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Authentic Cultural and Linguistic Learning through Practicum in a Nursing Home

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Abstract

This study investigates the value of community experience for mediating linguistic practice and cultural learning. Learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL), both immigrants and international students, frequently report difficulties in practicing English outside the classroom (Wright, 2006). Grounded in poststructuralist social identity theory (Norton, 2000, 2009), social constructivism (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and imbued by insights into language socialization (Duff, 2007; Duff & Hornberger, 2008), this project identifies what students gain linguistically, culturally, and ontologically from prolonged interaction within a nursing home (known as a ‘rest home’ in New Zealand). Four Chinese women who had undertaken a 10-hour community placement as part of a B.A. program in Auckland were asked to live on-site as caregivers. This project uses students’ reflective diaries and transcripts of a focus group interview to address key questions about how the context of the rest home and the experience of volunteering impact actuating communicative practice into social learning. I conclude that authentic practice allowed the four women to apply linguistic strategies taught in the classroom, observe aspects of culture firsthand, report on language used in the homes and for what purposes, and realise they could “make a difference.”

Key Words: Writing, Chinese learners, Socio-cultural learning, Language socialization

Introduction: *Really* practising English

In her reflective diary written during a volunteer practicum, nursing home volunteer Marion (all names are pseudonyms) writes “to work in a rest home made me really practice speaking.” In a focus group interview six months after her community placement Laura, another volunteer, comments, “You can practice English for real in the real life. It’s not what you learn from classroom because you know it’s all the textbook [sic].” Marion and Laura are two of four students who undertook a form of practicum known as “community placements” within nursing homes – ‘rest homes’ to New Zealanders – as part of a second-year assignment in a Bachelor of Arts English as an Additional Language (EAL) unit, *Culture and New Zealand Society* (CNZS) at a tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand. The unit is specifically aimed at mediating the local, national, and transnational aspects of cultural

knowing through a combination of in-class and real- world discoveries. This study reports on what these students gained linguistically, culturally, and ontologically from interaction with the elderly, supervisors, and other volunteers at rest homes. For them, these were sites of a special kind of cultural and linguistic learning, requiring patience and empathy and leading to unexpected insights about themselves as fellow humans and as agents.

Context of the study

This microstudy of mediating language and cultural learning in rest homes arose out of the perception that language learners in contexts where English is their additional language frequently report difficulty in accessing native speaker communities (Cooke, 2001; Hunter & Cooke, 2007; Wright, 2006) and that Asians in the community were becoming volunteers (Peterson, 2005). It is part of a larger project on the cultural and linguistic value of community placements for EAL learners (Andrew & Kearney, 2007). The microstudy also arose out of the need to create contexts where learners could develop multi-faceted and future-oriented agency (Hunter & Cooke, 2007; Manosuthikit, 2008).

As the literature review will clarify, this study is grounded in language socialization theory (Duff, 2007; Duff & Hornberger, 2008; Pavlenko, 2002). Language socialization approaches combine insights from the “social turn” (Block, 2003) in language education and the “situated learning” of Discourses in new literacy (Gee, 1991, 2000, 2004). The study is also grounded in two contemporary theoretical frames: social identity theory (Norton, 2000, 2006, 2009) and its overlap with constructivist notions of apprenticeship within communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and learners’ invested aspirations to future imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003).

The study presents qualitative data from the reflective journals of four female participants from China between ages 20 and 26 who chose rest homes as their community placements. This study also presents data from focus group discussion transcripts held six months after the participants completed their assessed placements. Each of these participants was clearly invested in their rest homes because they were still working as volunteers there even six months after the compulsory placements. In fact, the four women were invited to live on- site as caregivers. The participants were given the pseudonyms Marion, Laura, Dora and Beth.

Objectives of the study

The study addresses two questions about what EAL students learn in the real world that they cannot learn in the classroom:

- What pedagogical mediations are necessary to equip EAL learners to learn in the social world?
- What kinds of socio-cultural and linguistic learning occur in such real world contexts as a rest home?

The study could be conducted in any country where learners from overseas countries are invested in improving their communicative language skills and learning about local culture..

