PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners respond to Sarah Mercer’s ‘Psychology for language learning: Spare a thought for the teacher’

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1. Introduction
Mercer (2018) makes a compelling argument for the urgent need to further research teacher psychology, focussing on language teachers. While there has been considerable research on language learner psychology and with considerable focus on individual differences (IDs), there have been comparatively few studies into language teacher psychology. Mercer (2018, p. 506) highlights that teachers are among the most important stake holders in the language learning and teaching process. Therefore, it is essential to understand the psychology of both learners and teachers to achieve the best learning outcomes.

Certainly, teaching in several fields has become greatly learner-centred and there are many benefits to this. However, as Mercer (2018, p. 506) highlights: ‘In switching the focus from teacher instructional practices, we appear to have at the same time diverted our attention away from teachers as individuals with their own needs, motives and psychologies’. As a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), currently in Southern China, I am truly aware of the plethora of factors that have influenced me as a teacher throughout my career. Mercer’s argument for exploring the factors that influence teacher psychology is truly refreshing. This is especially the case from a career based around teaching in foreign countries and where I have personally experienced many difficulties that inevitably impacted my teaching, as well as observing other teachers facing similar difficulties.

Therefore, my response is largely based on possibly unique factors and challenges related to teaching EFL and living in foreign countries. These factors and challenges will be focussed on in three different categories: (1) settling in, (2) cultural differences, and (3) unprofessional teaching community. I will explain how the relational perspective that Mercer highlights as a theoretical lens for exploring teacher psychology relates to my own personal experiences. Furthermore, I will give an insight into the dynamic nature of my teacher psychology, which Mercer explains well through the complex dynamic system theory (CDS), and the impact this has had on my teaching practice.

2. Experiences as an EFL teacher in South Korea and China
2.1 Settling in
One of the key themes throughout Mercer’s article is the need to understand the contextual factors that influence teacher psychology and their teaching practice. Arguably, the classroom is a potentially more controllable context to attempt to understand teachers further, as there are fewer, or perhaps more easily identified variables/nodes impacting the system. However, focussing only on the classroom context does not truly encapsulate the dynamic nature of the system that influences teachers daily. The relational perspective that Mercer highlights as a theoretical lens for exploring teacher psychology could to a large extent explain how my working environment in South Korea and the other teachers’ personal opinions of China, while working in China, influenced me as I was settling into these two uniquely different contexts. The network of relating nodes of influence that Mercer discusses certainly includes myself, the students, owners of private schools (hagwons), and the other teachers. It would be
greatly beneficial to me as a teacher to further understand how these relational factors impacted my
teacher psychology.

Focussing on my own experiences teaching EFL in South Korea and China, I believe it is essential to
highlight factors that inevitably impacted me as a teacher and my teaching practice. Like many first-
time EFL teachers, I was young and looking for some new, exciting adventures working and living in a
different country. I was not totally convinced I wanted to go down the teaching path in my home
country of the UK, so bit the bullet and went to South Korea with nothing other than a Teaching
English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certificate to prepare me for teaching EFL to young learners
at a private kindergarten. To be honest, I felt like I had been thrown in at the deep end right from
the beginning. These kinds of hagwons usually have one priority – to make money. This often
means teachers are given terribly busy schedules with little guidance, and certainly no consideration
of our experiences as teachers in a totally new country. Upon arrival in China, I was yet again left with
the feeling of being slightly isolated as a teacher. The university I was teaching at had little support for
teachers and they are mostly left to figure out things by themselves. While this came with a lot of free-
dom to teach how I wanted to, it also meant that there was a certain lack of support. After all, this was
my first time teaching adults at the university level – which added pressure. Furthermore, many of the
other foreign teachers at the university were much older than me and there was a slightly negative
discourse to living in China among the teachers. I feel this greatly influenced my initial perspective
while settling into China and at times negatively affected my teaching. For example, I found myself
trying to raise topics with the students that teachers are dissuaded from raising. Many of these topics
were based on factors related to the discourse of complaining among the teachers. This often created a
negative atmosphere in the classroom and staffroom, which occasionally made some students and tea-
chers uncomfortable. Therefore, I mindfully removed this from my teaching practice, which positively
improved the classroom environment for myself and the learners.

2.2 Cultural differences

Mercer (p. 517) discusses the problem of setting boundaries for the professional domain that influ-
ences teacher psychology and teaching practice. From my own experiences, I can relate to this
issue. I often feel my professional domain should be focussed only on the school or classroom, yet
cultural factors certainly influenced me in many ways as a teacher. Mercer (p. 515) also highlights
teachers as being at the heart of a complex dynamic system; in this case the classroom is focussed
on as an undeniably complex system in which there are many influencing and relational factors, or
nodes. Mercer (p. 516) describes this relational role as being potentially contagious within the system
of the classroom, something I have personally experienced. For example, my high-energy enthusiastic
approach to teaching has certainly spread throughout the classroom when the relationship between
each node, or students, permits this. Unfortunately, relational factors within the classroom do not
always permit this positive kind of contagion, as will be explained further. This further emphasises
the need to understand factors that influence my teacher psychology, as the factors that influence
me as a node within the classroom inevitably impact my students. The personal examples I will
give below are testament to the pivotal role of a teacher within a complex system and a relational per-
spective, as well as emphasising the extent of the domain of factors influencing my teacher psychology.

