Second language learning and teaching: When lived experience and second language acquisition knowledge collide

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Abstract

Mei (pseudonym) was educated in an Asian country and, later, as a teenager in Aotearoa New Zealand. She is currently a primary school teacher of migrant students. Mei initially struggled at secondary school. Left to develop her own strategies, Mei formed her own theories around English language learning. Later, while studying on the Graduate Diploma in TESSOL (Teaching English to Speakers in Schools of Other Languages) she struggled to modify or expand these theories. Mei also challenged the benefits of the social construction of knowledge through discussion of academic readings in group work.

Introduction

This article focuses on one teacher, Mei (pseudonym), and her experiences studying on the in-service professional development course, the Graduate Diploma in TESSOL (Teaching English to Speakers in Schools of Other Languages, the GDT). Mei's case illustrates how disturbing it can be for teachers to revisit their emotionally ingrained theories of language learning developed from their own school experiences. Alternative theoretical models can be too challenging to consider. In addition, Mei's case challenges the value of sociocultural approaches to academic reading used in some GDT courses. The findings valourise wider familiarity with second language acquisition (SLA) knowledge within school curriculum and amongst teachers.

Academic readings are an integral part of the GDT at the University of Auckland. Three different approaches are employed on the four core papers: independent reading, individual presentation of key points to small groups, and a reciprocal approach (Parrott & Cherry, 2011). Three GDT lecturers gained approval for a large research project investigating a) which approaches to academic reading the teachers found most effective and b) how teachers used their academic reading to inform their teaching and work with school colleagues. Findings were that most teachers favoured reciprocal approaches (Kitchen, Jeurissen, Gray & Courtney, 2017). Tools used for

this longitudinal study included questionnaires and interviews. During the interviews Mei talked at length about her academic reading experiences on the third and fourth papers which employ Parrott and Cherry's reciprocal reading. She challenged the notion of the social construction of knowledge through discussion and interaction. In doing so Mei explained how disturbing it was to read about and listen to others discussing second language acquisition theory (SLA) that challenged her own theories of English language learning developed from her own school learning experiences.

The following section outlines literature around the shifting of teachers' theories of language learning through professional development. It then raises key points around academic reading and the social construction of knowledge.

Professional development and shifting teachers' theories of language learning

Teachers have experienced classrooms as students themselves. These often strongly embedded early experiences influence how teachers make sense of teaching and learning (Daniels, 2010; Loughran, 2006). Coleman (1996) cautions that pedagogies grounded in lived experiences are often emotionally ingrained and that challenging such working theories can be so disturbing that learning becomes impossible.

Discussing teachers' theories of teaching and learning, Kumaravadivelu (2001, p. 539) focuses not on these early school experiences, but on teachers developing their own theories as observant classroom teachers. He suggests that teachers develop their own "context-sensitive pedagogic knowledge" through continual cycles of observation, reflection, and action. Drawing on Vygotskian theory Daniels (2010) adopts a slightly different position from Kumaravadivelu, arguing that teaching and learning practices that are not consciously planned on the basis of principles do not easily become objects of conscious reflection. He contends that teachers need tools of reflection that allow them to "read" their practice within the "grammar" of their settings. Research knowledge, SLA knowledge in this case, being the key to this reflection. Within a school setting, teachers of migrant students may not have been introduced to the tools of reflection that allow them to "read" their practice within the "grammar" of their settings, and this may have consequences for migrant students. For example, teachers may not have such tools of reflection as SLA knowledge that

allow them to understand how to effectively teach students who are emerging bilinguals.

van Lier (2004, p. 91) discusses the role of *affordances* in teaching and learning, describing affordances as "what is available to the person to do something with". A teacher may have had little training or access to professional development about how to integrate language and content teaching and thus address the language learning needs of emerging bilingual students. Affordance occurs when opportunities are available in the environment. For school students, too, debilitative circumstances can occur: "societal forces can . . . confine a person's signifying relationships to a reduced menu of iconic and indexical relationships" (van Lier, 2002, 156). In a negative setting, for example where students may see their home language and culture not valued, their home language and culture may erode. This is deficit or subtractive language learning theory espoused by theorists such as Baker, (2017). Subtractive bilingualism happens when the two languages compete and the student loses the home language and culture, or they are eroded.

