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SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH EMERGING ENGLISH LITERACY: "FIND A ROLE THAT GIVES EACH LEARNER MANA AND CONSTANTLY ENCOURAGE THEM"

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SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH EMERGING ENGLISH LITERACY: "FIND A ROLE THAT GIVES EACH LEARNER MANA AND CONSTANTLY ENCOURAGE THEM"

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INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand government closed the country's borders in late March 2020 to all except returning New Zealand citizens and residents as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Radio New Zealand, 2020). Borders opened again in stages from late February 2022 (Te Kawanatanga o Aotearoa New Zealand Government, 2022). Over time, this caused cohorts in English language programmes in New Zealand tertiary institutions to become predominantly composed of local learners, of migrant and former refugee backgrounds. This was a change from the large cohorts of international students of pre-COVID years. English language teachers then faced the challenge of developing their skills to adapt to this new learner group.

This was also my challenge then, as my student group changed to predominantly local learners with varied social and educational backgrounds and learning needs. Some were not literate in their own language. I needed to learn to respond to their varied learning needs. As a late-career teacher, this challenge became an opportunity for professional growth and "becoming," and for this research. This project began in 2021 focusing on teachers' experiences of teaching adult English language learners from migrant and former refugee backgrounds, some of whom might not be literate in their first language(s). It aimed to assist other teachers of this learner group and to contribute to teacher education. In the process of analysing interview transcripts from eight teachers of this learner group around New Zealand, and the resulting emerging themes, I understood that a sole classroom or teacher focus was insufficient to support the complexity of the needs of teachers of this group of learners. Therefore, my focus widened to engage with community-based organisations which support these learners beyond the classroom through a variety of social, cultural, and educational programmes. The original grounded theory methodology was also widened to encompass transdisciplinary theory and insights to try to explain the complexity of the context and the challenges for teachers.

This inquiry foregrounds the experiences and professional insights of teachers and a member of a community-based organisation which provides varying supports to learners of migrant and former refugee backgrounds and their families. It offers insights, advice, and teaching strategies to support English language teachers of this learner group. These findings are especially important as the numbers of this learner group are set to increase across Aotearoa New Zealand.

BACKGROUND

The yearly refugee quota for Aotearoa New Zealand was increased from 750 to 1,000 people in 2018, then further increased to 1,500 people in 2020. Although the COVID pandemic interrupted this, six new resettlement

areas were named to cope with the increase, added to the eight reception centres already functioning around the country (Immigration NZ, 2018). These new New Zealanders require support around housing, education, and provision of health services as well as support to develop language and literacy skills which will be crucial to successful settlement in their new country. While this inquiry focuses on supporting literacy development and language skills it is important to acknowledge that these adult learners face a complex range of challenges as they settle into their new country and community. Some must learn written literacy for the first time. There are a variety of government agencies and NGOs who support them in this journey, in which many will face discrimination (Butcher et al., 2006; Marlowe, 2022; Marlowe et al., 2014; Skyrme, 2008). Kaur (2016) suggests the whole area of teaching English to this group is underfunded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This inquiry will add to already published research in the New Zealand context on teaching this migrant and former refugee background learner group (Benseman, 2014; Field & Kearney, 2021; Hope, 2013; Ryan et al., 2022; Shamem et al., 2002). This research is also informed by Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen (2009), who argue that learners with limited literacy have received little attention in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. SLA theory has traditionally applied single epistemologies to understanding language acquisition such as socio-cultural theory from Vygotsky (Ellis, 2014) and Norton (2000, 2013); Krashen's cognitive theory (Patrick, 2019) or teacher cognition (Borg, 2003; Feryok, 2010).

A wider frame of analysis for language teaching and acquisition was offered in a special issue of *Applied Linguistics* in which Ellis and Larsen-Freeman (2006) view language as "the emergent properties of a multi-agent, complex, dynamic, adaptive system" (p. 558). This acknowledgment of complexity was further developed by Freeman and Cameron (2008) who proposed a complex dynamic systems theory approach in which applied linguistic complex systems are likely to contain many subsystems. These systems are nested one within another, with complex systems at all levels, from the social level to the neurological levels. Larsen-Freeman (2016) suggests that in the case of classroom-oriented research, complexity theory sees a hierarchy from individual minds up to the sociopolitical context of language learning and teaching. Time becomes a significant factor, as emergence in a complex system is not only affected by what is taking place at one point in time, but is also the product of dynamism over time. This involves interconnected timescales, from the moment-by-moment scale of classroom activity to teaching and learning lifetimes (Larsen-Freeman, 2016, p. 379). In this complexity theory approach to language teaching, change, variability, and dynamism over time are key factors for the classroom teacher.

