Reconceptualising learning in transdisciplinary languages education

Angela Scarino

Research Centre for Languages and Cultures, University of South Australia

Anthony J. Liddicoat

Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick

Understanding and working with the complexity of second language learning and use in an intercultural orientation necessitates a re-examination of the different theories of learning that inform the different schools of second language acquisition (SLA). This re-examination takes place in a context where explicitly conceptualizing the nature of learning in SLA has not been sufficiently foregrounded. It also necessitates understanding how language itself, as the substance or object of learning a second language, is conceptualized. Neither the theorization of learning, nor of language on its own is sufficient to provide an adequate account of second language learning for contemporary times. In particular, this paper argues that views of language and learning derived solely from the field of (applied) linguistics are not sufficient to address the complex language learning needs of contemporary times and that a more interdisciplinary approach to language and learning is required. It is this interdisciplinary understanding that provides the basis for views of both language and learning that we consider to be necessary within an intercultural orientation. In particular, the paper will emphasize the interpretative nature of learning and the ways that such a view contributes to our understanding of learning in language education. From this perspective, the process of learning to communicate in a second language can be characterized as involving both a 'moving between' linguistic and cultural systems and an acknowledgement of the role of mutual interpretation in exchanging meanings through the acts of both communicating and learning.

Introduction

A recent volume has drawn attention to the need in applied linguistics to understand both the various conceptions of learning to which different schools of SLA subscribe and the way in which discussions of language learning differ depending on how language itself (i.e., as the substance or object of learning in second language learning) is understood (Seedhouse, Walsh, & Jenks, 2010). Two further multiple-authored papers have specifically addressed the many and at times competing theoretical and methodological perspectives on language learning that have evolved over the past three decades. The first, by Hulstijn et al. (2014), considered cognitive and social approaches to research in second language learning and teaching and offered a reflection on the commensurability of the different perspectives. The second (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016) argued that SLA needs to be reimagined in a way that recognizes the multilingual nature of language learning. It proposed an approach that transcends disciplines and "treats disciplinary perspectives as valid and distinct but in dialogue with one another in order to address real-world issues" (p. 20). The Douglas Fir Group did not propose a new perspective on learning; rather, it offered a framework that seeks to draw together a body of theories and research on second language learning to create a wide-ranging dialogue.

A common feature of these discussions is the recognition that no singular theorization of learning, nor of language, is sufficient to provide an adequate account of the complex phenomenon of second language learning, particularly in the context of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity. In this paper, we assert the need for an interlinguistic,

intercultural, and transdisciplinary perspective on language learning. Within this orientation, the process of learning and using a second language involves developing the capacity to 'move between' linguistic, cultural and knowledge systems; participating in and understanding communication as an act that involves reciprocal exchange of meanings; and using processes of reflectivity and reflexivity to develop consciousness and self-awareness about what is entailed in interpreting, creating, and exchanging meaning in diversity. We present an overview of theories of learning in applied linguistics, and especially in SLA, as a way of problematizing how learning has been understood within the field. We then present a case study that reveals ways in which learners' engagement with an additional language necessitates an interlingual, intercultural, and transdisciplinary perspective. Such an orientation can be easily closed down by a less expansive theory of learning.

Conceptions of learning in applied linguistics

In applied linguistics, learning has been understood primarily as second language learning—that is, the discipline has worked with a specific (i.e., SLA) rather than a general theory of learning, and there has consequently been little connection in applied linguistics between the learning of second languages and learning in general. The specific theory of learning adopted within applied linguistics has influenced how the field understands both the object of learning (i.e., language) and the process of learning.

As the object of learning, language has usually been conceptualized quite narrowly in applied linguistics and especially in SLA. Much SLA research has focused on the learning of language structures, especially grammar. This emphasis results from the privileging within linguistics of form-based theories of language, viewed as either a set of formalist rules (as in Chomskyan linguistics) or a network of form-function mappings (as in functional models of grammar of the Hallidayan type) that have been adopted directly into understandings of language for the purpose of learning. In such theories, language is viewed primarily as an autonomous system—in the case of Chomskyan theory as completely autonomous, or in Hallidayan theory as autonomous but interacting with and shaped by elements of the social world. Research on most aspects of language (e.g., syntax, pronunciation, vocabulary, and to some extent pragmatics) tends to reflect this focus on an autonomous system, rather than foregrounding language users and their language use. In much thinking about languages as objects of learning, languages have been understood as separate entities that are to be kept apart as much as possible in language learning, which Cummins (2007) referred to as the "two solitudes" (p. X). This means that learners' languages are not considered so much as a repertoire of communicative capabilities that mutually influence each other in developing learners' communicative capabilities, but rather as competing systems in which existing linguistic capabilities are often understood as little more than problems for the acquisition of the new languages that give rise to errors through transfer or interference (e.g., Selinker, 1972). Although some work within applied linguistics has challenged thinking about language as a structural system (e.g., Norton, 2000; Shohamy, 2007), discussions of learning have typically maintained a structural view of language.