The study is intended to be an a case study of how learning in community brings immigrants and international students closer to a sense of belonging, even as they practise their language and communication skills in a real-world context.

This article suggests that placing advanced EAL students in rest homes helps mediate learning that affects them linguistically, culturally and humanely. In line with recent work on in-service learning, the paper also suggests that requiring a reflective output allows for learners to analyse problems more critically and with a greater sense of social responsibility (Power, 2010). Norton (2000) wrote that reflection in a context of social identity theory focuses interrogation “between cultural practices in their native countries and cultural practices in their new country” (p. 152). This effectively creates the intercultural competence described by Buttjes (1995) as the ability to “mediate” between one’s own culture and that of others (p. 112).

Literature

Community placement and authentic pedagogy

Community placements are a form of community engagement that uses authentic pedagogies within a broad socio-cultural framework informed by social identity theory and impacted by social constructivism. In such frames, human activities occur within cultural contexts mediated by language and with “the specific experiences we have with the artefacts produced by our ancestors and...contemporaries” (Lantolf, 2000, p. 79). Like teaching practicums, work placements, or work experience, community placements are course-related organised learning opportunities where participants spend a specified period in a chosen environment or community to achieve course-related outcomes. The range of potential placements is enormous and may include charity shops, sports clubs, help organisations, or contexts of care for the young and old such as childcare centres or aged -care facilities. According to Andrew and Kearney (2007), community placements embody:

A chance for learners to observe and participate in activities that happen normally as part of the regular operation of a group interacting, communicating and socialising at a particular site, in pursuit of a common goal, using discourse typical of their community. (p. 32)

Practicums, work, and community placements are activities which Barnett (2004) describes as leading to “ontological turn” and “authentic being” (p. 247). Placements chiefly involve aural receptivity and oral communication, key ways learners acquire language in Ellis’s (2005) formulation. The assessment, however, gains both more authenticity and a quantifiable artefact by requiring students to keep a reflective journal of encounters with strangeness (Barnett, 2004).

In this study, community placements function as sites of linguistic, cultural, and ontological learning via language socialization and authentic assessment. In order to be truly authentic, Power (2010) maintains that there needs to be a “real world” element in the context of assessment (p. 57). Power also emphasises there also needs to be a chance for students to *apply* essential knowledge and skills. For authentic assessment events in the real world,

students need to be prepared so teachers need to mediate as well as inform. While the learner is both engaged and transformed within social identity and social constructivist theories, the teacher fulfills a range of roles to enable students to mediate language and cultural learning beyond the classroom. Furthermore, setting up opportunities for language interaction is one of the key ways that teachers mediate, throwing light on activities embedded in specific social and cultural settings (Huong, 2003).

Such intervention creates not only potential linguistic learning, but also cultural learning. Dłaska (2000) commented that independent culture learning only yields results if “meaningful contexts for...unfamiliar freedom are created” (p. 258). In preparing learners for the unfamiliar freedom of discovery in New Zealand communities, teachers prepare the learners for cultural discoveries with content and ideas and draw on the range of competencies that Canale and Swain (1980) emphasized as central to communicative language learning: linguistic, socio-linguistic, grammatical, discursal, and strategic. Students need to be culturally prepared to engage in future imagined communities and communicate within them receptively and actively. Murphey, Chen, and Chen (2005) state that teachers “are in a powerful position to help create...imagined communities and to stimulate or stifle them” (p. 84). They are most effective when invested in the learners’ investments themselves (Reeves, 2009).

Teachers offer mediation training between the classroom and real and imagined communities beyond it. Instructors variously become “intercultural facilitators” (Dłaska, 2000, p. 258), “social and intercultural interpreters” (Dłaska, 2000, p. 256), and “masters of the Discourse or Discourses to which they are apprenticing their learners” (Gee, 2004, p. 30). Students are encouraged to learn in community through apprenticeship (Wenger, 1998) and in this case, the rest home which comprises elderly clients, doctors and nurses, supervisors, and volunteer caregivers. As Gee (1991) wrote:

You cannot overtly teach anyone a Discourse, in a classroom or anywhere else. This is not to say that acquisition can’t go in the classroom, but only that if it does, this isn’t because of overt ‘teaching’, but because of a process of ‘apprenticeship’ and social practice. (p. 171)

Norton (2000), Pittaway (2004), and Reeves (2009) remind us that the instructor is in a unique position to create affordances that empower learners to gain returns on their language learning investments. In this study, as in Norton’s (2000), these affordances are described and reflected on in journals.