The key ideas of variability and dynamism also underpin the work of the North American Douglas Fir Group of applied linguists who developed transdisciplinary perspectives on language learning. They frame language learning as a complex, ongoing, and multidimensional phenomenon with dynamic and variable interplay among a range of individual neurobiological mechanisms, cognitive and emotional capabilities, and peoples' diverse experiences in their social worlds. These occur over the learners' life spans and along three interrelated dimensions of social activity: micro contexts of social action and interaction, meso contexts of sociocultural institutions and communities, and the macro level of ideological structures (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 24). They identify ten themes for language learning, which were later extended to language teaching through a focus on teacher identity and teaching (De Costa & Norton, 2017), as can be seen in Table 1.

Language learning *Douglas Fir Group (2016)*	**Language teaching** *De Costa and Norton (2017)*
1. Language competencies are complex, dynamic and holistic.	1. Language competencies are complex, dynamic, and holistic.
2. Language learning is semiotic learning.	2. Language teaching is semiotic learning.
3. Language learning is situated and attentionally and socially gated.	3. Language teaching is situated and attentionally and socially gated.
4. Language learning is multi-modal, embodied, and mediated.	4. Language teaching is multi-modal, embodied and mediated.
5. Variability and change are at the heart of language learning.	5. Variability and change are at the heart of language teaching.
6. Literacy and instruction mediate language learning.	6. Literacy and instruction mediate language teaching.
7. Language learning is identity work.	7. Language teaching is identity work.
8. Agency and transformative power are means and goals for language learning.	8. Agency and transformative power are means and goals for language teaching.
9. Ideologies permeate all levels.	9. Ideologies permeate all levels of language teaching.
10. Emotion and affect matter at all levels.	10. Emotion and affect matter at all levels of language teaching.

Table 1: 10 fundamental themes and their implications for language learning and teaching (adapted from De Costa & Norton, 2017, p. 8).

De Costa and Norton's wider themes allow a more spacious and complex understanding of the experience of language teaching and of the needs and experiences of the learners. These will be used later in the analysis of participants' experiences and reflections. Barkhuizen (2021) also offers much to support the complexity of language teaching and language teacher identity. His 2021 book explores experiences of language teacher educators working in a range of professional and institutional contexts, focusing on the domains of pedagogy, research, and service and leadership in institutional and in the community. Though his work is focused on language teacher educators, much is relevant to language teachers. His earlier books on language teacher identity (Barkhuizen, 2017, 2019), offer rich insights and analysis from language teachers around the world.

Other transdisciplinary theorists (McGregor, 2015; Nicolescu, 2014) provide the frame for professionals, practitioners, and individuals with lived experience to be acknowledged across disciplinary boundaries through valuing individual insights and instincts. This was an invitation for me to move beyond the classroom to speak to people who support learners in this learner group, which in turn would assist me to understand their challenges in class.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Participants' experience and perspectives were gathered in two separate series of interviews. Institutional Ethics Approval was gained for the interviews with teachers (Approval Reference WTFE03210220, 2020) and with community-based organisations (Approval reference WTLR05030325, 2025). The first series of interviews was with eight English language teachers of adult learners from migrant and refugee background from around New Zealand. With the constraints of COVID and distance, six were interviewed by Zoom, and two through email exchange. These were single interview events, five of them lasting up to an hour each. Participants responded to

the same set of open questions, whether orally or by email:

- Can you identify personal or professional experiences/training that support your teaching of this cohort of learners?
- What challenges have you experienced?
- What advice would you give to teachers about to begin teaching this group?

Participants had worked in community-based contexts and tertiary institutions in Aotearoa and other countries, the majority for between 11 and 20 years. Two born overseas were bilingual and bicultural, while others born in Aotearoa had varying degrees of fluency in other languages, including te reo Māori. While all eight were women, attempts were made to achieve a better gender balance, so it was not intended to make invisible the important role of male teachers and supporters of the language needs of this learner group. Participants Three and Four team-taught in their context and were interviewed on Zoom together.

The second series of interviews were with staff members in community-based organisations who support migrants and former refugees with a range of programmes. Two staff members provided their experiences and reflections on the key questions below:

- What services or programmes does the organisation offer?
- What are some of the benefits for clients who participate in their programmes?
- What are some of the challenges clients face with participation in programmes they attend, for example language learning programmes?