Academic reading and the social construction of knowledge

Social constructivism highlights the role of meaning making though discussion with others' similar or different views. Constructivism "gives central consideration to the understanding of situation-specific meanings of actions, from the point of view of the actors" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 255). Such approaches are embodied in Parrott and Cherry's (2011) approach to academic reading. Parrott and Cherry set conditions they found alerted students to the affordances readings offered: students were assigned to small reading groups and a set of rotating group roles (discussion leader, passage master, devil's advocate, creative connector, and reporter). Having studied the assigned reading, students met with their groups each week to talk about their understanding of the reading and its application to their own context. Parrott and Cherry's students reported that:

> small group work gave them positive pressure to complete the reading to be able to participate in the discussion, helped them understand multiple perspectives on the readings and topics, and helped them better comprehend the theories and concepts in the readings themselves. (2011, p. 364)

Parrott and Cherry's approach combines learners' natural commitment to the group with sociocultural understandings that meaning making happens through rich conversations and negotiation with others who have different, situation specific, classroom experiences.

Freeman likewise (2016, p. 241 - 242) valourises *communities of activity* and the *communities of explanation*. Freeman identifies three aspects of a community of activity: the actions are visible, they are recognised as meaningful and/or sensible to others within the group. He contends that in a community of explanation, a group of people need to share common ways of reasoning about the world.

Hargreaves (1994) raises other concerns relevant to this study about teachers' professional learning communities. He questions teachers' commitment to collaboration given the tension between the imperative to be like everyone else and the threat that not being part of the group can lead to alienation and exclusion. Some teachers may commit for these negative reasons. Indeed Cain's (2012) thesis is that solitude is widely under-recognised and under-valued within learning and problem-solving contexts.

The study

The GDT is a specialised programme whose curriculum focuses on the theory and practice of teaching students who are speakers of other languages. It is an in-service course for practising primary and high school teachers involving two or more years of part-time, after-school study. To complete the GDT teachers require completion of four core papers plus four elective papers. Weekly readings theorise the lecture topics and some provide practical strategies that contextualise the theory.

49 of Mei's cohort of GDT students (who were all practising primary and secondary school teachers) participated in a longitudinal research study where GDT lecturers sought to explore the effective use of academic course readings. Three types of data were collected: a Likert scale questionnaire administered towards the beginning and end of the two core years; an open ended writing topic probing the teachers' preferences around the three different reading approaches; and three qualitative interviews with teachers who volunteered to participate in these. This paper reports on

three qualitative interviews with Mei over 18 months. When Mei enrolled in the Graduate Diploma in TESSOL (GDT) she had been practising as an elementary school teacher for three years.

Sample questions from the third interview include:
Can you talk about which particular readings have you found most helpful in shaping your classroom practice? Can you give some specific examples in relation to English language learners in your class?
How have you found the approach taken in this particular course to the academic reading component?
Can you talk about the importance of having a group of teachers to discuss readings with and to share classroom stories that illustrate the readings?

In analysing the qualitative interviews, modified grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was employed. Separately, the researchers took responsibility for developing initial key codes and supporting evidence such as memo writing. The lecturers then met and compared codes and evidence then together conflated codes that were similar, subsuming them into wider categories, while also noting outliers. Mei, the notable outlier, is the subject of this study. Mei was interviewed by the author of this study and her data were analysed by the author, however the data and analysis were discussed during meetings of the wider team.

The following section presents the findings from Mei's interviews under two headings: challenging working theories about learning grounded in lived experiences can be disturbing; and challenging the social construction of knowledge.

Challenging working theories about learning grounded in lived experiences can be disturbing

Mei's talk shows that her teenage school experiences were strongly emotionally ingrained. She described her high school experiences negatively, and outlined the pressure to construct her identity as an English-speaking New Zealander. Noticeably, being different at school was a downward spiral. She told the story of how she decided to stop speaking her L1 even with the older sibling with whom she lived ("I

didn't speak my language at home"). She developed her own working theory from the only affordance she perceived to be available at school.

> So [I] completely replaced my language to get to where I needed to be and it was very effective because I learnt the culture and when you know the culture then you get a ticket in to that society . . . . So then there are a lot of benefits to go with replacing the language. . . . . I got an A bursary, I got into the place that I wanted to be in but I got too sick later on and it had a lasting impact . . . I think it was a lot to do with self-esteem because I wanted to be white ... I hated the fact that I looked different and I spoke differently.

