

# **Student teachers' collaborative construction of Grammar Awareness: The case of a highly competent learner**

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## **Introduction**

This paper explores how one particular student on an English grammar course for language teachers 'engages with language' (Svalberg, 2009) in consciousness raising grammar tasks. It is argued that she represents one way of being a 'highly competent learner'. Engagement with language (EWL) is defined as:

a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social state and process in which the learner is the agent and language is object (and sometimes vehicle) . (Svalberg, 2009: 247)

The engaged individual is described as cognitively alert and focused on the task, affectively purposeful, willing, and autonomous and socially interactive and initiating. EWL is seen as the process through which Language Awareness (LA) (Svalberg, 2007) is constructed, and then drawn on in further engagement. EWL is thus an inherently constructivist notion, with engagement and LA constituting a reiterative mediation – internalization cycle (Svalberg, 2012). We seek to understand what facilitated or hindered the particular student's willingness and ability to focus on the language task, and what accounts for the level and nature of her participation in grammar tasks. We look in some detail at how she goes about constructing new knowledge. We make no attempt to establish specific learning gains but instead focus on understanding the learning process from the individual learner's point of view.

## **Literature Review**

The approach taken here is constructivist (Kaufman, 2004) and informed by sociocultural theory (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978, 2000), thus aligning itself with a growing number of studies in this vein (e.g. Storch, 2007; Swain, 2000, 2010b; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). It investigates learners' co-construction of knowledge through collaborative EWL (Svalberg, 2009). An observable manifestation of engagement is learners' talk about language, or 'languaging' (e.g. Knouzi et al., 2010; Swain, 2010b; Swain et al., 2009), which

according to Swain (2000:102) includes not only ‘collaborative dialogue’, in other words “dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building”, but also ‘private speech’ (Vygotsky, 2000) in a collaborative setting, that is learners thinking aloud about language.

Collaborative dialogue is similar to what Storch (2008) calls ‘engagement’, and also refers to as ‘metatalk’. The author investigated “learners’ level of engagement with linguistic choices” (p.95) and how it might affect language development. Hypothesis testing, formulation of rules and corrective feedback (‘elaborate engagement’) produced deeper understanding than simple acceptance or repetition of suggestions (‘limited engagement’).

The EWL construct developed by Svalberg (2009), and referred to in the present study, does not replace but rather incorporates the notions discussed above. In the language classroom, engagement often takes the overt form of languaging. However, EWL can take place in or outside the language classroom context and can occur in ways that are not directly observable. A language user may, for example, notice and reflect on the effects of their dialect or accent in day-to-day social interaction. As a result they may try and modify either it or their emotional response in similar situations. The interaction of affective, cognitive and social aspects is an important feature of the EWL construct. Hence research into it cannot rely solely on observation.

Unlike the studies referred to above, the setting of the present study is learning *about* language (although incidental language learning may also be going on). The teacher education setting links it most obviously with recent work on the importance of Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) (Andrews, 2007), a professional attribute which is viewed as one of six key themes that currently inform the language teacher education agenda (Borg, 2011). Teachers with well-developed TLA have a wider range of options to draw on and TLA is thus an essential component in the teacher’s ‘tool kit’. The purpose of the course in our study was to enhance the students’ Grammar Awareness (a component of TLA) and their confidence in it.

We look at the setting from an ecological perspective in which the classroom presents the learner with potential positive affordances, that is conditions conducive to learning, or learning opportunities (van Lier, 2004). The learner is not at the mercy of the classroom environment but can actively create and make use of affordances. In the present study, the immediate environment consists of a group of five students, sitting around a table, working collaboratively on a fairly challenging grammar awareness raising task. One student (here called Isabelle) has English as her L1. For the others the L1 is Chinese. At the same time

there are other groups working nearby in the room on the same task. The learner discussed here, whom we shall call Emily, is one of the Chinese speakers (all names are pseudonyms). While her personal history is clearly an essential factor in her identity formation, in this study her nationality is not the focus.