Initially my chosen methodology was grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2018; Guest et al., 2012) because it allowed an iterative revisiting of literatures and related materials alongside analysis of participant data. But in the process of reviewing literature, gathering data, and returning to reflect on insights from the literature I needed to look wider than the classroom. So, despite Ellis's 2014 invitation to research both social and cognitive aspects of language learning, I chose a transdisciplinary approach.

The first process of analysis was to identify an overarching code which gave insight into how each participant perceived their role. The code for Participant One was "culture" as she saw her role as a teacher as a "a cultural bridge into New Zealand" teaching culture as well as language. She had 17 years' experience as a teacher and manager. She had also been a bilingual assistant trainer and policy developer for national Intensive Literacy and Numeracy (ILN) tests, funded through the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).

For Participant Two, also with management experience, the code was "communication." She believed that communication was central, and that it was important to have bilingual assistance which can mediate the learning process in a first language. With 20 years' experience as a teacher and a manager, she was primary teacher trained and experienced and had a master's in applied linguistics. She had taught English to adults and trained bilingual assistants in community contexts, and in a tertiary institution.

The code for Participants Three and Four was "ad hoc," as their teaching roles came with no contract and few supporting resources, a situation that lasted for five or six years. Both had postgraduate qualifications and specialist qualifications in teaching English language and literacy. Participant Three, with 18 years' experience, was also primary teacher trained and experienced, and had taught English to adults and done tertiary learning support. Participant Four with 14 years' experience teaching adults English in New Zealand, was bilingual, and had a degree in Education.

Participants Five and Six focused on teaching strategies. Their codes were "language focus" and "using stories." With 14 years' experience, Participant Five was primary teacher trained and experienced, had postgraduate qualifications in teaching English to adults, and had worked at tertiary institutions, including a wānanga. Participant Six was bilingual with 10 years' experience teaching English in New Zealand, two of those teaching this learner group. She had qualifications in teaching English to adults, with a related master's and PhD in teacher cognition.

The final two participants focused on the need for teachers to view the learner as a person with multiple life experiences. The code for Participant Seven was "a whole person" and for Participant Eight "an holistic approach." Both were primary teacher trained and experienced, with specialist post graduate qualifications in teaching English language, and Literacy and Numeracy to Adults. Participant Seven had 20 years' experience in New Zealand and overseas and had Counselling qualifications. Participant Eight had 11 years' teaching experience in New Zealand, including in a tertiary institute, and had a related master's degree.

RESULTS

This inquiry aimed to look beyond the classroom to enable insights into how teachers might support learners, so this section will first offer insights from a community-based participant, and secondly from classroom teachers, in terms of challenges and advice to newer teachers. One community-based organisation which supports new migrants and those with refugee backgrounds provides support with finding emergency housing or a private rental; energy navigators to ensure the house is warm and healthy; support with appointments for the doctor and dentist, and budgeting services. It liaises with counselling services which connect people with a counsellor from a similar cultural background, interpreting services, and appropriate language development support.

An employee describes her role as building relationships, as a connector into the community. The role was funded by the Ministry for Social Development but is now funded by the trust that runs the organisation. Amongst her duties she accompanies individuals to Work and Income where she describes people of refugee background experiencing bullying: "They [the client] are in tears … they are so vulnerable." She believes they need to be treated with more respect. She also described the constant instances of racism, at times physical violence, some of her clients face in the communities in which they live.

One situation she described was of a client family with an older child at a local tertiary institution learning English to prepare to study a professional course. The family was "completely on the bread line" trying to find a place to live. They sat in the office "with heads on the table, depressed." That learner was responsible for his mother and younger brother but was able to set that aside to go to class and focus on learning, despite carrying responsibilities far beyond his age.

I move now to challenges experienced by the teachers. The first challenge articulated by Participants One and Two identifies the time needed to teach and learn at this level, and the scope of the challenge. Participant One responds from the points of view of both a teacher and a team manager who is responsible for the overall budget for the programme: "One of the challenges of teaching, and at management level, is the recognition of the time it takes to become literate in adulthood, never mind a foreign language. That's a headache for managers and budgeters." Participant Two also identifies the scope of the task: "It takes quite a while to realise how big the task of second language literacy is. When you are literate it is very hard to understand what illiteracy is like … you can't hurry the process."