Within applied linguistics, the process of learning has been understood primarily from a cognitivist perspective, in which learners are understood to acquire language through an

unconscious process of hypothesis testing in relation to linguistic input (Hilton, 2005). Such theories of language acquisition developed as a reaction to behaviourism, which was challenged by Chomsky (1959). Chomsky claimed that children are born with a capacity for language, a language acquisition device (LAD), and that language is neither taught nor learned; it just grows. Within this theory, learning is understood as an individual process that occurs entirely within the mind of the learner. It is not influenced by external phenomena other than the linguistic input on which it operates. In Chomskyan theory, the LAD is understood as allowing children to discover the rules of a language system through their experience of natural language by matching the structures of language in their environment with their innate knowledge of basic grammatical relationships. This capability enables children to develop their language ability beyond the actual input that they have received. In this modelling of language acquisition, learning as a conscious process is marginalized in favour of processes that operate below levels of consciousness.

Although Chomsky's thinking is based on observations about first language learning, there has been subsequent consideration about how his theory also pertains to second language acquisition (e.g., White, 2003), and his cognitivist model of learning has largely come to frame how learning of additional languages has been understood. One of the most influential cognitivist theories of language learning was developed by Krashen (1982). Krashen's theory makes a fundamental distinction between *acquisition*—the process whereby language is acquired naturally and subconsciously as the result of hypothesis testing of the linguistic input received—and *learning*—the conscious process of learning form through instruction and correction. According to Krashen, acquisition is central to the development of language capabilities and acquired language yields natural, spontaneous communication. Learning plays a less important role in that it serves as a monitor of language production to ensure correctness. Krashen maintained that there is no interface between acquisition and learning; these are seen as separate processes, with acquisition as most important and learning contributing little, if anything, to acquisition. Learning is seen at best as having a secondary function—as the process of editing language use—and, as a result, learning has come to be less significant as a core concept in applied linguistic theory. Because Krashen's theory privileges acquisition over learning, *comprehensible input* that is designed to be linguistically just beyond the learner's level of competence ($i+1$) is seen as the necessary and sufficient condition for acquisition. As a result of unconscious operations, Krashen argued that acquisition takes place in predictable developmental sequences that cannot be altered by direct teaching. Communicative language teaching (CLT), which is derived from Krashen's work, has become the dominant approach to language teaching in many contexts (Leung & Scarino, 2016). This approach emphasizes communication over learning as the dominant process through which language capability is developed. In CLT, the act of teaching has largely been seen as providing input; that is, teachers support learning by providing a language model that learners can use to develop their own hypotheses about language forms.

Aspects of Krashen's (1982) model have been criticized and, for the current paper, the most important of these criticisms relates to the dichotomy Krashen created between acquisition and learning. There are a number of lines of research that have questioned Krashen's non-interface position in relation to acquisition and learning. Van Lier (2004) argued that the acquisition–learning distinction needs to be reconsidered, as it is based on a problematic understanding in Krashen's work of what constitutes learning. Van Lier

observed that when Krashen talks about learning he refers to meaningless drilling, and this is the reason for his no-interface position between acquisition and learning. Van Lier suggested an emergentist position, in which both acquisition and focused learning can contribute to the emergence of linguistic capabilities. Some researchers have argued for an interface between teaching and learning in which teaching can accelerate acquisition (e.g., Pienemann, 1989; Spada & Lightbown, 1999) and therefore view acquisition and learning as each contributing to the development of language capabilities. Cognitive theories that adopt an *information processing* view of human learning also suggest an interface between conscious and unconscious processes in language learning. Schmidt (1990), for example, highlighted the role of "noticing" and argued that conscious noticing is the first step towards coming to know a language. This view maintains that, if learning is to take place, learners need to pay attention to language features and forms.

More recently, SLA has moved away from theories of learning developed purely within linguistics. In particular, in reaction to cognitive theories, it has begun to focus on the sociocultural learning theory of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1934/2005, 1978). Sociocultural theories of language learning (e.g., Duff, 2007; Lantolf, 2000, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2006; Swain & Deters, 2007; Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki, & Brooks, 2009; van Lier, 2000, 2004) take into account a relationship between thinking and the wider social, cultural, historical, and institutional context in which learning occurs. Within these theories, social interaction is seen as the major means through which learning occurs, and the mental and the social are seen not as constituting a dichotomy but as being in a dialectic relationship: each is shaped by and shapes the other (Lantolf et al., 2015; Swain et al., 2009). Learning occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others. It involves a process of co-construction through language as well as other social and cultural systems and tools. Interaction mediates the construction of knowledge and leads to the development of a framework of knowledge and reference, which enables a learner to make sense of experience.

Sociocultural theories understand learning in terms of the *zone of proximal development*, which refers to domains of performance that the learner cannot yet achieve independently, but can reach with help (i.e., scaffolding) from knowledgeable others. For language learners, prior understanding, which is already structured in and by their experiences in their first language and culture, is brought into play when engaging with a new language and culture. Within sociocultural theories, learning is not simply a process that occurs inside the individual; rather, it is firstly and necessarily accomplished interactionally between the learner and a more knowledgeable other. Within sociocultural theories, interaction involves complex activity on the part of the individual, who draws upon mediational tools (most importantly, language, but also other semiotic resources). Learners participate socially in interaction with more knowledgeable others, learning first on a social, interpersonal plane. Then, on an individual, intrapersonal plane, they make the learning process their own through internalization (Vygotsky, 1934/2005, 1978). In this way, sociocultural theories of learning present a relational view of learning in which participants relate to each other, and to the tools and resources available to them in context, to generate and reflect on language use. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) characterized the cognitivist and sociocultural approaches to learning in SLA as families of theories, acknowledging the diversity of views within each framework and also emphasizing the