Our analysis of Emily's EWL is informed by recent conceptualisations in SLA of learner identity and its complex relationship with L2 learning. These have moved beyond essentialized, one-dimensional treatments of the learning task (Block, 2007; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004), privileging instead the dynamic and complex nature of interaction and investment in the target language (Morita, 2004; Norton, 1995). A unifying theme that has emerged in accounts of language learner identity is that of the multiplicity of identities a learner can draw on over time.

Following Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001), our effort to develop a multi-layered understanding of Emily's participation in a specific classroom community of practice (her workshop group) is predicated on a holistic research focus on the individual. As an investigation of the task performance and perspectives on performance of a highly competent learner, our study also aligns itself to recent scholarship that has evidenced the significant affective challenges of learning for international students in British higher education contexts (Kiely et al. 2007; Trahar, 2007). Wenger's (1998) construct of a community of practice is also valuable here as a way to understand how Emily manages and evaluates her contributions to group interactions. It encapsulates the socially determined, situated interplay of experience and competence defining learning, and the crucial role of engagement<sup>1</sup> as a source of identity formation:

Through engagement in practice, we see first-hand the effects we have on the world and discover how the world treats the likes of us. We explore our ability to engage with one another, how we can participate in activities, what we can and cannot do. But all takes place in the doing. Our enterprises and our definition of competence shape our identities through our very engagement in activities and social interaction.

(Wenger, 1998: 192-193)

A description of the course and the learner will be provided below. An account of the research method is followed by presentation of the findings from the interview, interaction and diary data, which are then discussed.

## **The Course and the Learner**

The context of the study was an obligatory, 15 credit grammar course taken by students on a Masters level programme at an English university. It had two strands: one for inexperienced, aspiring English teachers, and another for English teachers with at least two years' experience. The course aims were that the students should be better able to analyze, reflect on and talk about English Grammar and be better equipped to help their learners improve their grammar use.

Emily belonged to the majority group of students who were novice teachers of English as a foreign language. She had learnt some French in junior school and had been taught grammar explicitly from year six and until she entered university. While an undergraduate, Emily had taught English to a small number of individual students. From the beginning of the course, Emily said that she felt confident about grammar, but she also acknowledged gaps in her knowledge. In the final Grammar Awareness test she achieved an A grade.

The course was delivered in seven sets consisting of a 50-minute lecture followed by a 50-minute workshop. The students prepared for each lecture by accessing a pre-lecture task on-line. After the lecture they could check the key to the pre-lecture task on line. They then prepared for the workshop by downloading the workshop task (on the same topic as the lecture, e.g. Noun Phrases) and doing whatever reading they might need.

In the workshops the students were required to apply and expand knowledge from the lecture, which also gave them an opportunity to hone their analytical skills and to try out the metalanguage needed to talk about that part of the grammar (Appendix A). As we did not provide a complete key, solving the task required small group (5-7 students) discussion of solutions. A partial key was distributed 10-15 minutes into the workshop to give the students an idea of how well they were doing.

The workshop tasks were based on authentic texts, following a Consciousness Raising (CR) approach. CR tasks are a type of focused task for developing grammar learning within task-based instruction (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Eckerth (2008: 121-2) identifies two features that contribute to their particular learning potential: they encourage the discovery of features of form, meaning and function through active learner reflection on the target language, and their collaborative design means that the insights produced occur in communicative exchanges in the target language.

The tasks aimed to engender 'cognitive conflict' (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005) as an impetus for engagement and learning and were therefore deliberately challenging. Hence they often provoked puzzlement or outright disagreement in the groups, which had to be resolved

by collaborative dialogue, sometimes mediated by course notes or books. For such conflict to be useful, “the problem and the topics introduced have to be relevant to [the students]” (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2005:6). The relevance of the tasks was ensured by the students’ need to develop subject knowledge for their future teaching careers, and texts were chosen from a range of cultural settings.

## **Research Methods**

### *Research Questions*

The learner profile of Emily is one of eight (analysis is still in progress) and is based on transcripts of audio recorded group interaction, the student’s learner diary, and interview data.