Mei "hated the fact" she was different. She wanted to belong to the school community of English learning and social friendship. In her narrative the teachers and older sister with whom she lived, the very adults who could have mediated and offered alternatives, appeared silent. The only available affordance that Mei perceived was to deny her self—her culture and her language. Her working theory arising from what she perceived to be the affordances offered to her as a migrant students was that she could be successful by assimilating into New Zealand (English speaking) culture. Mei used a metaphor to describe the benefits from sacrificing her ethnic self: "a ticket" to the society that included friends. She used modifiers to emphasise these benefits ("*very very* effective" "*a lot of* benefits"). Mei perceived the strategy as successful in that it got her an A bursary and entrance into university, but she acknowledged the accompanying dire consequences ("I got too sick later on and it had a lasting impact").

Much later, during the interviews, in arguing against theory presented to her during GDT classes, Mei held the same line:

> Yes and also the replacing of that [L1]. I think yes it's important to see the language side of things but also I think it's important to see the societal factors that can play, the fact that when I replace my language there are a lot of benefits to go with it. But in that class [the GDT class lectures and readings] they talk about how it's not very effective academically but actually it was academically very effective and I think a lot of people actually still find that method very, very effective.

Mei withdrew from one GDT paper, and the course for a year, because the messages about bilingualism were too disturbing, too confronting. She felt that the lecturers did not allow space for her to validate her own very vivid working theories around second language learning. In her experience distancing herself from her L1 identity and language allowed her to be academically successful in an English speaking society. In discussing Baker's (2017) notions of additive language learning (rather than subtractive) she commented:

> The lecturers presented what they knew as facts when I actually didn't agree with it. And then the assignment was around what they had presented as facts, so then for me because I didn't agree with it, then I couldn't do the assignment and then that's when I decided to drop it.

In withdrawing from the paper, Mei set the conditions for her own participation in learning—her lived experiences and working theories needed to align with theory "presented as facts". "I reject some things that I don't agree with". She looked around at her GDT classmates and thought about how many may have lost their L1.

> A lot of you are here because you replaced your language and you succeeded in this society, because you have done that, so then how can you confidently say to your students not to do that when you have actually got to where you are by doing that ?

Mei needed considerable space and time before she could consider using SLA research to reflect on her own theories. Over time, Mei was able to reconsider the negative effect that denying her L1-self had had on her personally, and she re-enrolled in the GDT a year later being able to note the positive affordances of learning about SLA theory:

> Looking back I think I should have had a bit more balanced to keep myself safe. Yeah. I've never actually gotten that message from school, high school [that difference is a blessing]. It was only when I actually started uni and I actually I think it was year two that I took [a] bilingual paper that was like a therapy for me and that's when I started to heal.

In attributing to the bilingual paper therapeutic characteristics, Mei acknowledged that the academic readings themselves, a few of which she read and re-read in the long run enabled her to rethink her own experiences, and to visualise a different path to her own for the students she currently taught. However, it was not a replacement, rather it

was an explicit acknowledgement that there were alternatives to her experiential working theories.

> I mean yes I don't think it's good to promote replacing language but I think they still need to think about how they can marry those two together.
>
> Ultimately the parents want their kids to succeed and if that's what they want.

Academic reading enabled Mei to add another, possibly healing, layer. She was also rethinking the narratives she might discuss with her students' parents about the affordances of keeping two languages alive.

Over time Mei was able to acknowledge and talk about the expansion of her language learning theories. At the third interview, 18 months after the first one, she also explained that some of the readings had become "part of her DNA". This comparison to her inherited genetic material, DNA, is a very powerful metaphor. The understandings became part of who she is, her very *being* as a teacher. In this, Mei transformed her perception of available affordances and the resultant working theory arising from her migrant school days. The thoroughly interrogated theories became part of her DNA—fundamental material that is unalterable. She gave an example.

> So like I might be um I was talking to my team leader about PROBE (Prose Reading Observation, Behaviour and Evaluation) testing and how that is culturally not inclusive of minority cultures . . . . And I think sometimes I forget that people, well I don't forget that they haven't got that experience, I do understand that they haven't got that knowledge that I've got but because it's so innate I don't know where to start.