fundamental differences that exist between them. One of the prevailing similarities between these two families of theories (i.e., cognitive and sociocultural) is the construct of language (the object of learning) that each adopts, characterized by a focus on language structures and a conceptualization of languages as autonomous systems. The incorporation of the sociocultural family of theories into SLA has opened debates about the nature of learning, but much of this debate has been an attempt to relate the two theoretical positions (e.g., Seedhouse et al., 2010; The Douglas Fir Group, 2016) to each other as a way of reconciling their differences in approach. Seedhouse (2010), who identified theories of language and learning as fundamental to a conceptualization of learning, acknowledged that disputes within the field have resulted from competing cognitivist and socioculturalist views and theories of learning. However, he resolved the conflict around the idea of cognition, indicating that there exists within language acquisition both a cognitive and a sociocognitive dimension (p. 247); that is, learning remains situated in the field of cognition, and SLA needs to deal with two paths to cognition. Further, Seedhouse proposed three ways of resolving the theoretical divide. The first is epistemic relativism (a view that seems to be put forward by The Douglas Fir Group, 2016), in which all theories are held to be valid for particular purposes. According to such an approach, the field is characterized by theoretical diversity, but the theoretical positions remain largely unmodified. The second approach is a form of epistemic hybridization, in which aspects of each theoretical position are drawn on to create a new composite theory. The third approach is a theoretical response that positions SLA theory in a larger field of scientific endeavor by viewing language learning as a particular instance of a wider, adaptive system.

We would argue that the current debates around learning have focused more on finding ways to accommodate existing theories within the current disciplinary models of learning than on developing a broader understanding of what learning a language actually entails. Learning involves acquisition, participation, creation, and interpretation. We therefore suggest the need for a broader, transdisciplinary consideration of learning that looks at the theoretical positions that have emerged within the discipline as well as those that exist in other disciplines. This route will provide a way to expand existing conceptualizations of both language and learning, and a way to consider new possibilities for learning, as well as the consequences of particular theoretical positions about learning.

Opening up views of learning

Opening up learning in applied linguistics and SLA involves investigating how multiple ways of thinking about learning can contribute to discussions in the field. Based on her work in the field of mathematics education, Sfard (1998) conceptualized learning as two dominant metaphors: *acquisition* and *participation.* This distinction has increasingly entered into discussions of second language learning (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Sfard argued that acquisition metaphors construct knowledge as a commodity and frame learning as the process of receiving, accumulating, or gaining possession of that commodity, which is transferred from the teacher to the learner. A participation metaphor constructs knowledge as an aspect of practice, activity, and discourse. According to this metaphor, through a process of enculturation, learners actively construct knowledge while becoming a participant in communities of shared practice and shared discourse. Sfard argued that neither of the metaphors should be understood as a

complete theory of learning but recognized a need for theories of learning to find complementarity between the metaphors.

In applied linguistics, the acquisition metaphor faces a problem of terminology, given the particular meaning that acquisition has gained as the result of Krashen's (1982) distinction between acquisition and learning. Sfard described acquisition as transfer from someone who knows to someone who does not, but Krashen made no reference to whether the processes involved are conscious or unconscious. In fact, a view of learning that distinguishes between conscious and unconscious processes is not evident in Sfard's work. Although Krashen's conceptualization focuses on the nature of the processes involved, it would appear that his understanding of both learning and acquisition would intersect with Sfard's meaning of acquisition; both imply a transfer of knowledge as a body of information from someone who knows to someone who does not. However, the focus on communication as the mechanism of learning inherent in the idea of $i+1$ and in CLT would also entail aspects of participation and active construction of knowledge.

Sfard's (1998) metaphors are based on a distinction that is different from the cognitive versus sociocultural debates about approaches to learning in SLA. The difference between Sfard's two metaphors is that the acquisition metaphor assumes the objectification of knowledge whereas the participation metaphor highlights people in action, where "being in action means being in constant flux" (Sfard, 1998, p. 8), and focuses on the activity of learning and the idea that knowing cannot be separated from the knower. Usually, the debates in SLA have focused on the nature of the cognitive activity involved in learning—internal or social—but have treated language within a framing of autonomous linguistics, as discussed above. Both the cognitivist view of learning by hypothesis formation and the sociocultural view of learning as the internalization of socially and culturally established concepts can thus be understood as belonging to the acquisition metaphor, as they focus on knowledge as a commodity that exists independently of the learner (Sfard, 1998, p. 7). However, emerging from the socioculturalist perspective, there are views of language learning that have conceptualized language as something other than a body of knowledge, which could thus be aligned more closely with Sfard's participation metaphor. These perspectives include van Lier's (2002, 2004) and Kramsch's (2008, 2011; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) ecological view of language learning, Levine and Phipp's (Levine & Phipps, 2012) critical approach, and Norton's (Norton, 2000, 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2002) work on the role of identity in language learning. Such views have conceptualized language in a more personal and contingent way and have focused more on the development of shared language practices than on the acquisition of a body of knowledge.