The overall question addressed was what facilitated or hindered the student’s EWL. More specific research questions were:

1. How did the student engage with the collaborative CR tasks?
2. How was knowledge created during her EWL?
3. What factors affected her EWL (e.g. triggered, enhanced or hindered it)?

Emily and her group were audio recorded twice, for the duration of the third and fourth workshops (2 x 50 minutes). The interaction was transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers and the second researcher then listened and checked the transcription for accuracy, with agreement reached on minor discrepancies.

Membership of the group varied somewhat – there were five students in the first and six in the second. Importantly, the student we call Isabelle, and with whom Emily liked to work, participated in both. Emily was one of eleven students who volunteered to keep a learner diary. In terms of a brief for the diary entries, the participants were asked to focus on their reactions to how a given workshop went and to note down their thoughts and feelings about the nature of their particular learning experience. Hence we also had Emily’s diary entries for all seven workshops. At the end of the grammar awareness course, she was interviewed individually. The semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The questions (Appendix B) probed her perceptions of the workshop content and procedures, and of her own participation.

The course ran in the autumn term and the interview took place in spring. To encourage interview contributions of a more nuanced nature, Emily was asked at the beginning of the interview to listen to an approximately 10-minute segment of the interaction data in which she featured, and then to a specific shorter segment (Appendix B). As this did not follow the

standard practice that a recall task should occur immediately after the event in question (Bartels 2005: 12), we call it ‘stimulated reconstruction’. It proved useful in terms of setting the agenda for the reflective focus of the interview as a whole and triggering quite specific comments on workshop activity.

The overall framework of analysis of the three types of data was the EWL model discussed above. A number of categories and sub-categories reflecting mainly two of the three strands of EWL – affective and social – emerged in the current analysis. Earlier research into students’ EWL on the same course (Svalberg, 2012) had raised among other issues the complex role of anxiety or other types of ‘tension’ in language learning (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001). As all three aspects of EWL overlap and interact, some inferences could also be drawn about cognitive EWL. The categories were: affect (tension, other); attitudes to knowledge & learning (expectations, motivation); management of learning (affordances, self-evaluation); group dynamics (awareness, management of interaction).

‘Affordances’, included in ‘management of learning’, is one of the key notions in this study. It refers to how the learner creates or identifies learning opportunities, and makes subsequent use of them. Other categories of particular significance in the Emily data were ‘awareness of group dynamics’, and ‘management of interaction in the group’. The categories were applied to the three data sets: diaries, interviews, and group interaction. The interview data will be discussed first (see conventions in Appendix C), followed by extracts of the workshop interaction and the student’s diary notes.

## **Findings & Discussion**

### ***Interview***

One interview question probed the participants’ feelings about the level of challenge. Emily welcomed difficult tasks, despite the sometimes negative feelings they engendered:

I say it [tasks being difficult] is good because it is a challenge – it is a kind of challenge – it reminds me that I still – erm – I still can’t do - very well in grammar learning – I have to make myself improve – but – at the same time I feel a little disappointed when I finish one or two – erm – task – because I think – oh my god what I have learnt in the past – I have learnt nothing.

The wording *I have to make myself improve* indicates that Emily takes full responsibility for her own learning; she is willing to create and make use of learning opportunities. Difficult

tasks help her do this by revealing gaps in her knowledge. Feelings of ‘disappointment’ do not seem to discourage her.

Generally, Emily is very active in the group work, but one thing that slows her down is other people’s silences.

There are two or three times there are – there are students I am not very familiar with sitting with us and erm – they are very shy – and they don’t want to talk too much – and erm – in that case I will – erm – I was not very willing to talk too much either because I just don’t want to – erm – I don’t think – I don’t know whether it’s a kind of show off – I don’t want other people to think – oh my god – she talks too much she’s showing off herself.

She is aware of how others in the group might see her and feels uncomfortable in a dominating role. The silence of her peers which might have been a positive affordance - an opportunity for her to take the floor - instead makes her withdraw or tone down her participation. As will become evident below, she feels more comfortable working with Isabelle (the L1 English speaker) and one other international student, who are both talkative.

