

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

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Introduction

The context of the present study is an English grammar course for experienced and aspiring language teachers. In this paper we discuss how one particular student 'engages with language' (Svalberg 2009) in consciousness raising group tasks on authentic texts. We argue that she represents one way of being a 'highly competent learner'. Engagement with language 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. Engagement with language is seen as the process through which Language Awareness (LA) is constructed. The LA thus created can then be drawn on in further engagement. Engagement with language is thus an inherently constructivist notion, with engagement and LA constituting a reiterative mediation – internalization cycle (Svalberg 2012). In this paper we seek to understand what facilitated or hindered a 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 grammar knowledge. In this respect, there are similarities between the present study and studies on 'languaging' such as those by Swain and associates (e.g. Swain et al. 2009; Knouzi et al. 2010) which look at language learners' talking about language and the effect it might have on language learning outcomes. Languaging is admittedly a central feature of the group work data discussed below. There are, however, important differences. Though one may assume incidental language learning to be going on, the setting for the present study is learning about language rather than language learning. Also, for reasons we will discuss, we make no attempt to

establish learning gains. Instead we focus on understanding the learning process from the point of view of the individual learner.

Literature Review

The language teacher education setting of the study 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). As pointed out by Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2006), there is no ‘best method’ for language teaching; teachers should consider the needs of their learners in their specific context and circumstances, and choose teaching approach accordingly.

Teachers with well-developed TLA have a wider range of approaches to draw on. TLA is thus an essential component in the teacher’s ‘tool kit’. The purpose of the course which forms the setting of the 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, which can be actualized if and when the learner perceives them as such (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. While her personal history is clearly an essential factor in her identity formation, it is important to point out that in this study her nationality is incidental. As Clark and Gieve (2006:54) argue, there is “an ‘Asian learner’, or sometimes ‘east Asian’, or ‘Chinese learner’ discourse” which tends to focus on perceived ‘deficits’, for example a lack of critical thinking and a tendency to be passive and deferential. The authors present a counter argument to this ‘large culture’ (Holliday 1999), stereotyping perspective, citing a number of studies which have shown it not to be confirmed by empirical evidence (e.g. Kember & Gow 1991; Littlewood 2000) and highlighting the detrimental effects such an approach can have in reifying and fixing what is a situated, highly dynamic and individual phenomenon.

Our analysis of Emily's engagement with language is also informed by recent conceptualisations in SLA of learner identity and its complex relationship with L2 learning which have been distinguished by efforts to move beyond essentialized, one-dimensional treatments of this key facet of the broader learning task (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Canagarajah, 2006; Block, 2007) and have, instead, privileged the dynamic and complex nature of interaction and investment in the target language (Norton, 1995, 2001; Morita, 2004). A unifying theme that has emerged in these accounts of language learner identity is that of the multiplicity of identities that a learner can draw on over time.

Following Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 157), our effort to develop a multi-layered understanding of the nature of Emily's participation in a specific classroom community practice, namely learner workshops on collaborative grammar awareness tasks, is thus predicated on a holistic research focus on the individual: "the concrete individuals who come to the learning site with specific histories, personalities and agencies". Furthermore, as an investigation of the performance and perspectives on performance of a highly competent learner, who in many ways demonstrates a developed toolkit of skills and 'navigation strategies' (Kiely et al. 2007), our study aligns itself to recent scholarship that has brought into relief 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 that defines learning, and the critical role of engagement¹ as a source of identity formation:

Engagement in practice is a double source of identification: we invest ourselves in what we do and at the same time we invest ourselves in relations with other people. As we build communities of practices through this process, we work out our relations with each other and with the world, and we gain a lived sense of who we are. 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: 192-3)

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. A brief conclusion section follows.

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. The programme 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 by the end of the course the students should be better able to analyze, reflect on and talk about English Grammar, should better understand their learners' grammar needs 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 sixth grade and until she entered university. In the interview she indicated that her university lecturers in Business English addressed grammar issues only as they emerged in text or in the students' output. 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 Tuesday lecture by accessing a pre-lecture task on-line and, optionally, by reading the lecture power point. After the lecture they could check the key to the pre-lecture task on line. They then prepared for the Thursday workshop by downloading the workshop task (on the same topic as the lecture, e.g. Noun Phrases) and doing whatever reading they might need. As the workshop task did not have a complete key, solving the task required the students to discuss their solutions in small groups (5-7 students). A partial key was distributed 10-15 minutes into the workshop to give the students an idea of how well they were doing. The tutor otherwise kept in the background during workshops and was mainly a class manager.