Paavola, Lipponen and Hakkarainen (2004) have argued that Sfard's two metaphors do not represent a complete understanding of the nature of learning and have proposed a third metaphor, which they call the knowledge-creation metaphor. This metaphor represents learning as a mediated process of collective knowledge creation that develops new, shared knowledge. This metaphor contributes to views of learning as adding to, changing, or re-organizing either ready-made existing knowledge (i.e., acquisition) or its transmission (i.e., participation), extending the overall knowledge and know-how of the community of participants. Learning is thus a creative process, a dimension that these authors claimed was missing from Sfard's two metaphors. This creativity may involve drawing upon tacit knowledge by transforming it into explicit knowledge, experimenting with new conceptual modelling and new theory-building beyond current levels of understanding. Learning is

understood, therefore, as a collaborative endeavor. The value of the knowledge creation metaphor resides in the fact that it goes beyond notions of situated cognition and social practices to emphasize communal, social, mediated activity that gives rise to new practices or artefacts.

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) concluded that these three metaphors still omit aspects of learning that are necessary for developing an understanding of language learning that involves a more elaborated view of language than that offered by autonomous linguistics. They argued for a hermeneutic view of learning that takes the perspective of the learner (Ashworth, 2004; Gallagher, 1992), who is understood as an interpreter working towards achieving understanding. Two hermeneutical principles are central to this idea. The first is that all interpretation is governed by tradition (or history), and the second is that all interpretation is linguistic. Gadamer (1960, 2004) described learning as something that grows out of dialogue as a "fusion of horizons"—the horizons reflected in the learner's initial presuppositions and the horizon of the other person or text with which the learner engages. Within processes of interpretation language has a central role, not simply as a tool for learning in the Vygotskyan sense but as part of a mutual process, whereby individuals make sense of each other's contribution (the subject matter) while also making sense of each other (the person). Gallagher (1992) argued that understanding is not an abstract, mental act but a linguistic event, since language has a central role in understanding the world. He emphasized that in any learning, what is learned is meaningful and takes place within some context that bestows meaning on meaninglessness. In Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics language is central to the processes of coming to see meaningfulness. He contended that learners come to the act of learning with their own fore-understandings (*Vorverstehen*), with a pre-understanding of the phenomena they meet in interactions with people or texts. Learners use dialogue to achieve a "fusion of horizons" between their fore-understandings and their emerging interpretations, and each experience of doing so transforms their understanding of the subject matter, themselves, and others. Learning therefore means not only acquiring new knowledge and participating in communities of users of that knowledge, but also recognizing that learning itself is interpretive and that learners are both interpreters and creators of meaning (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) maintained that language learners are interpreters in multiple senses, as they use the language they are learning to work towards interpreting and creating meaning in interaction. In this way, they are interpreters of another linguistic and cultural system, and they are also interpreters of the experience of learning itself.

In developing a new language, learners learn to decentre, to step back from their own ways of perceiving, understanding, and being in the world and explore other possibilities. However, this does not imply in any way that they leave behind their own language and culture, as languages are not mutually exclusive but, rather, constitute interpenetrating realities. This decentering is fundamentally predicated on reflection (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), and this reflection applies at multiple points in learners' engagement with languages and cultures. For example, learners need to reflect on the diverse interpretations that are possible in response to the same experience of language as meaning-making; on the processes of interpretation themselves; on the assumptions that provide the basis for interpretation; and on the perspectives, positioning, stance, expectations, and judgments that they bring to the act of interpretation, as well as how these operate for them compared to others.

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argued that this process of interpretation is reciprocal. Both in the act of communicating and in the act of learning, people exchange meanings about matters being discussed and learned and, at the same time, they are exchanging things about themselves. Any exchange in communication and in learning therefore involves interpreting self (*intra*culturality—i.e., learners' interpretations of experiences within their own cultures) and others (*inter*culturality—i.e., learners' interpretations of experiences within the cultures of others) in diverse contexts of situation and culture. This movement between the intracultural and the intercultural also comes into play in developing an understanding of the interrelationship between language and culture and their function in the interpretation and construction of meaning. Thus, language learning involves communicating and learning to communicate in and through an additional language, as well as learning to understand the process of communication itself across languages and cultures, recognizing the linguistic and cultural construction of the interpretation and creation of meaning (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

In arguing for an expansion of the conceptualization of learning from a transdisciplinary perspective, we do not propose that one particular way of viewing learning is superior to another but, rather, that each way of viewing learning enriches our understanding with different elements. This is in fact Sfard's (1998) argument; she claimed that both of her metaphors are needed in order to understand learning. We perceive an expanded view of learning as one in which multiple ways of understanding this concept are held together, and we argue that a problem emerges only when the full complexity of learning goes unacknowledged in the processes that describe, support, or evaluate language learning.

A case study: the need for an expanded view of language learning

The focus of the study

The case study described below illustrates—through its absence—the fundamental need for an expanded conceptualization of language learning. Such a conceptualization would open up the learning process beyond institutional prescriptions and move towards a recognition of learning as interpretive. Learners (and indeed their teachers) bring to the learning experience their own language/s, culture/s, and histories that shape, in important ways, the interpretation and creation of meanings that emerge from learning dialogue. These language/s, culture/s, and histories cannot be ignored. Rather, an expanded view of learning opens up the in-between spaces, bridging the learners' primary socialization and enculturation into their own linguistic, cultural, and knowledge worlds of the language/s being learned. Through reflection, this process of linking the interpretation and creation of meaning is brought into consciousness, so that the learner learns not only about how to communicate meanings, but also about the practice of meaning-making (Kramsch, 2006) within and across languages and cultures.