Emily displays a multi-layered understanding of learning from peers. She comments on the usefulness of listening to others.

Well – erm – I think the most helpful way is to listening to others – because erm – [...] well – listening to other people you can know what you didn’t know before – but – well – I have to say that speaking – erm – expressing your own ideas is also very helpful but you are just showing what you already know – but getting other people’s ideas is a kind of learn – is a kind of learning opportunity – because you are learning something new – even though some of the ideas are not always correct – you can know – you can what the wrong things are like.

Listening to others is a source of learning on three levels according to Emily. You can build new knowledge (*know what you didn’t know before*), you can *show what you already know*, and even when the peer input is incorrect you can learn by noticing that it is incorrect (*know what the wrong things are like*) and thereby consolidate what you know. At the beginning of the course Emily is confident about her grammar knowledge, but she finds the two last workshops, on the use of modals and complex sentence structures, challenging. Her strategy, in addition to doing the workshop tasks, is listening to the lecturer and to her peers.

I didn't know that before – but – after listening to the lecture and doing the workshop tasks – and – and listening to what other people are talking – other people's idea – I – I think I am clear about those things now.

Emily appreciates working with different people for different reasons. For example, she feels she can learn a lot from one particular classmate because she is a more experienced teacher. She also learns from Isabelle, despite the fact that she is often wrong. Emily explains:

I just like listening to her because – erm – yeah – because from her learning theories I can know how the British do learn – and erm – I can compare - I think about whether I should – erm – change my – improve my teaching or inspire my teaching in the future.

The way Isabelle theorizes language helps Emily reflect on how she might teach grammar in future. (The interaction data below includes some examples of Isabelle talking about language.) There are, however, certain constraints on how learning can progress due to language issues. In the extract below, Emily offers her perspective on the complex role of a shared L1 resource in the talk of her group.

Emily: When we work with Isabelle – British [\*] can't use too many Chinese – but no – most of our classmates are Chinese and sometimes using Chinese to discover problems – it's really useful to us and we have to use that – but if we work with Isabelle we can't use that.

Interviewer: So how did that make you feel?

Emily: Well that make me feel – the [\*] progress is a little bit slow – now it's very easy for us to engage – for Chinese students to engage. [...] and especially when there are some students whose – English is not very good – and I think that is the reason that they can't participate too much in – participate too much in talking – sometimes they're just sitting there and silent.

Hence, while Emily identifies and values opportunities for learning through her interactions with Isabelle, opportunities which in some respects go beyond the specific analytical remit of the particular task, such talk in English does not necessarily facilitate group progress. Instead, the more prescribed task outcomes, as well as the rate of group learning, would in Emily's view often be best served by use of the majority L1.



## ***Interaction***

The interaction extracts below are taken from workshop 4 which focused on the identification and classification of verbs. The task was based on a 215 word extract from a popular science text, referred to below as ‘Lucid Dreaming’. It starts:

Scientific evidence for lucid dreaming

Our dreams seem so real that it is usually only when we wake up that we recognize them as the mental experiences they are. Although this is how we generally experience dreams, there are significant exceptions: sometimes while dreaming, we consciously notice that we are dreaming. This clear-sighted state of consciousness is referred to as lucid dreaming. ...

[LaBerge, S. (2004). *A psychobiological model of dreaming*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, p.19-20.]

The students were asked to:

- Underline all the verbs
- Classify each verb according to type
- Classify each verb according to form.
- Decide whether the verb is finite or non-finite

Further questions asked them to reflect on their ability to carry out these steps and what the stumbling blocks might have been. In the transcripts, ‘episodes’ were identified and labeled according to the main issue and language they dealt with. In the extracts below, words in italics are quotations from the task text.

The ‘finite’ episode illustrates Emily’s confidence in her own knowledge. When there is confusion in the group, Emily is often the one the others look to for a solution, and who provides it.

### **‘Finite’ Episode – *remember***

S1: *remember* is a finite verb

**Emily:** ***remember* is non-finite I think because**

S2: because of *can*

S1: of course – *can remember* – *can reason*

S4: so it is auxiliary?

