guiding my analysis of the journal.

### ***Analysing the Journal***

After journaling about the counselling sessions, I analysed the resulting text following a process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). I reread the journal multiple times to familiarise myself with the text, corrected minor spelling and grammar errors and then uploaded it to ATLAS.ti Web (Version 9.18.0) for coding. My coding was an iterative process inspired by abductive coding (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Vila-Henninger et al., 2024), where initial ideas from theory are used to begin the coding process and this is subsequently complemented with ideas from the data. Thus, I started with very broad codes such as *Learning interactions* where I highlighted my writing about students creating or being active within their learning network with other actors. Likewise, I included a code

for *Limited engagement* or *Lack of engagement*, where I noted interactions that did not seem to lead to learning.

I also coded for *Support Group Interactions*, where I wrote about students' learning experiences in support groups. These have traditionally been assumed to be sites of social learning in the ALMS course, so I was interested in who or what students felt they were interacting with in the groups in order to learn. I also added codes based on significant actors in the students' courses, such as *Interacting with texts* or *Effect of counselling*, and further refined the codes based on details from the journal.

Table 2 below shows an overview of the data used in this part of the study. I quote liberally from the data below to illustrate the analysis. The quotes are labelled with the day of the counselling session and pseudonyms have been used in place of students' names. The students were informed of my counselling journal both in the opening sessions of the course and in counselling sessions and granted their permission for it to be used as a research tool with their anonymity assured. Thus, exact dates have been omitted here, and students' actual names are not recorded in the journal.

**Table 2. Overview of Data in Stage 2**

Time period for counselling journal	April & May 2023
Number of days on which I counselled	12 days
Number of students counselled in this period	34 students
Counselling journal (Google Doc)	4,425 words (8 pages)
Qualitative analysis software used	Atlas.ti Web (V9.18.0)

The following sections comprise an analysis and discussion of the journal in relation to my research questions. In contrast to Stage 1 of this story of practice, where I puzzled about how students understood social language learning, the ANT lens focused my attention on the students' interactions on the course. In presenting the analysis, I first address who or what my students interacted with on the course and how these interactions related to their learning. I then outline how the students interacted with the course's support groups, traditionally thought of as being sites of social learning in ALMS. The analysis concludes by examining the mediators and intermediaries on the course, particularly focusing on the students' agency: how they acted and were acted upon in their learning during the course.

### ***Analysis of the Journal 1: Who or What Did the Students Interact With?***

My journal reveals many examples of what could be called traditional social learning: speaking, discussion, communication with other people in support groups, DIY groups, and diverse out-of-classroom settings.

Julia\* purposely chose shifts at work so she could speak English with more "accomplished" speakers, and she organized events where she would have to speak English... (Day 4 of 12, \*All names quoted are pseudonyms)

A group with friends allowed Laura to relax and use the language but the vocab support group challenged her to speak more clearly and correctly and complexly - she had to think about it more. And both of these interactions were important. (Day 7)

However, there were also many non-human actors on the course with which students interacted, most notably texts:

Ella interacted mainly with texts. She read them, reviewed them, translated them, reflected on them, wrote about them, discussed them, summarized them. (Day 1 of 12)

This interacting with texts accords well with the ANT literature: Law and Hetherington (2003) see texts as a key category of materiality, and they are seen in ANT analyses not only to simply carry information, but also to “control, direct, monitor, document, make visible, shape consolidate and inscribe what comes to be valued as knowledge” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 8; see also Farrell, 2006). For many students, the texts themselves shaped and directed the learning, being more mediators of learning rather than mere course materials used to achieve a learning objective.

I had always avoided the hard texts but now Anni went at them and took time to really engage with them. Listening again to a part of an audiobook, reading again, making notes, writing things down. So really conscious engagement, deep engagement rather than just a surface reading - which seemed to give more in terms of really understanding and developing vocab, etc. (Day 2 of 12)

Anni here affords the hard texts a certain presence and respect in her course and interacting with them led to her learning. The quote above highlights the conscious engagement, but there seems also to be a physical engagement with going at the texts, rereading and relistening, and indeed making notes and writing things down. The texts here could thus be said to match well with Law and Hetherington’s (2003) other two categories of materiality: material objects and bodies.

One particular text which students engaged with was their course log or diary. However, its role in the course varied greatly from student to student.