Participants Three and Four explained their challenge with lack of institutional support:

> The classrooms were joined by partitions, so the environment was noisy. The principal kept promising another classroom, but it didn't happen for many years. There were no resources. Over time I tried to source material for refugee adults … I did a lot of photocopying. That lasted for about five or six years ... We didn't have contracts. We were promised and promised … but never received them.

Their experience as teachers stemmed from a constant lack of job security, a less-than-sufficient teaching environment, and an almost complete lack of resources. Their learners were women of refugee backgrounds, some of whom had their baby with them in class which added layers of complexity to the classroom situation.

Participant Six raises the issue of the impacts of past experiences: "Subtle challenges, not easily seen, effects of trauma, family issues, cultural issues that we are not aware of." Participant Seven repeats the effects of trauma and the need to nurture study skills:

> Some learners are suffering emotional trauma. Many are coping with major adjustments to a new way of life, family difficulties and processing their previous experiences. Expect absences … Some do not have the study skills or attitudes to study that we may assume or have ourselves … Mainstream assessments are often difficult. In a very short listening assessment that was obvious to us, one student said, 'There are too many words in the way.'

She also identifies an issue of suitability of assessment type for learners of this background and language development level. Her experience was that the assessment structure was more complex than the learner's skills level. The challenge to create appropriate assessments needs to be taken seriously in courses that require achievement in certain assessment tasks.

Participant Eight identifies issues particularly pertinent to learners who may not have written literacy in their first language(s), referring to "disengagement and a sense of futility at not being able to learn English, especially when they see others learning faster than them." She describes the emotional investment required for individuals to work at their own pace and to be able to accept their own limitations along the way. This echoes Theme Eight, "Agency and transformative power are means and goals for language teaching."

Moving to the advice offered to newer teachers of this group, this encompassed teaching content and strategies, understanding the learners' backgrounds, accommodating their other investments, and doing any professional development available.

Participant One suggests that teachers "negotiate a class culture and code – slowly with cultural inputer/bilingual assistance." This is echoed by Participant Two's advice for bi-lingual assistance: "Use the first language if you can … Don't over plan … ask your learners what they want to learn." Participants Three and Four offer suggestions about accommodating learners' other investments: "Have patience, they are not going to learn quickly … Their life is focused on their babies, and their husband and their home." They also recommend, when training learners who have never had formal schooling before, "Teach them how to learn, for example how to organise their folder … Learners need to be doing work at home as well." Participant Five suggests, "Get to know the learner's journey, their culture and family situation," and highlights the importance of professional development: "Observe other teachers. Do any PD [professional development] about low literacy learners, though not much is available." They then offer discrete teaching content ideas, as the next two participants do: "Use some explicit phonetics, like short and long vowels. Lots of copying … make sure writing is on the line."

Participant Six describes teaching strategies that have worked for her: "Build step by step, for example, I would write my name and the country I come from. They would do that. Then we added home city. Use concrete meaningful things. This makes English meaningful for them." She highlights the need to be aware of affective

factors to "Develop their interest and their confidence." This is echoed by Participant Seven who suggests, "Use structured lesson routines. Ensure topics are personalised around their adult interests, world views and life experiences." She focuses on learners' strengths. "Learners have superb oral memories but are slow with visual decoding," she says, "Some are fantastic and entertaining oral story tellers. Pull vocabulary decoding and grammar out of those stories and recycle often." She also highlights multi-modal strategies, using visuals and discrete sounds: "Teach letter sounds with a key word and picture and introduce combinations progressively: short vowels, a few consonants like m, s, c, t, also initial sounds, and final sounds. Use games and short rhymes to consolidate." Finally, she acknowledges the need to address numeracy skills to support her learners' everyday language needs and suggests NZ Maths as a good website. She suggests: "Find a role that gives each learner mana and constantly encourage them."

Participant Eight advises a holistic attitude to the teaching process: "Smile, welcome and be kind. Learn about them and their family and their story. Be a listener. Be flexible; it's ok; they're doing their best and they are learning." She echoes other participants who highlight the importance of teachers learning about their learners' backgrounds and understanding how this might influence their abilities to learn in the classroom or elsewhere.

DISCUSSION

In this section I will discuss three aspects: insights from a community-based organisation, the challenges of this learner group, and advice to newer teachers. Firstly, insights from the wider social world beyond the classroom may provide greater understanding for the teacher about the stresses some learners may face. This highlights the importance of the teacher working to ensure the classroom is a safe space for learning.