S1: *remember*?

S4: no – *can*

**Emily:** **modal auxiliary**

The only L1 English speaker in the group (Isabelle) talks considerably more than Emily<sup>2</sup>. She is aware that her grasp of grammar is not as good as Emily's, but she seems comfortable with that and is keen to learn. The fact that she is talkative gives Emily licence to also talk without fear of being seen as showing off. Nevertheless, Emily's interventions are often quite subtle.

**'Gerund' Episode - *while dreaming***

S1: and *sometimes while dreaming*?

S4: *Dreaming*

S1: I think *dreaming* is a noun

Isabelle: Well [\*] *dream* is a noun – isn't it - and *dreaming* – you mean it's not a verb

S1: *dreaming* is not a verb?

Isabelle: no

S1: *dream* is a verb

Isabelle: no

[Chinese discussion; Emily mentions 'non-finite verb']

S1: *while we are dreaming*

Isabelle: I think it's a gerund – *I am running I am singing* – a gerund is a verb used as a noun

**Emily:** you mean *dreaming* is a gerund

Isabelle theorizes language (*a gerund is a verb used as a noun*), but does not realize that the definition does not apply in this case. Emily recognizes that Isabelle is wrong. Rather than telling her that, she interprets it in a statement (*You mean 'dreaming' is a gerund*) which gives Isabelle an opportunity to self-correct. The discussion continues:

Isabelle: verb as a noun – say *I am singing* – *singing* is a noun

**Emily:** it is not

S1: *I am singing* – *singing* is a verb

**Emily:** it's a verb

Isabelle: but *am* – *I am* - *I like* - sorry

[Group laughter]

Isabelle's *sorry* indicates that the negotiation has helped her realize that she is wrong. The group's laughter seems good humoured and supportive. One might argue that this episode gives Emily an opportunity to notice *what the wrong things are like*. Isabelle continues to seek clarification, testing her new understanding:

Isabelle: so *I like singing* – then it’s a noun – is this the same here?  
**Emily: I don’t think so**  
 S2: I think - I think it is different  
 S4: *like* can use a perfect present – like *-ing* or *I like to be* or *I like being*  
 Isabelle: or *I enjoy*  
 S4: yeah  
 S2: I think this is progressive  
**Emily: I think you’re right**

Emily often takes the role of arbiter. Despite the tentative wording (*I think...*) she may be absolutely certain – but she does not want to be seen as *a show-off*. Emily’s arbiter role is also evident a few minutes later.

#### **‘Progressive’ Episode - *Are dreaming* re-visited**

Isabelle: where are we?  
**Emily: *we are dreaming* – here – yes**  
 Isabelle: this *dreaming* is progressive yeah? present progressive  
**Emily: mmm**  
 Isabelle: and it is non-finite?  
**Emily: yes**

Here Isabelle checks her enhanced understanding with Emily. A number of similar episodes finish with a barely audible confirmation by Emily.

Because she is talkative and does not hesitate to take risks, Isabelle’s learning behaviour is very evident in the transcripts. Emily is here a skilful manager of the interaction, and helps facilitate affordances for other people’s learning. Her own learning process is often less apparent but in the extract that follows she is more voluble than usual.

Towards the end of Workshop 4, the students in Emily’s group return to an issue they discussed earlier. Isabelle in particular is trying to determine how to distinguish between a verb in present simple, and the infinitive form. They are focusing on the verbs underlined below:

“During lucid dreams, one can reason clearly, remember the conditions of waking life, and act voluntarily within the dream...”

**‘Infinitive follows auxiliary’ Episode – *can reason, remember***

Isabelle:     [\*\*\*] they are also [\*] present tense – how do we know they are infinitive – there is no *to* – *to reason, to remember* – how do we know it is the infinitive? – and not just present? [...]

Isabelle:     Is it because we use *can*?