...for Onni [the log/diary] was the tool to bring structure, once he found a way to reflect that felt suitable/appropriate for him. He didn’t want to write a long confessional page about everything he ever did, but rather more clipped scientific notes and comments. It brings to mind this Latour [2005] idea of mediators and intermediaries. The log is sometimes not so important - just a place to note things down and bring structure, but sometimes it’s a place for learning and it itself creates and facilitates the learning. (Day 9)

The logs’/diaries’ centrality to the course was especially important in making the learning visible and connecting the diverse activities of the course. I describe one log/diary as “rich and full of different interactions” (Day 7) and another as “really detailed and meticulously kept—again that making the learning visible was really useful for [Matias] in his own words” (Day 4). These linked, networked texts are emblematic of the ANT idea that the actors in a network gain meaning and identity from their relations with each other. The texts themselves are not important as distinct entities but rather in their relations with the students and with other actors on the course.

The interactions between actors are also almost always multiple, meaning there are many actors involved at the same time, and the intensity of the interactions seems to correlate with the intensity of the learning.

Anni also said writing was best when she did summaries—here I think this was because of the mediation element. She had to really think about what she had read and engage with that, whereas the essay was just more performative, something she wrote. This seems to speak to the connectedness again—not just her and the page—and the teacher!—but her and the original text and the page and the connection between reading and writing and then the reader—maybe she was the most important reader here! (Day 2)

The logs/diaries are often particularly central actors due to their being the site of reflection, which is also the case for other reflective aspects of the course, such as the counselling sessions. Reflection appears to allow the student to *trace associations* (Latour, 2005) or make connections between the different elements of the course and thus see their learning. While reflection often involves interaction with oneself, or intra-action, its dialogic, interactive, perhaps one could even say *social*, character is emphasised in my journal, even if the interaction was not always with other human actors. Students reflected by interacting with their logs/diaries, their course goals, their learner identities, and sometimes their counsellor. The following quotes feature some of these reflective interactions, showing how the students interacted with different elements of the course, sometimes employing them as learning tools and sometimes having their learning shaped by them.

Aino also mentioned how interacting with herself and her existing knowledge worked for her - and the previous work built on and led to the later work. "Okay, Now I'm ready for that." The reflection in the log/blog was only one part - in fact more a fun way ("like a hobby") to gather things together and find perspective. (Day 3)

...[Julia] was interacting with her goals and self-reflecting/evaluating really effectively. (Day 4)

[Oona's work was] really reflective... mainly reading work, but different types of reading and a detailed log and she responded to my comments [in the second counselling session] that perhaps she could write more about the reading, which helped to internalise (her word!) it. (Day 10)

In summary, interaction could be seen as central to the learning on the course, whether in the form of traditional social interaction in formal or informal settings or interaction with non-human actors, particularly textual ones. Reflection too can read as a dynamic interactive process, involving a dialogic engagement with the self, as well as a host of other actors, such as counsellors, learning diaries, and bodies of knowledge.

### ***Analysis of the Journal 2: Interactions With and Within ALMS Support Groups***

One element of the course that I was particularly interested in was our support groups. Their status as social learning experiences was an important driver in formulating this inquiry and I was keen to reflect on how the students interacted in these specific settings. Some students indeed experienced support groups as traditional "social learning" spaces:

There was more traditional social learning with Ella's book club... they could help each other and it was fun. (Day 1)

However, students sometimes seemed to interact more with the theme of the group, the materials, or the teacher's feedback:

[Julia's] group seemed about input and affordance and opportunity and feedback more than community. (Day 4)

Elias even talked about his interaction with peers' texts, as opposed to the peers themselves:

The support group people's texts gave him ideas, vocabulary and material, but not a whole lot of communicative engagement - but it was still of benefit and he noticed his writing improving as a knock-on effect. (Day 5, Elias)

My journal also notes some students emphasising the learning in the groups, as opposed to the social element, because they afforded “the time and space to practise and learn” (Day 2). The following extract contrasts a support group and more informal *social* interaction with friends:

A group with friends allowed [Sara] to relax and use the language but the vocab support group challenged her to speak more clearly and correctly and complexly - she had to think about it more. And both of these interactions were important. (Day 6)

Support groups in this framing appear as mediators in the learning network: the traditional idea of smooth social interaction conflicting with a cognitive interaction with the target language. This conflict, rather than impairing learning, is seen here to stimulate and support it.