The case study was a small-scale, qualitative study that investigated the assessment of the ESL curriculum in a context where multilingual students (based in South Australia and Malaysia) undertook the same written examination task and were assessed by the same examination authority (based in South Australia). Specifically, it sought to ascertain the extent to which ESL teachers and assessors in South Australia and Malaysia take into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of students, how language and culture come

into play in the assessment process, and what this reveals about language learning. Rather than implement any kind of intervention towards changing practices, it focused on seeking to establish an understanding of current practices and to explore the phenomenon of assessment when it takes place across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. We discuss briefly the distinctive educational context in which the case study was situated and the methodology used in the investigation. Our discussion then focuses on an illustrative response to the writing task component of the ESL examination, prepared by a Malaysian student.

Context

The South Australian Matriculation (SAM) has been offered in Malaysia since 1983, in China since 2005, and it was administered in Singapore from 1992 to 1995. The SAM is a consequential senior secondary high school certificate program that prepares students for an examination, the results of which are used to determine university entrance. For students in Malaysia it provides access to an Australian English-speaking university education. The SAM is comprised of five subjects, including ESL, which is compulsory. The Malaysian students of interest in this case study participated in the learning program taught by local teachers in Malaysia. The students were assessed using the same examination process and with the same panel of examiners that was selected by the assessment authority for the local South Australian students of ESL. Over the years since the initial implementation of the program in Malaysia, there has been a great deal of professional learning exchange between the Malaysian teachers of ESL and their South Australian counterparts, particularly through various kinds of moderation activities in relation to the school-based assessment component of the program. As well, Malaysian teachers of English have participated in the examination panels established for particular areas of study by the assessment authority. The SAM program and, in particular, the ESL program, provide a natural instance of a learning environment where multiple languages and cultures come into play in the learning of English. Furthermore, the focal task, which was considered in this case study, represents the culminating learning and assessment experience in a course intended to prepare students to meet the academic demands of an institution of higher education where English only is the medium of instruction.

Methods Employed

The study employed methods of documentary analysis and interview. Documentary analysis was undertaken of the *ESL 2005 curriculum statement* (i.e., the syllabus), the 2005 examination paper (specifically, the task in the written examination paper), and two sets of student responses to the assessment task (provided by 48 students from two sites in Malaysia and 38 students from two sites in South Australia). The ESL curriculum at this time was framed by the ESL subject community as an integration of systemic functional linguistics and genre-based approaches to English, combined with critical literacy. Group interviews were conducted with Malaysian teachers of ESL and a group of teachers and members of the assessment panel for ESL, based in South Australia. These were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed in full. The interview questions probed teachers' overall understanding of ESL (i.e., How do your students experience ESL?); their advice to students at the time of the examination and their reasoning for offering the advice that they do; their perceptions of the criteria for judging performance; and the extent to which

the students' L1 language and culture influence students' responses, their perceptions about whether or not students write to an Australian examiner as the audience, and their views on the fairness of the assessment process for all cultural groups and individual students taking ESL.

The writing task of interest in the present case study asked students to write a formal letter of approximately 200 words in response to a short written or a visual text. In responding to this assessment task, appropriate types of correspondence might include a letter to an editor or an official as a letter of complaint or a letter requesting information or services. It was left to the individual student to decide upon the type of formal letter (e.g., complaint, request, etc.), the audience to address, the role and position to take, and the perspective to adopt (i.e., the identity of the author). In making these decisions students necessarily need to decentre from their own social, cultural, linguistic, and knowledge world and enter an interlingual, intercultural, and interdisciplinary space in order to imagine not only what they will say and do, but also how their response will be received.

Analysis of an illustrative student response

The focal student text below was written in response to a photograph depicting an out-of-shape bicycle, a car, a young person in between, and other people surrounding the scene. The photograph is evidently of an accident involving a bicycle rider and a car, an experience undoubtedly perceived by the assessors to be within the realm of all students' linguistic and cultural experience, whether in Malaysia or South Australia. Notwithstanding this consideration, however, from the students' point of view, there remains a significant linguistic and cultural challenge in having to decide the role, position, and voice that they might assume in writing a complaint or request to someone in authority. The students' capability to respond depends not only on their knowledge of English, but also, at least to some extent, on their individual linguistic, cultural, and knowledge repertoire derived from prior experience through life and education. This experience is necessarily located in their local context, be it urban or rural Malaysia or South Australia. Thus, a task which the examination authority and its panel of examiners understandably deemed to be accessible to all becomes much more complex when considered through the lens of the decisions that the students are required to make. In addition, it is necessary to take into account how such a task is normally accomplished in the students' diverse linguistic and cultural worlds. It is these aspects that extend well beyond the institutional view of language learning, as captured in the *curriculum statement* for ESL.

Overall, students offered many different interpretations of the context of the assessment task from a range of locations in Australia, Malaysia, and elsewhere. They addressed their letters to various authorities, including the manager of an organisation, the president of the city council, the editor of a newspaper, the chief of police, and the minister of transport. They adopted various identities, writing as concerned citizens, the chair of a committee of villagers, and the relatives of the victim. The letter below provides an example of a response from one of the Malaysian students.