**Emily:**       **the two verbs are combined together – if one could distinguish which is the infinitive – we should check whether it can be changed according to tense - or the subject – for example – in the sentence *one can reason clearly* – *reason* can’t be changed according to the subject pronoun**

Emily takes this opportunity to theorize by formulating a strategy for the identification of present tense, as opposed to infinitive. ‘*Reason*’ in ‘*one can reason*’ does not take –s despite the third person subject. This is evidence that it is an infinitive. Isabelle then raises another issue:

Isabelle:     but that would make it non-finite

**Emily:**       **non-finite – ah!**

The ‘ah’ from Emily seems to express a realization that she is not sure how this notion (non-finite) applies – she has become aware of a gap in her knowledge, sees this as a learning opportunity, and tries to formulate what it is she needs to know:

**Emily:**       **so this is about the relationship between infinitive, present and non-finite**

No one else in the group reacts to this formulation but Isabelle proceeds to test Emily’s strategy (the alternative terms ‘Verb 1’ and ‘Verb 2’ have been replaced below by ‘infinitive’ and ‘present’ in square brackets.):

Isabelle:     so if we change this – we *consciously notice* – here *notice* is [present] – we could say we *can notice* – then it changes to [infinitive] – is that right?

**Emily:**       ***we can notice* – yes *notice* changes [\*]**

Isabelle:     to [infinitive]

**Emily:**       **yes**

Isabelle has discovered that although the form of *notice* is not perceptibly different, it does in fact change from present to infinitive when the modal verb is added. Emily here is again the arbiter, confirming that Isabelle has understood correctly.

Emily's diary notes reflect her perception that in these exchanges she is herself learning on several levels.

### **Diary**

The following diary entry refers to the same workshop (Workshop 4). V1-V5 refers to a paradigm of verb forms including infinitive, present, past, past perfect, present perfect, in that order.

03.11.2011 Grammar Awareness

This is the first time I know verbs are classified into V1 – V5. Before this, I had no systematic knowledge on it. The task for workshop is to classify verbs in a text called 'lucid dreaming'. This time, the task is not as difficult as last time. I have a clear mind on what to do. During the work, I was challenged by Isabelle and Harry about my answer. Most of the questions I can answer. However, the problem comes Isabelle asked me what the difference between Infinitive and V2. I can't answer. Actually, I just have a strong feeling on how to distinguish them when they are put in the text. I cannot express the feeling in words! Even when the workshop finished. I still struggled with this problem. I hate this kind of feeling. Obviously I can distinguish them but just can't explain "how".

Through her frequent self-evaluations, Emily displays a high level of awareness of her strengths and limitations. We might even think she is judging herself a bit harshly. She concedes that her background knowledge is incomplete (*I had no systematic knowledge [about verb forms]*). Some of it is intuitive knowledge ('sensitivity') (*I just have a strong feeling*) but not yet declarative (*I cannot express the feeling in words*). The group interaction puts Emily on the spot (*I can't answer*). She feels frustrated at her own inability (*I hate this kind of feeling; it made me disappointed*). The continuation of the same entry mentions yet another *problem*, 'copular verbs'. Emily does not, however, let the frustration discourage her.

"Copular verbs" is another problem. This concept is familiar to me. However, I can't remind myself what does it actually refer to. The problem is I didn't identify even one copular verb in the text. It made me disappointed. However, Isabelle helped me on this point. Through her explanation I recall some knowledge of it. After I finished the workshop I turned to the course book for "copular verbs". To sum up, discuss with peers can be something revealing problems and solving them.

Rather than give up, Emily identifies a peer as a learning resource (this is one of the few occasions where Isabelle is the one providing the answer). Her explanation triggers a memory of previous knowledge but Emily's learning does not finish there. She follows up by

consulting a grammar book after the workshop. Emily has thus managed her learning by identifying and making use of learning opportunities and resources (affordances) such as peer interaction (*discuss with peers*) and books. Peer interaction can even reveal problems she was unaware of, and motivates Emily to resolve remaining issues autonomously, after class.