Challenging the social construction of knowledge

Mei made it clear that she did not think she was typical of the teachers on the GDT course. She read and re-read the readings she felt were important (and she by no means read all the assigned readings) scrutinising the reference lists and looking up and reading some of the references. Consequently, she perceived that she understood the reading at a much deeper level than the other teachers. She filtered the theory through her own experiences and, once it resonated with her, she internalised it so the theory became hers,

> I am very, very thorough. So I think and it's the same with readings, before I actually make it my own because I know that it's going to affect the way that I speak, the way that I think, it's going to affect my world view, so before I make it my own I leave all those options open. So extra perspective, definitely it helps . . . I go away and I take what I need and that becomes mine . . . Becomes my thing and then I might not even remember the rest of the ideas that he [the author] had that wasn't quite aligned with my thing.

While she positioned herself within the "community of activity" of the reading groups, and the reading group's actions were visible and recognisable to her, for her they were not Freeman's (2016) "community of explanation".

> It frustrated me a lot more because I couldn't understand what other people were saying. I wish, 'cause with some readings I read three to four times and when I read I actually read very thoroughly so it takes a while for me to read.

Mei rejected the explanations of others. The other reading group members did not share sufficient experience and knowledge for group functionality in her opinion:

> For me I think if someone is presenting a reading it needs to stick to what the reading says. So this is what it is, and then go right on so that other people can have their own ideas and see that through their experience and their eyes. But I think when people talk about the readings what I found is that it normally deviates from the actual reading and they talk about their experience. I didn't find that particularly helpful [to] understanding the readings.

Mei was not invested in other teachers' applications because contexts are unique, and her contextualised understanding did not tally with that of others. Situated application, therefore, she saw as a waste of time:

> I think I've always dreaded listening to other people talk about the readings, that time, I think we get 20 minutes, 15 to 20 or sometimes 25 minutes just listening to them talk. And yeah just them talking about their life is very good but yeah it didn't really help in terms of understanding the readings I think. But then again I wouldn't expect them to … do the things that I do.

Mei used some of the group shared time "to have time off".

Mei was the key actor in her own learning. She took from the readings only what she saw as relevant for her. Sociocultural construction's notion of interdependence in group work was not actualised for Mei through the readings. She recognised her own agency and set her own conditions: "If I don't understand the whole picture then I refuse to participate in parts of it because I don't think that that represents the whole, because that loses the whole purpose." She felt that the others in her group were caught up in smaller, not so substantial details. She likened her contribution to being on the main track, whereas others were distracted by minor details off-track. She perceived herself as outside the group as shown when she re-enacted the others' words, other group members positioning her as "you" while they positioned themselves as "we":

> I understand this reading, so why are you not on this reading with me? . . . They found it very difficult to work with me because it felt like we spoke a different language. They were like, yeah why are you talking about that? We are talking about ... so I think I see the whole picture whereas they see little things.

Mei may have seen herself as Vygotsky's more knowledgeable other (Lantolf, 2000), however, she perceived that the others in the group did not award her this role. Notions of sharedness and homogeneity in group work may not be common to all group work.

Even at school time, during professional development time, "if there is a shared discussion I tend to sort of shut down during that time". She did not need the sense of belonging to a group that the talk brought. Solitude was the air she breathed (Cain, 2012). She positioned herself outside the group, and enjoyed time off.

> I think a lot of people tend to understand from sharing their experience . . . they want to talk about their children and they want to talk about it with others and they want to have a sense of belonging, even through readings, so I think that helps them. It helped me have my time off.

However, Mei explicitly talked about valuing contributing to the group: "not having something to bring to the table during the discussion that was really difficult for me". Mei used another powerful metaphor here: contributing "something to bring to the table". Mei acknowledged her role as a group member and wanted to contribute in a vital way, in this case metaphorically contributing food, the essentials of life. Mei was

present in the group in time and space and, while discussing classroom applications of readings was not a shared practice, she did at times listen to the classroom stories the other teachers told. She recognised the important role of storytelling for the well-being of the group.

> They are lovely people so they want to talk about their experience and how they are going, their classroom and that. And I enjoy listening to them but I didn't find that particularly helpful understanding the readings.

Discussion

A clear finding from the research was how uncomfortable and disturbing it was for Mei to re-examine her emotionally ingrained working theories developed when she was a migrant school student. The readings on the affordances of bilingual learning conflicted with Mei's own theories of language learning. She dropped out of the course, and this action supports Coleman's (1996) cautions about the barriers of emotionally ingrained student school experiences. Considerable time and space was needed before Mei had the emotional and cognitive energy to engage again with authors and their written words as she relived her own school life and internalised an alternative layer of thinking. By the middle of the second year, Mei reported that she was using theoretical frameworks in academic readings to rethink her experiences as a migrant high school student. Adding another layer to her working theories was hard. It was work that she did on her own by reading and re-reading once she was ready to take on other ideas. Eventually her working theories became more comprehensive and connected being both experience and research informed. Of course, the connected clear implication is that had Mei's secondary school teachers been immersed in the benefits of being bilingual and bicultural, Mei's school experiences and consequent working theories could have been very different.