...[in the conversation group] you got the time to speak and people let you go slowly and get the words out. In the everyday conversations... maybe there wasn't so much time or it didn't seem to be as good a place to practise. (Day 2, Anni)

The students interacted with and within the groups to form their learning networks, and the groups themselves were not passive actors in these networks, providing challenging, and sometimes surprising, interactions leading to learning:

...[Iida] was against support groups - it's compulsory “I had to go there”, but she also then said she was surprised how much she enjoyed it. (Day 5)

Support groups can thus be read here as important actors within students' courses, sometimes as sites of interaction with fellow students, but also sometimes providing opportunities to interact with texts, with discourses, and with the language itself. An ANT view of the support groups would not position them as by definition social learning spaces but rather argue that their position in the students' courses is not fixed, and this view can certainly be read in my journal.

### ***Analysis of the Journal 3: Disruptive, Slowed-Down and Limited Interactions***

As mentioned in the previous section, some students associated the support groups with what could be described as a slowed-down form of interaction, such as spending time to get the words out or trying consciously to speak more clearly or complexly. The groups were often contrasted with out-of-classroom social situations, with the learning element of the group disrupting the communicative interaction. My journal also refers to this slowed-down or disruptive interaction in other parts of the course too. In the following extract, for example, I note how Aleksí compares academic reading for content with reading for (language) learning:

I think the point about slowing down was really interesting. [Aleksi] now looks up all the words on the academic word list from the abstract before he starts it. If you jump into an academic text you can easily get “overwhelmed”, so the AWL [academic word list] highlighter slowed him down and made him think. It was almost interrupting his reading/ or flow to stop and reposition and learn more effectively. (Day 10)

These slowed-down, disruptive interactions can also be seen in the students managing their learning, where students appeared to scaffold the learning process themselves, rather than having it done for them by a teacher. In the following examples, I noted how Aino deliberately limited her English interactions and gradually increased the difficulty level, with echoes of the zone of proximal development. Jenna rejected certain types of

interaction (speaking English with other Finns) and instead gradually found her own ways into the learning.

Aino also mentioned how interacting with herself and her existing knowledge worked for her - and the previous work built on and led to the later work. "Okay, Now I'm ready for that." (Day 3)

Jenna found interaction with [other] Finns in English terrible but went and did some interaction with non-Finns and that felt easier, and she did the weekly challenges [support group] which gave new ways to study and learn English. (Day 8)

There are, I would argue, clear links to learner autonomy here with the students making choices and taking charge of their own learning. However, the other actors in students' learning networks also had agency and shaped their course choices and activities. Indeed, the disruptive and challenging actors were often highly important in learning, alongside the simpler or easier activities, which helped students get started. Both here can be seen as mediators of learning, playing important roles in creating learning on the course.

Sometimes, however, students did not engage with particular aspects of the course or the language. This limited engagement, perhaps predictably, seemed to correlate with limited learning:

Milla did lots of work on writing, reading and vocab and improved here and enjoyed this. But didn't improve so much in speaking and pron[unciation] because she didn't get involved as much here. (Day 9)

[Elias' course was] not at all a waste of time - but a little bittersweet that he could have engaged that bit more in groups, with his diary, with speaking to others, getting feedback—he could have learned a lot more, I think. (Day 5)

The regret expressed here is of course personal but grounded in my interaction with the students and their own expressions of regret or missed opportunities. Some students, however, deliberately set limits on their engagement, often in support of their own well-being:

Venla and Helmi had very similar ideas in that they set limits on the course and what they wanted to do on it. I think this is... like a form of self protection. [Students] need to set limits in terms of what they do and how much they commit to a course (Day 8)

[Linnea had] a group too, but when it got too big and unwieldy she checked out. (Day 12)

This limiting of engagement is a reminder that the course is just one part of their engagement with English during their life and that English is just one actor in their lives. One student remarked, somewhat pointedly, that the lifewide, lifedeep (Barnett, 2011; Karlsson & Kjisik, 2011) approach in ALMS could be overwhelming:

Olavi commented that on this course I felt like I had to be aware/alert all the time - Can I use this on my ALMS course? Would this be good for my ALMS course? (Day 9)

The variety in type and quality of interactions here can be read as central to the learning and indeed to learner autonomy. Indeed, the fact of interactions being sometimes disruptive as well as facilitative of learning echoes Trebbi's (2008) discussion of constraints in learner autonomy being both necessary and also providing opportunities. Learner autonomy and indeed learning can be read here as successfully managing one's interactions or being a mediator in one's own learning network.