## **Discussion**

### ***A Highly Competent Learner***

All three data sets were crucial to answering our questions about how the learner engaged with the tasks, how knowledge was created in this process and what factors affected her engagement. The study highlighted a problem with the assumption that more ‘elaborate engagement’ leads to better quality knowledge than ‘limited engagement’ (Storch, 2008), namely that engagement is not necessarily verbal and directly observable. From the interaction data we might have concluded that Emily did not engage much at all. The diary and interview, however, provided more in-depth insights and showed that she was highly engaged (focused, willing, and active). The elaboration provided by Isabelle appears to have served as scaffolding (Lantolf & Becket, 2009) for Emily’s thinking. In other words, Emily was an active listener. Without being engaged while listening, she could not have taken on her arbiter role.

This highlights that reflection, or what Vygotsky (2000) called ‘inner speech’, is an integral component of the complex dynamics of EWL. Emily learnt by self-evaluating, discovering gaps in her knowledge, and then seeking out the knowledge from peers or books. By listening to her peers she could learn directly from their correct solutions, but also indirectly by discovering when and how they got it wrong. From her own accounts we can deduce that she learnt facts, analytical skills and how to ‘language’ (Swain, 2010b). ‘Cognitive conflicts’ (Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2000) and the disappointment and frustration they engendered spurred her on.

Emily and Isabelle’s friendly and supportive relationship is likely to have contributed to the productivity and success of their ‘collaborative dialogue’ (Swain, 2000). That researchers have a lot to gain by not artificially separating affect and cognition has been pointed out by Swain (2010a), who argues that emotions are interpersonal and co-constructed, and that they influence and are influenced by learning. Storch and Aldosari (2013) found that relative proficiency within EFL learner pairs was less important for successful outcomes than good relationships. Barron (2003: 352, drawing on Lave, 1988) concludes that “friends engage in more productive dialogue during learning activities than those who are not friends” and calls

for “a better theoretical understanding of joint learning that integrates cognitive, relational, and social practice aspects of learning”. Spielman & Radnofsky (2001: 273) point out that “concerns about lowering the so-called ‘affective filter’ have sometimes obscured the need to attend to cognitive stimulation”. By adopting a holistic approach, the current study has sought to make a contribution to this fairly recent body of work.

What emerges is a profile of what we consider to be a highly competent learner. Our assessment of Emily is not based on the size of learning gains on the course (which we have not measured). We have preferred a qualitative, descriptive characterization. Effects are not necessarily immediate or easily measurable, and learning is not a simple on/off process. Instead, knowledge can develop over a long period of time. Emily partially remembered that she had been taught something about copular verbs in the past. Through the peer interaction and her own subsequent efforts, she learnt more about this topic. A likely scenario is that her grasp of it will be further enhanced if and when she needs to explain it to her own students. Such a cumulative learning trajectory, we would argue, depends on the learner’s willingness and ability to engage with the language.

A competent learner in our analysis is one who both creates, and identifies and takes advantage of affordances (van Lier, 2004). Emily’s case illustrates that the quantity and quality of such learning opportunities depend on the individual but also on the group and the interactions within it. Had we focused on languaging alone, this may not have emerged.

Emily had her limitations. The fact that other Chinese students had greater problems expressing themselves in English than she did is likely to have contributed to her concern about being seen as a show-off and her often adopting a listening role.

In this paper we have focused on Emily, and sometimes contrasted her with Isabelle. In many respects, Isabelle was also a competent learner though in a very different way. We are thus not suggesting that a competent learner displays a fixed set of characteristics and behaviours. Emily and Isabelle each enacted and developed their unique identities, in complementary ways, and both were influential players in the management and maintenance of the qualities of a particular, dynamic classroom ‘community of practice’. What seems to underpin Emily’s activity and rich evaluations of this experience is a developing awareness of how learning in this type of classroom task necessitates a level of mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998) over time; a complex, contingent process in which Emily’s sensitivity to and maintenance of group cohesion is balanced with her development of more personally significant learning opportunities.