It was Mei's own work, her own noticing of affordances that enabled her to rethink. Her comments on group work support Freeman's (2016) notion that teacher communities of action and explanation require teachers who share common ways of reasoning about the world. A differently structured reading group might have provided Mei with Freeman's community of explanation. Commitment to in-depth reading and thinking prior to in-class group work is one thing, but equally critical may be the grouping of teachers who share similar backgrounds or who have the same

commitment to individual reading. It was the readings, not the other teachers that provided the mediational tools; Mei actively engaged in internal dialogue with authors. The authors were Vygotsky's more knowledgeable others, not the other teachers in her reading group. Mei, over time, allowed their thinking to become rooted in with her own thoughts—as part of her DNA. This process took considerable time, supporting Avalos' (2011) contention that prolonged interventions are needed. Neither did Mei jettison her own lived experience. She continued to see assimilation as a viable option for migrants to consider while, at the same time, awarding credence to other theories.

However, despite adverse conditions, reflective and agentive learners such as Mei create conditions for their own learning consistent with their own psychological and social approaches. Mei confined her relationships in the collaborative reading groups to a reduced menu of relationships and, critically, interdependence was not one of them. However, she was mindful of the beneficial role of group relationships and chose to award storytelling her attention. Mei cared for her reading group community. When she could not see the group sufficiently exploring meaning in the academic readings she listened with attention to group members' stories of classroom application. While Mei contributed to the group for social reasons, as teacher educators the GDT lecturers could have been more explicit around the purposes of employing the Parrott and Cherry (2011) approach, and in discussing these purposes setting clearer, whole-class-decided learning outcomes.

Moreover Mei's resistance to group discussion and her perception of the value of individual reading and thinking bear out Cain's (2012) thesis that solitude is widely under-recognised and under-valued within learning and problem-solving contexts for some students. Within second language teacher education, lecturers could model, for teachers, ways of validating both individual and group work. The popular strategy of think/pair/share (Kagan, 1989) incorporates both aspects for example, but it is worth considering whether the "think" section may sometimes be too rushed. Mei's case raises the need for an explicit prioritising of the individual component in group work.

Conclusion and implications

Teachers have a powerful role in shaping classroom culture. A given classroom culture awards certain roles to migrant students and these roles are shaping or being shaped by classroom interactions and (non) participation patterns. Mei perceived only a very limited choice of interactions in her school setting. As influential members of the classroom microcosm teachers are in need of an understanding of SLA theory and knowledge. For example teachers have a role in sensitising native speakers to their helping roles with migrant students and, perhaps more critically, in raising a migrant student's awareness of the affordances around language and learning in L1 and L2. Perhaps also native speakers can be sensitized to the affordances bilingual migrant students could offer them. Teachers have a powerful role in shaping classroom cultures that value bilingualism and multilingualism.

Mei's stories illustrate how our sense of self is constituted through discourse, both with inner talk based on experiences and others' texts and, in this case, also through interviews during the lengthy course of the research project. However, a note of caution may be warranted in that Mei was talking with her lecturer who is in a position of power and someone with whose views she was familiar. It does appear that Mei's sense-making was not totally disrupted so much as *expanded*. Mei's stories suggest that disrupting working theories is a struggle that involves deep engagement with new ideas over a length of time. New knowledge becoming part of a teacher's DNA is hard-won and takes considerable time. The new knowledge may not displace old notions, but adds richer layers, alternative stories that Mei can now share with the parents of her migrant students. Mei's investment in reading shows that over time academic readings can be a powerful tool for reinterpreting personal experience and for driving teaching and learning practices within the classroom. Mei's negative school experiences affirm the critical role of SLA knowledge for all teachers of migrant students, and the critical role of sharing this knowledge with students themselves so that all understand the beneficial social and academic affordances of being bicultural and bilingual.

Acknowledgements

A heartfelt thank you to Mei for sharing her learning experiences on the GDT, to my GDT research colleagues, and to the reviewers for pointing me in the right direction.

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