Even after struggling to settle into a new country, in terms of living and working, it never fails to
surprise me how many issues related to cultural differences continue to influence my personal life and
teaching practice. Focussing more on my experiences in China, I want to explain some of the difficul-
ties of trying to relate to my students. It became a significant part of my preparation for class to learn
about such things as Chinese food, traditions, music, and TV. It was not easy and continues to be a
struggle trying to learn about these important factors for engaging my learners because, quite frankly,
the cultural differences were so great. Another significant cultural difference that has influenced my
teaching practice in China is the teacher–student roles. Chinese students are used to the more tradi-
tional role of a teacher providing the knowledge while the learners’ role is to listen diligently with little
engagement. This has been highlighted extensively as an issue for teaching EFL in Asian countries, especially while attempting to teach oral English. In order to engage the learners, I felt I had to use a lot of energy and enthusiasm so that they could enjoy the class and attempt to alter their traditional roles as students. Essentially, this could often be quite draining as a teacher and I had varying degrees of success in different classes. If a class had more confident students that engaged with this high energy classroom environment, it appeared to greatly influence other learners. If a class lacked certain student dimensions, such as more confident students willing to engage and make mistakes, the hard work on my behalf had less success. This varying success was difficult to comprehend sometimes and could be quite disheartening. However, the rewards of slowly altering the teacher-student roles in my classes has been the most satisfying teaching experiences of my career so far.

2.3 Unprofessional teaching community

Yet again, the complex dynamic systems and relational perspective that Mercer draws attention to offers great potential for exploring a broader domain of influencing factors on teacher psychology and teaching practice. The communities of practice model (Wenger, 1998) has been used in many studies to explore how a particular context can influence teacher identity (Trent, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2020) and teaching practice. However, these studies do not fully acknowledge the larger domain of factors influencing teacher psychology and inevitably their practice from outside these communities of practice. My own experiences below are a good example of how factors outside the classroom and larger educational context act as nodes influencing my actual teaching practice.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of my experiences teaching EFL in South Korea and China was the occasionally unprofessional teaching community I found myself in. By community, I mean the other teachers I worked with and teachers from various other schools that almost naturally became part of my social domain. Of course, not all teachers within this community can be described as ‘unprofessional’, yet there was certainly a theme of ‘backpacker teachers’ and the pressure to be ‘fun teachers’ from stakeholders exacerbated this issue. Stanley (2013) presents an in-depth study into experiences of EFL teachers in Shanghai, China that encapsulates my own similar personal experiences. I certainly see myself as a professional, career-minded EFL teacher, so I tried my best to not allow the discourse within this unprofessional community to affect me. However, there are some occasions where – upon reflection – I can see how it did impact my teaching practice and teacher psychology. Often, these occasions related to lazier practice or cutting corners that would have certainly influenced my learners at the time. For example, while teaching young learners in South Korea, I would find myself falling into a routine way of teaching that the other teachers I knew were following as well. These teachers were not always working at my school; in fact, I was greatly influenced by teachers in my social domain outside the classroom. The routines I learnt from these teachers were, quite honestly, easier for me and less inspiring for the learners. However, I could see the other teachers relaxing more by following this routine and it became a habit to follow similar routines. While no teacher is always perfect, I do believe that this unprofessional teacher community influenced me as a teacher in some negative ways.

3. Conclusion

Overall, my personal experiences as an EFL teacher within and outside the classroom reflect the dynamic nature of teaching and teacher psychology that Mercer has highlighted. Besides the examples I have already given, there are many more experiences I have had that emphasise the complex system of influential factors impacting me as a teacher and my teaching practice. A great deal has been learnt through the plethora of studies into learner psychology, which can also be described as part of a complex system not only including the classroom, but that has also improved both teaching practice and learning outcomes. Therefore, it can only be beneficial to study teacher psychology to further improve the field of language teaching. I have argued that teaching EFL, in particular, may be uniquely complex
as a system due to the examples I highlighted, and I would be personally very interested to learn more about teacher psychology from the relational perspective that Mercer proposes. While concrete implications from these kinds of studies may be difficult to establish, as a result of the complexity of the system and problems of creating clear domain boundaries besides the classroom, I believe acknowledging the relational nature of factors influencing teachers is significant a reason for exploring teacher psychology. After all, teachers are such an integral part of any learning process and such a personal profession as teaching can only be fully understood by acknowledging the influence of factors, not just inside but outside the classroom.

References

Robert Wood is an English language instructor at Guangdong Peizheng College in Southern China. Previously, he spent five years teaching young learners in private schools in South Korea. In September 2021, he will begin teaching English for Academic Purposes at Jinan University, Guangzhou, China. Overall, he has more than seven years’ experience teaching EFL in South Korea and China. The main aim of his practice is to increase the confidence of learners to achieve their potential. He received an MA in TESOL from the University of Nottingham, UK.

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