There has been a lot of research on the cognitive and meta-cognitive goals of learner autonomy achieved beyond the classroom (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Wright, 2006), and a greater understanding of the socio-cultural needs of learners to achieve the less monolithic process of agency. This is aptly conceived as a co-constructed relationship that engages students’ learnings, changing identities, and ability to act with initiative in the social world (Hunter & Cooke, 2007, pp. 74-75). It may also be regarded as the socially-mediated “prerogative to act” (Manosuthikit, 2008, p. 3). The learners’ interactions involve accessing and “acting” within communities where they access motivational, cultural, and linguistic capital and self-knowledge.

The instructor's goal is to lead learners to examine the socio-cultural world beyond, but reflected in, the classroom. Desirable frameworks for appreciating cultural difference as part of language learning and creating integrated, inclusive visions are well-covered in scholarly literature (Buttjes, 1995; Byram, 1997; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Dłaska, 2000; Fennes & Hapgood, 1997; Sercu, 2002). There is also a framework to promote understanding of resources integral to the socially constructed world that invite interrogation and agency and might impact agency (Hunter & Cooke, 2007). An increased understanding of the need for a socio-cultural curriculum embedded in a formal linguistic one led to the report *Intercultural communicative language teaching* (Newton, Yates, Shearn & Nowitzki, 2010), which emphasised that "culture is no longer an invisible or incidental presence in language learning but instead is...a strand with equal status to that of language" (p. 1). In addition to the need to accommodate intercultural learning is the political need to avoid teaching materials that reproduce iconised stereotypes or simplistic models of cultural relativism. This need to allow space for flexible identity negotiation and to understand the role of power differentials emerges as a strong imperative in the literature (Canagarajah, 1999; Kearney & Andrew, 2009; Kubota, 2004; Norton & Gao, 2008; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000).

Investment in learning and imagined communities

Social identity theory (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000, 2006, 2009; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) led to new understandings of learners' motivation as "investment" and their learning as individual, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Learners' investment is impacted by teachers' understanding learners' complex desires for future being and belonging and their "imagined communities". Imagined communities originated in the work of Anderson (1991), and, placed alongside the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), have been widely used in scholarship on investment (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2001, 2006, 2009; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2005; Pittaway, 2004). Several recent studies have applied "imagined community" to Chinese learners (Li, 2009; Murphey, Chen, & Chen, 2005; Norton & Gao, 2008; Orton, 2005). The term describes learners' investment in their learning because it is likely to impact their future goals, ambitions, dream communities, and desires for belonging and recognition.

The motivational concept of "investment" can be defined as the "socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 10). Understanding learner investments is productive for learner engagement both in classroom and community contexts (Norton & Gao, 2008). In the world of the imagination, we all create "new images of the world and ourselves" (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). Kanno and Norton (2003) believe that the analogy of nationhood and community helps those who want to belong feel a sense of community with people not yet met. In their conception, the imagined community of people can be seen as "groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination" (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241).

In the study, learners have idealised visions of themselves as members of future academic, national, professional or creative communities. The participants are international students, whose investment is likely to be in an imagined community in their country of origin.

Volunteering helps them belong to local and national communities and to the idealised imagined community of humanity. The fact that these students chose placement in a rest home, as opposed to a church group or an environmental action group, is significant. These students see themselves as having the capacity to care for vulnerable or elder others. For example, three participants mention remembrance of a grandmother in their diaries, and two mention their future expectation of looking after their parents when they are elderly. Wong (2006) argues that the essence of dialogic, Confucian “learning in community” involves talking and listening within enduring relationships where learners have a high degree of investment and in which such contexts facilitate “cognitive changes” (p. 49). Learning in community is especially natural to the Chinese learners who chose community placements in rest homes. Three of the students also plan to enter Nursing school?. Regardless of their imagined educational and professional communities, these students chose placement in a rest home for a reason.