## Conclusions

The study suffers from certain limitations. Use of Emily's L1 (Chinese) in the interview could have offered richer data, but this was beyond our competence. Furthermore, the delayed nature of the stimulated reconstruction interview task brings into question the extent to which recall interference (Gass & Mackey, 2000) influenced Emily's contributions. It is our view, however, that all such retrospective elicitation tasks are to some extent verbal reconstructions, regardless of when they occur. Emily's interview account, mediated as it was by segments of interaction data and diary extracts authored around the time of the interaction data itself, constitutes a rich source of *her perspectives* on the issues, and is thus a key element of our three data sets.

As with any individual case study, we cannot know, nor does it seem useful to ask, how similar or different Emily is from the average learner - even one with a similar background or in a similar context. Instead the study highlights the potential complexity and uniqueness of each learner and provides an approach to investigating it which might prove useful to other researchers. It also has potential implications for teachers and second language teacher education more broadly.

As illustrated by this case-study, a class does not consist of 'average' or 'typical' learners (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 2006). It is made up of individuals; groups of individually unique learners. Although some generalizations can be made (e.g. in terms of age or proficiency), teachers need ways of understanding and adjusting to individual needs and styles. We consider learner profiles such as Emily's a small contribution to that end. Parallel studies by other researchers, in similar or other contexts, would be valuable. Finally, the study confirms our view that developing teacher language awareness, especially in terms of refinements to declarative knowledge and the encouragement of an analytical mindset, is an essential professional task which, as Andrews (2007) argues, can impact profoundly on the manner in which second language teachers enact a range of key pedagogical practices.

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## Notes

1. 'Engagement' as used by Wenger (1998) and 'EWL' as defined in Svalberg (2009), overlap but are not synonymous.
2. In Workshop 4 Isabelle took 128 turns (1188 words; 9.3 w/turn) and Emily 98 turns (565 words; 5.8 w/turn).

## Appendix A

### Workshop Task: The structure of NPs

In the text below:

- Underline all the NPs.
- Double underline if one is embedded in another.
- Circle the head nouns.
- Describe how the head nouns have been modified.

**The Year of Salma al-Hurra** [from Maalouf, A. (1994: 5) *Leo the African*. London: Abacus]

894 A.H.

*5 December 1488 -14 November 1489*

*In that year, the sacred month of Ramadan fell in high summer. My father rarely left the house before nightfall, as the people of Granada were short-tempered during the daytime. Quarrels were frequent, and a sombre bearing was regarded as a sign of piety;... [185 words in total]*

- What kinds of pre and post-modification of Nouns would your learners be likely to need a command of (e.g. for exam or study purposes)?
- What are the main challenges for your learners in the use of NPs?
- Are there any useful rules of thumb to do with NPs?
- Might you incorporate any of what has been discussed in this session into your teaching of the use of Nouns?

## **Appendix B**

### **Summary of Interview Schedule**

1/ Structured section. Teacher Bio Data (3-5 mins)

About 10 minutes of the recording of one of the workshops featuring the interviewee was then played to stimulate the interviewee's memory.

2/ Semi-structured section 1: Warm up (10-15 mins)

General, open ended questions, e.g. "*How did the workshops work for you?*" were followed by more specific ones, e.g. "*What helped you engage with the task?*"

3/ Semi-structured section 2: Stimulated recall (10-15 mins)

Discussion mediated by specific extracts from the diary data and recorded interaction.

Attention was drawn to the diary notes in front of the interviewee and a shorter extract (3-4 minutes) of the same workshop recording was played. General questions were followed by more specific ones. For example: *Discussing your ideas and listening to the ideas of others – how did that work for you?; In this extract, do you think you were building new knowledge or just confirming what you knew?*

4/ Follow-up questions (5 - 10 minutes): Further specific questions depending on what had already emerged.

5/ Closing (2 mins) *Do you have any other comments on the nature of your learning experience in the seminars? Any questions about the research?*

## **Appendix C**

### **Transcription conventions**

S = (unnamed) student

[...] deleted segment

[\*] short unintelligible segment (one or two words)

\*\*\*] longer unintelligible segment

- tone group boundary (impressionistic)

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