I will relate the challenges participants shared to four of De Costa and Norton's 10 transdisciplinary themes of language teaching (2017). Theme One, "Language competencies are complex, dynamic and holistic" is illustrated in the time-intensiveness and often daunting scope of the challenge of teaching English to this learner group as described by participants One and Two above. Secondly, Theme Four, "teaching is multi-modal, embodied and mediated" (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Participants Six highlights "the subtle challenges not easily seen, the effects of trauma, family issues and cultural issues," while Participant Seven also observes that some learners are suffering from emotional trauma and adjusting to a new life. Consequently, teachers should expect absences from class, hence missed opportunities to learn. All the learning is embodied and mediated by past experiences, the effects of which a teacher may experience only "subtly," as Participant Six explained, but which will be crucial to the learner's language skills development. Participants Three and Four shared a teaching space separated only by a partition, with few resources and no contract, illustrating both their commitment to their learners despite lack of support and the employing organisation's disregard for the professional needs of learners and teachers of this group.

Thirdly, Theme Five, "Variability and change are at the heart of language teaching" (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Learners' varied backgrounds, different gaps in schooling, and the complex social worlds they inhabit over time, all mean that the teacher will need to accommodate constant variability and change at individual and class levels, as Larsen-Freeman (2016) identified with complexity theory. Lastly Theme Ten, "Emotion and affect matter at all levels of language teaching" is illustrated through Participants Three and Fours' emotional investment in their learners despite having no contract. Participant Eight's statement about learners disengaging and feeling their efforts to learn English are "futile" also illustrates this theme. It implies the constant support and encouragement needed by the teacher to hold the space for those learners to find their own emotional resources to continue in this challenging journey of acquiring written and other literacies, such as computer literacy.

Turning now to advice. Participants' advice illustrates De Costa and Norton's Theme Six that "Literacy and instruction mediate language teaching" (2017, p. 8). Participants Five and Seven highlight teaching strategies which are essential for teaching literacy, language and numeracy. Participant five noted the importance of learning from colleagues as in her experience there were few opportunities for professional development for this learner cohort.

The "diverse experiences learners have experienced in their social worlds," as The Douglas Fir Group (2016, p. 24) describe them, are constant influences, though the causes of behaviours are not always obvious in the language classroom. Participant Five advises learning about the learner's journey, their culture and family situation. Participant Six reminds teachers that, though learners may be beginners at learning English, they are adults who negotiate complex lives, so that teaching topics need to suit adult interests, and life experiences. Participant Two warns against overplanning lessons, but advises teachers to ask learners what they need to learn, treating them with respect by allowing them to ask for their own language needs to be addressed in class. Lastly Participants Three and Four advise being patient as their learners seemed more invested in their families, than learning English, so illustrating De Costa and Norton's Theme Ten (2017, p. 8), "Emotion and affect matter at all levels of language teaching." The teacher is then better able to understand and work around the learners' other investments.

CONCLUSION

Professional challenges can come from unexpected causes, such as the border closures which caused a change in student cohort makeup in tertiary level English language classes in Aotearoa New Zealand. Consequently, teachers needed to learn to understand and meet the learning needs of a different learner group. This inquiry suggests that at any time in a teacher's career the opportunity is there to evolve and learn and 'become' a professional with wider and deeper insights in their classroom practice and their understanding of their professional role. This article has argued that learning to meet the English literacy and language needs of a class of adult learners of migrant and refugee background requires more than a single epistemological approach. It has briefly mapped the development within Second Language Acquisition theory of teaching frames that take more complex epistemological approaches, those of complexity theory and transdisciplinary frames of understanding language learning and language teaching.

In drawing on the experiences of participant teachers, and insights from a community-based organisation, it argues, as transdisciplinary theorist physicist Nicolescu (2014) proposed, that looking to professional understandings and experience across disciplines, and to others with lived experience of the issue under inquiry, taking on board anecdotal reflections and experiences, can create new embodied knowledge. Paying attention to personal insights and instincts, this knowledge will, in this case, support teaching literacy and language skills to this learner group of adults with multiple other needs and investments.

What might this mean in class? Approaching learners with patience and support, enabling them space to engage their own agency. "Find a role that gives each learner mana and constantly encourage them," as one participant suggested.

This article has highlighted the need for more professional development for teachers of this learner group. The experiences of participants in one situation illustrate the need for more resources and the dignity of a contract. Echoing one of the teacher participants, the findings suggest that teachers work from a strengths-based, rather than a deficiency, mindset, as every day these learners exhibit courage and commitment to learn English and communication skills that they need to create a new life for themselves and their families. It also highlights that learning new skills at any stage of a teacher's career requires institutional support.

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