Language socialization in communities of practice

Pavlenko’s (2002) claim that “interaction is crucial for L2 learning” (p. 286) demonstrates how Vygotsky-inspired socio-cultural and poststructuralist theories that connect participation to learning and identity are commensurate with each other (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 2). Encouraging socialization has an impact that is at once cognitive, epistemological, and ontological. It is cognitive since it connects “human mental functioning and the activities of everyday life” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 1). It is epistemological since it offers complex ways to understand knowledge which differs from classroom instruction and s participants to make links between the classroom and the community, perceive contrasts between the new and the familiar, and become open to “surprises” (Norton, 2000, p. 152). This might lead language learners to compare what they observe in New Zealand from norms in their own cultures. New knowledge is created through cultural contrasts. Encouraging socialization is also ontological for several reasons. Communities offer situated identities for participants to see and aspire. Moreover, community placements provide opportunities for students to explore their identities as agential members of new cultures.

Placement in real communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) activates what Gee (2000) recognises as the “social mind.” It also alerts participants to “Discourses” and “situated meanings” (Gee, 1991, 2000, 2004). Exposure to an awareness of these phenomena form part of a socio-cognitive process that enhances the cultural literacy of adult EAL students and engenders agency. Participants develop this cultural literacy and its accordant agency through investment in experience-based community learning. Gee’s (1991) concept of “Discourses with a capital ‘D’” (p. 2) provides a fitting description of the cultural and the specific literacies encountered in community placement. Discourses, Gee (1991) says, are:

Ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities ... they are socially situated identities. (p. 155)

Methodology

Information about the participants

All four participants are female international students from China between the ages of 20 and 25. The four participants knew each other well because each was approaching the end of their second year of advanced English study in New Zealand. One of the four, Laura, aspired to become a citizen of New Zealand at the time this study was conducted. None of the women had lived overseas before and all had completed secondary school in China. For all of them, their rest home placement was their first volunteer work. In fact, none of the participants except Laura had worked in paid employment before. All were enrolled in the BA (EAL) program at Unitec New Zealand, which aimed for to improve students' linguistic excellence and socio-cultural knowledge. All participants had completed a mandatory unit on Maori culture.

Pedagogical procedures prior to community placement

Drawing on such studies as those cited above, teachers of CNZS explicitly teach the following topics over ten weeks in preparation for real-world interaction:

- Ideational knowledge (in this case, specifically about aged care in New Zealand and generally about identity, culture, and language in use)
- The meta-cognitive framework (strategies to approach learning in community)
- Communicative strategies (ways of listening, responding, interacting; functional and situational language)
- Seeking links between language, context and the social world and noting them
- Defining and illustrating "reflection" (which involves monitoring language used by the self and others, recognising cultural differences, testing hypotheses from the classroom, and realising impacts of the social world on the self).

In this project, teachers also organise supervisors and maintain practical contacts with them for the future. Participants built a rapport with the rest home supervisor over four semesters. This study was conducted occurred during the fourth iteration. The rest home supervisor's support for the four women in the focus group testifies to their humane investment in helping others where their initial investments in community placement has been to participate in an assessment that gave them contexts for practising their listening, speaking and communicative competencies. The supervisor's role in mediating the students' socialization into their practicums, while not empirically measured, is acknowledged in their journals and in her telephone communication with lecturers.

Data

The qualitative theoretical framework uses a teacher-researcher lens to examine participants' lived literacy practices and engagements within their reflective writing about their community placements in rest homes. The key research instruments are the reflective diaries. Although students respond to cues, they are encouraged to write freely. These diaries provide content-

rich and suitable data for thematic analysis. Researchers whose methods inspire this study have used similar approaches to analyse learner texts, snapshots of their experiences, their language learning histories (Murphey, Chen & Chen, 2005) and reflective diaries (Norton, 2000). Data used as the basis for this study derive from two main sources:

Journals

The first source consists of learners' reflective journals written either during or after their community placement experiences. Journals were based on notes written during the placement. Students were required to participate for a minimum of 10 hours. These journals, averaging 350 words and organised chronologically in four installments, were written in response to a series of cues. In the descriptor, the students were asked to consider:

- their interactions in spoken English
- the situations they found themselves in in which English was used
- a record of their learning about language, culture, and society based on their placement
- evidence connecting classroom learning with community placement

Focus group

In order to triangulate data and gain a sense of how authentic learning in a community impacts learners, students who had worked in rest homes were invited to be part of a focus group, which took place off-campus. Only four students out of 12 agreed to participate, all of those whom had become live-in volunteers for a period of up to six months. Prior to the focus group session which was conducted with two interviewers, the participants were given a list of cues that would be used in the interviews. The interview was then transcribed. Participants were asked:

- What advantages do you think working in the Kiwi community gives English language learners?
- What were your personal reasons for getting involved in your community?
- What did you notice about language and culture from working in the community?
- What differences between New Zealand and China did you observe in the rest-home?
- What did working in the community give you personally, in addition to having a chance to practice English and observe culture?
- What did you learn about yourself that you couldn't learn in school?

Themes and Analysis

The method aligns with a method that Sandelowski (1995) uses in a nursing context. She describes a method of closely reading the material, identifying key storylines to understand everyday practices and underlining key phrases "because they make some as yet inchoate sense" (p. 373). The researchers, both of whom have backgrounds in literary and discourse analysis, used a holistic, instinctive, and multiple-technique method to bring out "indigenous themes" (Patton, 1990). This method allows themes to emerge from the texts and for the researchers to list quotations into thematic strings, which is structurally equivalent to open coding in orthodox grounded theory. The researchers used Ryan & Bernard's (2003) criterion

for identifying themes that “you know you have found a theme when you can answer the question, ‘*What is this expression an example of?*’” (p. 87). The researchers used “cutting and sorting” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 347) to assemble a database of quotations. When quotations are contextualized, it becomes possible to identify sub-themes and to select those data pertinent to the research questions.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include a small sample size and reliance on self-report data, although our focus on lived experience and literacy practices allows us to come close to reproducing the focused intensity of a case study. Although we recognize the limitation of our sample of four, we present the major themes that each of the four participants mentioned as findings: linguistic learning, cultural learning, and ontological insightfulness.

Findings

Mediating language and cultural learning in a rest home involves a range of categories of learning. These categories include linguistic learning, cultural learning, and learning about the self as a learner and a contributor to society. This learning transcends that available in the classroom, and its capital has potentially long-lasting effects. As Dora wrote, “I learned many things that I can’t learn at school.” The supervisor at the elder care home advised Beth to take advantage of her learning context of volunteerism and stated, “Volunteering is a significant social phenomenon in New Zealand...She pointed out that voluntary work opens up a window to observe and learn about New Zealand culture and society,” revealing a mediational role. The following findings show that Laura, Beth, Marion, and Dora did just that.

Linguistic Learning

Applying classroom language

There is evidence of participants consciously applying language learned in the classroom to the real world context. Laura articulated :

When you’re working as a volunteer in the community, school you know – older – older people around you, no matter their English is native language or not, but you have all the opportunities to practice, to try. If it is easy for what you learn from classroom and make it in real life. (All quotes in this section come directly from learners’ diaries).

Marion noted, quite globally, that her practised communication “connects with my classroom learning of researching, writing and speaking skills...such as asking, interrupting, clarifying, showing interest, paraphrasing, explaining, agreeing, and disagreeing.” Similarly, Laura spoke of her application of listening strategies: “We need to apply reflective listening skills like in the classroom... ‘*do you mean...?*’, ‘*do you want to ask...?*’ and so on.” Dora spoke happily about the impact of using functional and situational gambits acquired during classroom study:

When I was serving morning tea, I tried to build a good relationship with them, so I began to ask some questions such as 'How are you today?', 'Would you like a cup of tea?' or 'Please have a seat and a nice cup of tea', I realised that they are happy when I am talking and serving with them.