Mr Kevin Wang
101 Danny Road, CBD
Adelaide SA 5000

7th November 2005

Editor
Bright Newspaper Office
210 New North Road, CBD
Adelaide SA 5000

Dear editor,

I am writing to you about a traffic accident two days ago.

Two days ago, when I was reading books at home, suddenly I heard that there was fierce wrangling outside the door on the road. Therefore, I went out and asked what happened. I saw a traffic accident.

A villager was dropped from the bike, because he was knocked by a rich man who was driving his car. That villager broken his leg, therefore, he asked that the rich man take him to the hospital and pay money correlated with this. However, that rich man refused to do it.

A few minutes later, two policemen came and they found out what happened. When they asked the rich man to do following the villager, they found the rich man and they are old friend.

In this situation, the policemen just asked him to pay $100 to that villagers and let him go away.

When I saw the whole thing, I was very angry. At last, the villager had no idea and went away by himself. With this picture, I hope you can expose this thing, and let people know those two stupid policemen. Also I hope this thing can draw to the society's attention.

Yours faithfully,

Kevin, Wang

"Kevin Wang" was the identity adopted by a Malaysian student. This student author assumed a Chinese/Malaysian name but provided an Adelaide address, as he sought to situate his response in an English-speaking environment. He addressed the letter to the editor of a newspaper. The names of the newspaper office and the street, invented by the student, show an amalgamation of knowledge of some address conventions in English as well as familiarity with the tradition of naming locations and buildings in Chinese/Malaysian cultures with highly positive descriptors, such as "bright." There is a certain ambivalence about the location. The writer situated himself in the city of Adelaide, but the accident involved a "villager," reflecting different cultural understandings of the urban/rural environment in Australia and Malaysia. Kevin took on the role of a shocked citizen seeking to expose an injustice through the press. The teachers noted that students find this role difficult. One of the Malaysian teachers stated, "We are asking them to write to the editor, the municipal council, the mayor. They don't do these things, you know. They say, 'Why?'" Kevin provided a brief report as a witness of poor police assistance and as an

informer reporting on policemen negotiating "compensation" in a context of a conflict of interest.

Kevin's response, which was typical of all the responses analysed, reveals much more than his capabilities in writing a formal letter in English as an additional language. It highlights his decision-making about the nature of the formal letter, his interpretation of the depicted scenario and its location, and the role, position, perspective, and voice he assumed, a role in-between his Malaysian and his imagined Australian worlds. He also had to make sense of the subject matter depicted in a photograph, interpreting those present in the scenario, as well as himself and his role and relationship, to those present. His response was necessarily culturally laden. Naturally, in the letter, he projected himself and his cultural situatedness in Malaysia. In writing in English he could not and should not be asked to leave behind his own primary language, culture, local knowledge, and identity.

In the context of the specific ESL examination, what is to be assessed is the student's performance in the English language and in particular, in this case, adherence to the structure of a formal letter genre. However, this aspect of the assessment of student learning cannot be separated from the interrelated and interdisciplinary language, culture, and knowledge complexes upon which students, in their own situatedness, need to draw. It becomes of value to understand how it is that the linguistic, social, cultural, and historical context of the students and the linguistic and cultural variability of their responses are managed in the teaching, learning, and assessment processes. In the context of classroom teaching and learning it would be feasible, for example, through reflection on the task or experience at hand and reflexivity (i.e., inviting students to interpret self in relation to others as language users and learners), to develop ways of moving between the language/s and culture/s at play. Students could be invited, for example, to consider the ways in which they need to adjust their language choices in any given socio-cultural context in accordance with the language and culture-specific conventions (i.e., in recognizing gender, age, social status, etc. through language use) and make comparisons of such conventions across languages and cultures. They could be invited to think about the language and culture-specific norms governing particular instances of language use. In addition, they could be called upon to consider the many different interpretations that would be possible and that fellow students actually make. Students could further be invited, as an integral part of their learning, to reflect individually and collectively on the diverse roles, positionings, voices, stances, assumptions made, and perspectives exchanged; on their own and fellow participants' social, cultural, and linguistic situatedness in the exchange; and on the language and textualization of the experience. Learners would come to understand the interlingual and intercultural nature of the exercise through processes related to the expanded view of learning that we have described—and, in particular, through processes of reflection, both on the subject matter knowledge as understood in diverse cultural contexts, and on themselves in relation to others. They would also come to understand that, in responding, they need to draw upon knowledge that comes from diverse disciplines; that different people draw upon diverse knowledges that are a part of their personal experiences and enculturation; and that in learning language/s, interlingual and intercultural bridging becomes necessary.

The interviews with the Malaysian teachers of English revealed their understanding of the intercultural complexity posed by the examination task. As one of the teachers stated:

> Sometimes I think my students have a problem with the role that they are supposed to take when they are writing the letter. So when they look at the picture they know it is about something in Australia; and you get the people in the picture, the background of the picture… So, I guess sometimes, I think to myself, if I put myself in my students' shoes, I would be thinking like: Am I supposed to be Australian? What is the role? Should I reflect that I am part of the Australian community? Because I have to answer the question, and I can't assume that the picture is happening in Malaysia.