The workshop tasks were based on authentic texts and deliberately challenging. They required the students to apply and expand knowledge from the lecture, and gave them an opportunity to try out the metalanguage needed to talk about and reflect on that part of the grammar. The students were asked, for example, to identify, describe and justify form:

- Underline all the NPs (in the text).
- Double underline if one is embedded in another.
- Circle the head nouns.

- Describe how the head nouns have been modified.

They might also be asked to link form to meaning and explain choice:

- In the dialogue, underline modal verbs
- specify the time reference of each modal
- explain its function (e.g. to express willingness, uncertainty...)
- explain why the writer chose that particular form (e.g. with reference to social distance, intimacy and other interpersonal aspects).

Sometimes they were asked to consider classroom implications of their findings (Appendix A).

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 engagement with language while solving consciousness raising grammar tasks. More specific research questions were:

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

Emily and her group were audio recorded twice, for the duration of workshop 3 and 4 (2 x50 minutes), and the interaction was transcribed verbatim. Membership of the group varied somewhat – there were five students in the first and six in the second. Importantly, a student with English as her first language whom we shall call Isabelle, and with whom Emily liked to work, participated in both. Emily was one of eleven students who had responded to a call for volunteers 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 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. In order 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). While the delayed staging of this form of stimulated recall did not follow the standard guideline that the recall task should occur immediately after the event in question (Bartels 2005: 12), we would argue that it proved useful in terms of setting the agenda for the reflective focus of the interview as a whole and triggering quite specific recollections and comments on workshop activity.

The analysis of the three types of data drew on earlier research into students' engagement with language on the same course (Svalberg 2012) which had raised, among other issues, the complex role of anxiety or other types of 'tension' in language learning (Spielmann & Radnofsky 2001). During the analysis process this and a number of other categories and sub-categories emerged: attitudes to knowledge & learning (expectations, motivation); management of learning (affordances, self-evaluation); group dynamics (awareness, management of interaction); affect (tension, other).

'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, 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 (an 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.

Interviewer: So what did you think about discussing ideas with others – and listening to other peoples’ solutions or ideas?

Emily: 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 peoples’ 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 strategies are doing the workshop tasks and 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 peoples' 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 – because she can't understand – yeah.

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. 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 is not a verb

S1: it's 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 is 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

[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 to* [*]

Isabelle: or *I enjoy*

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 – present progressive - yes?

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. Here Emily 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.

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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 are crucial to answering the research questions. The first one was: *How did the student engage with the collaborative CR tasks?* In the interaction, Emily often says very little. One might have concluded from this that she did not engage much at all. The diary and interview, however, provided more in depth insights and showed that Emily was highly engaged (focused, willing, and active). In this light, even her very short contributions took on a new significance, revealing her arbiter role. It became clear that listening to others (*the most helpful way* according to Emily) was a strategy she often adopted.

The second question was *how knowledge was created during her engagement with language*. A related question we had not asked but which proved to be important was *what knowledge was created*. It emerged that Emily was consciously seeking different types of knowledge. By listening to others she could learn directly from their correct solutions, but also indirectly by discovering what and how her peers got it wrong. One way she learnt was by self-evaluating, discovering gaps in her knowledge, and then seeking out the knowledge from peers or books. She was aware of learning not only facts but also how to ‘language’, i.e. how to theorize language in English, especially from her English L1 peer.