Marion, in the quotation that opened this paper, and Laura, in the following extract from the interview, showed an awareness of the community placement's role as a bridge from the classroom to the community:

You can apply, you know, what you learnt, match what you learnt to identify, you know, the language features or the strategies you can apply. But in the community's life, *really practice*.

Acquiring language in context

Beth is particularly redolent with stories about overhearing slang in the rest home. On day 2, she wrote: "Today I learned a kiwi slang, 'sweet as', pronounced 'sah-weet-az'". Beth was keen to adopt it and stated, "I am starting to use this kiwi slang." She was equally observant of Kiwi pronunciation and stated, "Older people are more likely to pronounce words like *grown*, *thrown* with one syllable, and younger people...with two syllables (*growen*, *throwen*)."

Laura described how she learned the term 'seeingeye dog' and the idiom 'out of the blue' and Dora was amused by the idioms 'back in two shakes' and 'down the drain'. Beth, gesturing to the mediational role of the communicative context of the elder care home, noted "working in a relaxed and friendly environment definitely can help with advancing my language fluency and my understanding of New Zealand colloquial language." In the interview, Doraspoke about acquiring another idiom:

I remember that I ask 'how are you' who is one of my colleagues; she said '*box of birds*'. I said 'pardon me?' She realise I couldn't understand, she explain me that what the meaning of that, so I learnt a lot.

Dora was also aware of how placements are intended to mediate language encountered in the classroom. She reported, "So, after I heard someone use the slang that you teach, so I can understand exactly the meaning and how to use that. It is more effective in the real situation." Asking her interlocutors the meaning of slang was "really exciting" to her.

Cultural Learning

Socio-pragmatic strategies

In the process of real practice in the rest home, the four women learned about the socio-pragmatic regulations of their spoken language to suit their audience, specifically elderly people. Beth recorded, "I realised that I need to speak slowly, clearly, and patiently as they need to listen carefully and properly." In the latter part of her diary, she wrote about moments of frustration and impatience, but also self-control. Speaking of her wards she wrote, "Memory lapses...I need to clarify and repeat what I say, should always be patient and tolerant." Dora also applied such strategies as what she calls 'asking for repetition' and

illustrating it with the gambits, “I’m sorry. I didn’t catch you. Could you say that again, please?” Marion spoke of the importance of building rapport with a clear introduction and stated, “I greeted them by saying, ‘Hello, my name is —. I am a volunteer here, and what is your name?’ for the opening gambit so that keeps the conversation going.” In addition to communicating with the elderly, Laura also spoke of communicating with her supervisor and other volunteers, where the register is different:

When they spoke to the elderly, the staff changed the tone of their voice; they spoke very clearly and slowly. But when they talked to volunteers, became fast again, and speak with linking and contractions.

Noticing socio-linguistic phenomena

Beth considered the difference between the spoken language of her elderly wards and that of her peers. She observed differences in the context and register of the language used:

I think the language they used is quite formal than younger. For example they would say ‘Thank you very much indeed!’ rather than ‘Cheers’ or ‘Thanks a lot’. I guess the main reason is most of them grew up in the early of 19th century (*sic*), so some new fashion words were not spoken at all.

Dora found the context unfamiliar, saying “I thought it was much more difficult to talk to them because they were older than me and don’t use the same language as I do.” Related to this is the politeness and use of terms of endearment noticed by Laura. She stated, “They all seemed very polite and they often used words like ‘darling’ and ‘dear’.” Beth observed that they are fond of saying ‘lovely’ and noted that when they sought clarification, they did so in a formal way by saying ‘I beg your pardon’ instead of ‘Sorry?’” Marion thought she identified a feature of this generation’s speech, but in fact she might have observed a more general phenomenon about Kiwi speech and stated, “In informal speech elderly people often use the third person ‘she’ in place of it as the subject of a sentence, especially when the subject is the first word of the sentence, such as ‘She’s a beaut day’ (It’s a beautiful day), and ‘she’ll be right’, meaning ‘It’ll be OK.’” Beth clearly understood the colloquialisms in context and related the use of the pronoun “she” to a generational colloquial tendency.