The teachers recognized the need to consider the contextual situation of the response, as this impacted who it is that students could assume to be in their responses. When asked specifically about the advice they provide to students in relation to how they deal with this complexity intra- and interplay of language, culture, and knowledge in their learning of English, one instructor stated that she advised them, "Make sure you are not Malaysian." Several teachers in the group echoed this suggestion.

The teachers' advice here comes from a desire to develop students' capability in monolingual, 'examinable' English, encouraging learners to become other than themselves in order to 'be' native English speakers. They are aware of the complexity that this entails vis-à-vis the students' primary languages, cultures, and knowledge, but they consider this move to be part of the institutional 'requirements' that must be respected in order to succeed in English as an additional language, and they are aware of all that this success symbolizes for the students and for themselves as teachers.

The Malaysian teachers recognized the complexity of the positioning, roles, and stances that their Malaysian students of English are required to perform but their understanding of the 'requirements' of the assessment task took precedence. No doubt, the resilience of the monolingual framing of English language learning meant that they did not see the possibilities offered by the inherent multiplicity of the learning context. In asking students to be someone other than who they were, the instructors did not offer learners the opportunity to be themselves in English, consciously aware, through reflection and reflexivity, of the need to "move between" linguistic, cultural, and knowledge complexes in order to be able to interpret meanings and to hope to be understood in the exchange.

Discussion and conclusion

The teachers did not entertain an expanded interlinguistic, intercultural, and interdisciplinary language learning possibility because of the very way in which English language learning has been monolingually and monoculturally framed and due to the way in which language itself has been defined as a bounded system of formal grammatical rules. In addition, the subject matter or thematic substance of language learning has also been considered to be monoparadigmatic and monoperspectival. It is an acknowledged responsibility of the assessment authority to ensure that the tasks in the examination are free from "linguistic and cultural bias," and it must be highlighted that both the assessment authority and the assessors in this case study take this responsibility most seriously. At issue, however, is the very framing of the learning, which contrasts sharply with the expanded interlingual, intercultural, and interdisciplinary view of learning discussed previously.

Within an interlinguistic, intercultural, and interdisciplinary orientation, students would

not be invited to put aside their own languages, cultures, knowledge, and identities. Instead, they would be invited to consider themselves, in their learning of additional languages, as shaped by the languages, cultures, and knowledge complexes of their primary and ongoing enculturation. They would be encouraged to reflect on the ways in which, in both communication and in their learning, they perform their own social, linguistic, and cultural situatedness in their interactions, responses, and reactions, and to recognize that their fellow participants in interaction also experience this situatedness. They would be prompted to think about how the participants' respective situatedness comes into play in the *reciprocal* interpretation, creation, and exchange of meanings. They would develop capabilities beyond language to include understandings of dispositions, positionality, stance, and identities. This kind of interpretive and reflective work needs to be made explicit so that students come to understand what they do, say, and mean, and what it is that others, in diversity, understand them to mean. Attention to self-reflection of this kind extends their personal development and identity formation as they consider how others, within and across languages and cultures, perceive them. This reflection may well take the form of a site of tension, but it is (precisely) a productive, individual, internal tension that can lead students of additional languages to learn how to more effectively 'move between' and negotiate the diverse linguistic, cultural, and knowledge worlds that their learning brings together, and to develop meta-awareness about notions of language, culture, knowing, and learning (Scarino, 2014). In this way, students experience 'being' in the learning of language/s and then develop consciousness of what it means to do so, stepping back or decentering (Edelman & Tononi, 2000). By learning to use lenses other than their own and to recognize that their "seeing" is from their own point of view, learners come to see with the eyes of others (Andreotti & de Souza, 2008; Kramsch, 2014).

It is in this sense that language learning itself becomes an interdisciplinary endeavor that brings together, for both students and teachers, insights from linguistics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, critical literacy, and discourse studies as they transcend borders across diverse linguistic, cultural, and knowledge worlds. The value of such an orientation resides in providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complex entailments of second language learning. It permits an understanding of the linguistic and cultural construction of knowing and learning as acts of meaning-making and as acts of identity formation. How language learning happens depends on how it is understood, and teachers' understandings of learning have a significant impact on what learning can happen in the language classroom. Narrowly focused theories of learning, and of language as the object of learning, drawn from psychology and from linguistics respectively, effectively constrain what is possible in language learning. By opening up to more interdisciplinary understandings of both language and learning and considering work in areas such as education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, discourse studies, and philosophy, it is possible to provide conceptualizations of learning in applied linguistics and in language/s education with greater depth, breadth, and diversity. Such interdisciplinary perspectives engage the field with the learner as situated, individual, and human, and with language as a complex symbolic repertoire that is both a personal and collective resource for making, interpreting, and communicating meanings.

References

Andreotti, V., & de Souza, L.M.T.M. (2008). Translating theory into practice and walking minefields: Lessons from the project 'Through other eyes.' *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning, 1*(1), 23–36.

Ashworth, P. (2004). Understanding as the transformation of what is already known. *Teaching in Higher Education, 9*(2), 147–158.

Chomsky, N. (1959). Review of *Verbal behaviour* by B.F. Skinner. *Language, 35*(1), 26–58.

Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Review of Applied Linguistics/Revue canadienne de linguistique appliquée, 10*(2), 221–240.

Duff, P. A. (2007). Second language socialization as sociocultural theory: Insights and issues. *Language Teaching, 40*(4), 309–319.

Edelman, G.M., & Tononi, G. (2000). *A universe of consciousness*. New York: Basic Books.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1960). *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (2nd ed.). (J. Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall, Trans.). New York: Continuum.

Gallagher, S. (1992). *Hermeneutics and education*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Hilton, H. (2005). Théories d'apprentissage et didactique des langues. *Les Langues modernes, 99*(3), 12–21.

Hulstijn, J.H., Young, R.F., Ortega, L., Bigelow, M., De Keyser, R., Ellis, N.C., Lantolf, J.P., Mackey, A., & Talmy, S. (2014). Bridging the gap. Cognitive and social approaches to researching second language learning and teaching. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 36*, 361–421.

Kramsch, C. (2006). From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *The Modern Language Journal, 90,* 249–252.

Kramsch, C. (2008). Ecological perspectives on foreign language education. *Language Teaching, 41*(3), 389–408.

Kramsch, C. (2011). The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching, 44*(3), 354–367.

Kramsch, C. (2014). Teaching foreign languages in an era of globalization: Introduction. *The Modern Language Journal, 98*(1), 296–311.

Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2008). Language ecology in multilingual settings. Towards a theory of symbolic competence. *Applied Linguistics, 29*(4), 645–671.

Krashen, S.D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Hemel, UK: Prentice-Hall.

Lantolf, J.P. (2000). Second language learning as a mediated process. *Language Teaching, 33*, 79–96.

Lantolf, J.P. (2006). Sociocultural theory and L2: State of the art. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 28*(1), 67–109.

Lantolf, J.P., & Thorne, S.L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lantolf, J.P., Thorne, S.L., & Poehner, M.E. (2015). Sociocultural theory and second language development. In B. Van Patten & J. Williams (Eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition: An introduction* (pp. 207–226). New York: Routledge.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2010). Having and doing. Learning from a complexity theory perspective. In P. Seedhouse, S. Walsh, & C. Jenks (Eds.), *Conceptualising 'learning' in applied linguistics* (pp. 52–68). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Cameron, L. (2008). *Complex systems and applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leung, C., & Scarino, A. (2016). Reconceptualizing the nature of goals and outcomes in language/s education. *The Modern Language Journal, 100*(S1), 81–95.

Levine, G.S., & Phipps, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Critical intercultural theory and language pedagogy*. Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning.

Liddicoat, A.J., & Scarino, A. (2013). *Intercultural language teaching and learning*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. London: Longman.

Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2002). Identity and language learning. In R.B. Kaplan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 113–123). New York: Oxford University Press.

Paavola, S., Lipponen, L., & Hakkarainen, K. (2004). Models of innovative knowledge and three metaphors of learning. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(4), 557–576.

Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J.P. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)contruction of selves. In J.P. Lantolf & A. Pavlenko (Eds.), *Sociocultrual theory and second language learning: Recent advances* (pp. 155–177). New York: Oxford University Press.

Pienemann, M. (1989). Is language teachable? Psycholinguistic experiments and hypotheses. *Applied Linguistics, 10*(1), 52–79.

Scarino, A. (2014). Learning as reciprocal, interpretive meaning-making. A view from collaborative research into the professional learning of teachers of languages. *The Modern Language Journal, 98*(1), 386–401.

Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 11*(1), 17–46.

Seedhouse, P. (2010). A framework for conceptualising 'learning' in applied linguistics. In P. Seedhouse, S. Walsh, & C. Jenks (Eds.), *Conceptualising 'learning' in applied linguistics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Seedhouse, P., Walsh, S., & Jenks, C. (Eds.). (2010). *Conceptualising 'learning' in applied linguistics*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 10*(1), 209–232.

Sfard, A. (1998). On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Researcher, 27*, 4–13.

Shohamy, E. (2007). *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*. London & New York: Routledge.

Spada, N., & Lightbown, P.M. (1999). Instruction, L1 influence, and developmental readiness in second language acquisition. *Modern Language Journal, 83*(1), 1–22.

Swain, M. (2006). Languaging, agency and collaboration in advanced second language proficiency. In H. Byrnes (Ed.), *Advanced language learning: The contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky* (pp. 95–108). London: Continuum.

Swain, M., & Deters, P. (2007). "New" mainstream SLA theory: Expanded and enriched. *Modern Language Journal, 91*, 820–836.

Swain, M., Lapkin, S., Knouzi, I., Suzuki, W., & Brooks, L. (2009). Languaging: University students learn the grammatical concept of voice in French. *The Modern Language Journal, 93*(1), 5–29.

The Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal, 100*(S1), 19–47.

van Lier, L. (2000). From input to affordance: Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective. In J.P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 245–259). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Lier, L. (2002). An ecological-semiotic perspective on language and linguistics. In C. Kramsch (Ed.), *Language acquisition and language socialization: Ecological perspectives* (pp. 140–164). London: Continuum.

van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning. A sociocultural perspective.* Boston: Kluwer.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1934/2005). *Мышление и речь*. Moscow: Smysl.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

White, L. (2003). *Second language acquisition and universal grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.