## Concluding the Story of Practice and Continuing the Story

This story of practice recounts my puzzling about the meaning of social language learning and a requirement for students to include a social element in their ALMS English course. The puzzling took place initially with a group of students reflecting on their understanding of social language learning at the start of a course. This was both a course task for the students and an opportunity for me to begin a creative inquiry into my puzzle. The inquiry then continued through an analysis of my counselling journal, particularly focusing on one group of students discussing their course experiences and reading this through the lens of actor-network theory (ANT).

While the initial puzzle revealed no simple consensus, it did show diverse, evocative, and sometimes creative responses to the question of how the students understood social language learning. The responses emphasised communication with others, but also learning with and from others, sharing ideas and experiences. The question also revealed differing attitudes to and understandings of learning, raising questions of identity, and provoking affective responses. These responses highlighted the embodied nature of learning, showing that the words *mean to you* were as important as the words *social language learning* in the original prompt: *What does social language learning mean to you?* This highlighted the value of a qualitative, EP approach to the initial puzzle, opening up the idea of social language learning rather than narrowing it down.

The use of ANT as a theoretical lens furthered the inquiry, facilitating a critical reflection on and a playful exploration of the concept of social language learning within my educational context. Central to ANT is the idea that an unexamined label such as *social* hides a complex network of actors—objects, people, ideas—working with and on each other. This focus provided an approach to puzzling about and problematising the concept of social language learning. From an ANT perspective, *social* language learning, like any form of language learning, arises from and is “sustained by multifarious capillaries of associations and activity” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2014, p. 37). My counselling journal and the resulting analysis, thus, followed the actors, tracing the associations and (inter)activity in my students’ courses.

The results of this analysis show students learning by interacting with themselves and other people, but also with texts, contexts, discourses, and the language itself. It suggests too that these interactions are rarely simple, often involving multiple actors, and that disruptive interactions were as important as smooth ones. Where the interactions were limited or lacking, students seemed to learn less.

## Limitations and Implications

While the inquiry into social language learning in this story of practice supported and facilitated my own critical and creative thinking, it is important too to acknowledge that it is one story of practice, my story of practice, and indeed only one of my stories of practice. The story is as much, if not more so, about my interaction with the idea of social language learning than my students’. And like my students, I interacted with others, with texts, with theories, and with the structures of the programme in which I work in order to tell the story.

Partial as it is, the story has several implications for my practice as a counsellor on the ALMS course. While the ANT lens encourages me to be cautious of a term like social language learning, the initial inquiry here demonstrated that it was a useful term for starting a discussion with students about what language learning was or could be and what their values were in relation to it.

The inquiry has also encouraged me to think differently about our support groups and the role they play in students' courses. Instead of assuming the groups to be sites of social learning, they are better seen as sites of learning, offering our students many affordances and opportunities for learning interactions. The requirement to take part in at least one support group affords opportunities for new, complex, and unexpected interactions on students' courses. Mercer (2013, p. 394) suggests that complexity approaches to language education have the "potential to prompt alternative ways of thinking and open our eyes to different ways of viewing our classrooms." The ANT lens in this project has performed this function for me, encouraging me to decouple support groups and the social in language learning. This shift supports a focus in counselling discussions on what a support group might offer a particular student. Similarly, it encourages students and their counsellor to be more creative in making their ALMS course social, rather than us ticking a box when the student has participated in a support group.

The requirement for students to include a social element in their course could perhaps, based on this ANT reading, be reformulated as a requirement to engage in new, diverse, and sometimes challenging activities with different people, different texts and in different contexts. This phrasing might I fear be rather unhelpful or unclear for students, but it could inform our group discussions in the opening sessions of the course, focusing our attention on what it means to learn, an essential concern for students charged with becoming more autonomous learners. For me as a counsellor, this reformulation provides a useful heuristic for listening and asking questions about their work on the course.

Ultimately, this inquiry suggests it is problematic to assume that social language learning, or indeed any aspect of language learning like writing or grammar, is a simple, uncomplicated concept. The process of unpacking such a concept, however, has helped me better identify student learning and uncovered opportunities to further support and encourage it in counselling sessions. Framing the inquiry as a puzzle to explore rather than a problem to solve, following the Exploratory Practice approach, has helped greatly to structure and facilitate the process. Likewise, EP's principle of integrating research into pedagogical practice has helped make the work manageable and meaningful for me. This story of practice, thus, emphasises the process of reflective practitioner research: How a critical and creative examination of one's existing practices can suggest new ways of thinking and talking about learning, supporting, and furthering both learners' and teachers' autonomy.

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## Review Process

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