Anzac and Mothers’ Days

The community placements occurred on Anzac Day and Mother’s Day, two key dates in the cultural calendar which opened windows into the cultural significance of these occasions. Beth moved from the female to the male ward on April 25 when she wrote, “To compare with having a chat with male elderly people, they liked to talk about the First World War [*sic*], ANZAC Day, and armies instead of their families ... It seems to me that they still cannot forget the wars.” Dora also spoke of emotional stories in which residents responded to the poppy, the dawn parade, and the Anzac biscuit. Dora wrote:

Anzac Day, poppies, Anzac biscuits. A lot of elderly people fairly enjoyed a traditional ANZAC biscuit, and enjoyed the pleasure of reminiscence as well. Stories and laughter filled

the coffee inn...one elderly dipped her Anzac biscuit in her tea and she was shaking. I could see a tear in her eye.

Although she could understand the time frame or the cultural impact of the wars in New Zealand's history and identity, she could certainly interpret the emotion that memories of these events engender. In her focus group, she described her wards, who had baked their own batch of Anzac biscuits and insisted that she try one:

After that I realised [it] is quite meaningful...[it] is not a biscuit is, but a piece of...I can't say it...maybe they put some inside they want people to understand their culture?

Laura made observations about the first Sunday in May. Quoting a website (<http://www.china.org.cn/english/12618.htm>), she reiterated, "Though Mother's Day originated in America, people in China take it with no hesitation because it goes in line with the country's traditional ethics-respect to the elderly and filial piety to parents." She adds that she noticed that "most kiwis think the ideal gift for their mother would be a card, chocolate, flowers, pampering, holidays." For Marion, caring for the elderly on Mother's Day triggered a comparison of the treatment of the elderly in her country and she stated, "We believe younger generations have the responsibility for taking care of the older, and when old people retire, they are expected to enjoy themselves and also keep healthy."

Ontological insightfulness

Students who engage in volunteer work in an elder care home as part of a community placement assessment gain insight into their own capacities as a member of the human race. They also gain insight into their abilities to adapt to socio-linguistic contexts and acquire linguistic items. Laura reflected, "What I found out from my personality is like; I [gained a] more and more strong personality." But even small incidents can have impact. For Dora, the ability to engender a smile was valuable. She stated, "Every time when they were wearing a smile, I felt that it was just only a tiny work to me, but can make them happy." Marion also expressed surprise that she could "make a difference." Dora wrote in her final entry:

Being a volunteer gives me a chance to contribute to NZ society...I have learned some typical kiwi lifestyle, some kiwi slang and pronunciation. More importantly, it's a wonderful opportunity of broadening my perspective of NZ culture and society.

Beth gained an unexpected insight into how she would work under pressure when one of her wards collapsed when she was administering to her. She wrote of her quick thinking, "At that moment I dialed 1-111 immediately, my workmate Laura and I stayed with the man, reassured and made him comfortable until Care Supervisor came." Elsewhere, she spoke about the healthcare knowledge she gained on-site.

For Laura, working in the elder care home was part of a wider journey which for her involves "integration" and "immigration." She stated, "I will continue to do voluntary work either in rest-homes or other community centres in order to integrate into the society, as it is a good opportunity to learn more about New Zealand culture and society outside the class."

In her focus group, Dora referred to own capacity for patience among the elderly, even when their requests are “unbelievable.” Her mantra became, “Speak slowly, loudly, clearly.” She was insightful about her choice of a rest home for a community placement and stated:

Personally, I have a grandmother. She is 84 years old now. I grew up with her so I have to maybe special relationship with elderly people. So I really want to help them and build up the relationship between a younger generation and older.

Beth revealed a similar motivation. Working with the elderly is a vicarious but constructive way to deal with a major aspect of missing people back home.

Discussion

Throughout the findings, we see ways in which participants learned as apprentices in communities of practice by practising Discourses from class or their lived experiences. They made use of literacy practices and socio-pragmatic strategies taught in class and turned teaching into acquisition and learning into knowing. Operating in the real world forged learning through the kind of participation that proponents of language socialization argue are essential for authentic language learning. To apply Huang’s (2003) study of teacher mediation in sociocultural learning, the placements led the EAL learners into the Vygotskian zone of proximal development where they became engaged in problem solving and their potential development became evident (p. 33). Vygotsky’s *Mind in society* (1978) enables us to view the lecturers in a mediational role. In this study of language students’ on practicum in nursing homes, teachers enabled and assisted learners’ performances, affording multiple chances for acquisition and knowing, and allowed privileged access to overhear and employ Gee’s (1991) situated meanings.