The different data sets also complemented each other in revealing *what factors affected Emily’s engagement with language*. Friendship within the group was a helpful factor. It was evident from the group interaction that Isabelle and Emily were on very good terms and worked closely together, and this was confirmed by Emily’s interview responses. Disappointment and frustration at her own lack of knowledge also provided an impetus for engagement. One might conclude that the relatively challenging nature of the tasks had a positive effect on her learning. Emily, however, felt inhibited by the other students’ relative silence and her own perception of how the group might see her which probably contributed to her often adopting a mostly listening role. What emerges is a profile of what we consider to be a highly competent learner. This assessment 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 of specific learning behaviours are not necessarily immediate or easily measurable. As Emily’s experiences have shown, learners may feel disappointment, leading to

demotivation for some but stimulating others to create or seek out further learning opportunities. In Emily's case there is some indication that cognitive conflict spurred her on - an impetus that is in itself an important gain.

Another consideration is that 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 (the learning object).

Our position is that knowledge is most effectively created in social interaction. A learner in this case is one who both creates, and identifies and takes advantage of, learning opportunities. The quantity and quality of such affordances depend on the individual but also on the group and the interactions within it. Identifying the learning opportunities implies an ability to reflect on and identify one's own learning needs. A competent learner, therefore, needs to be self-aware and aware of the group dynamics and be able to actively manage the interaction at relevant points.

The analysis above has attempted to show that Emily frequently showed such awareness and skills. Had we focused on languaging alone, this may not have emerged as Emily left most of the talking to others. Languaging out loud is an essential strategy for some learners – as it seemed to be for Isabelle - but others may make fewer or shorter verbal contributions but be equally cognitively focused and even socially active in the group.

Emily also had her limitations. The fact that she had to speak about English in English may have slowed her down. In the interview she points out that other Chinese students had problems expressing themselves in English. This contributed to a situation where Emily was concerned she might be seen as showing off when others were quiet. To the extent that she did want to speak, she sometimes had difficulty formulating her knowledge in English. The data indicate two reasons for this. One was that the knowledge she had was sometimes implicit rather than declarative, and the other her background culture of learning. She was not used to talking analytically about language, which she associated with "*the way the British learn*".

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. She was, for example, very keen to speak and formulate her thoughts, and appeared undaunted by the

prospect of being wrong and displaying her weaknesses. 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 learner identities, constructing knowledge and regulating their participation in the talk of a particular group in complementary ways. Our analysis of their contributions to this group talk indicates that Emily and Isabelle are both influential players in the management and maintenance of the qualities of a particular, dynamic classroom ‘community of practice’ – here a series of workshops aimed at developing the LA of participants with quite various professional and personal backgrounds. 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

By looking across data sets we have built a profile of one learner whom we characterize as highly competent. She showed herself to be highly engaged (focused, willing and active) with the language task in ways we had not anticipated. She left most of the languaging to others, but clearly paid close attention as she felt she learnt a great deal from listening. When she felt confident about the answers, her contribution to the group was mostly as a quietly spoken arbiter. From her peers she learnt how to talk about grammar in English, and also ‘*what the wrong things are like*’, both very useful types of knowledge for an English teacher.

This study suffers from the limitations of all individual case studies. 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.

A class does not consist of ‘average’ or ‘typical’ learners. 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.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. 'Engagement' as used by Wenger (1998) and 'engagement with language' as defined in Svalberg (2009), overlap but are not synonymous.

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)

When the bio-data had been obtained, and the interview procedure explained, about 10 minutes of the recording of one of the workshops in which the interviewee participated was played to stimulate the interviewee's memory. During this time, the interviewer left the room.

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

The interviewer started with general, open ended questions, e.g. *"How did the workshops work for you?"* and then used more specific ones as required, 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. The interviewer drew the interviewee's attention to the diary notes in front of the interviewee and then played a shorter extract (3-4 minutes) of the same workshop recording. The interviewer then asked general questions first 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 we just listened to, do you think you were building new knowledge or just confirming what you knew?*

4/ Follow-up questions (5 - 10 minutes): The interviewer asked 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

Analytical categories and sub-categories

Attitudes to knowledge & learning	ATT
Expectations	ATT-exp
Motivation	ATT-mot
Management of learning	ML
Affordances	ML-aff
Self-evaluation	ML-sev
Group dynamics	GD
Awareness	GD-aw
Management of interaction	GD-mint

Affect	AFF
Tension	AFF-ten
	AFF-oth
Other	

Appendix D

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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[Word count: 7,266]