True to the tenets of social identity theory, participants experienced surprise and serendipity about their linguistic, cultural and ontological progress. Their investments in learning in New Zealand and in serving practicums come to the forefront. Beth’s adoption of the Kiwi phrase “sweet as” and Dora’s learning that “box of birds” means “happy” brings them metaphorically closer to Kiwiness. Laura’s realisation about her personality crystallized her desire to become a New Zealand citizen. Dora’s ‘a-ha’ moment about Anzac biscuits created an indelible knowing indigenous to the Antipodes. There is a sense that Beth’s realisation that she could save a life or Dora’s dawning knowledge that her love for her grandmother motivated her volunteerism are forms of lifelong learning. In addition, the act of reflection in writing and speaking alerted participants to differences in cultural practices Norton (2000). It allowed learners to realise for themselves how much they have learned about culture and themselves through involvement in community, which illuminated the humanitarian potential Power (2010) identified.

In the light of the findings, it seems that learning in community is especially natural to the Chinese learners who chose community placements in rest homes. Wong (2006) spoke of Confucian “learning in community” leading to “cognitive changes” (p. 49). Laura’s confirmation that listening strategies do indeed work or Dora’s understanding that “dear” and “darling” belong to the archaic discourse of the elderly are instances of such cognitive

change. Gee's concept of "Discourses" (1991) provides a fitting description of the cultural and the specific literacies encountered in community placement, which demonstrate "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking...that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities" (p. 161).

Participants' efforts to apply language and strategies practised in the classroom and out of class points to progress towards the future-oriented agency that Manosuthikit (2008) and Hunter and Cooke (2007) describe as favourable outcomes for real-world EAL learning. As the literature review stressed, understanding learner investments in learning English, is central to creating learning interventions that afford opportunities for agency. The pedagogical intervention of preparing learners socio-pragmatically and socio-culturally for authentic encounters enacts Barnett's pedagogy for an unknown future by creating meetings with the real and the strange (Barnett, 2004). It also resonates with Dłaska's (2000) emphasis on the need for "unfamiliar freedom" in designing intercultural learning for EAL students. In-class pedagogical interventions, rehearsing how language works, and discussing aspects of national culture set the stage for learning lexis, particularly slang and idioms, and aspects of culture.

Conclusions

Volunteer placements such as rest home practicums place participants in contexts where pedagogical interventions in language and culture such as those described in this study become meaningful. Such interventions can lead to effective and potentially agential learning and knowing, particularly about language, culture, and individuals' sense of themselves as students, members of a Kiwi community, and citizens of the world.

In their reflective writing and in their spoken recollections, participants revealed learning "for real" by volunteering in a rest-home that exposed them to Gee's (1991) Discourses. Having the opportunity to "act" in contexts of language socialisation afforded opportunities to use Discourses and witness "how people get their acts together" (p. 155). In this study, these people are other workers in a rest home and residents. In community practicums, learners gain privileged access as apprentices and participants in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), to individuals' and communities' ways of being as their members "get their acts together."

This paper discusses community placements, exemplified by this study of Chinese women working in rest homes and corroborates insights from socio-cultural and post-structuralist work on learner identity. They activate the social turn (Block, 2003), encourage intercultural competence (Sercu, 2002), provide an environment for language socialization (Duff, 2007), emulate communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), draw on the need for teachers to understand learner investments (Norton, 2000; Reeves, 2009), and facilitate learning for unknown futures (Barnett, 2004). The project demonstrates the pedagogical applicability of "imagined communities" as learners reached out to people they had not met (Kanno & Norton, 2003). The confidence the women gained from working in the rest home, pedagogically informed by language learning strategies and cultural concepts, gave them the sense that they might also be effective in the communities they desire. They might also imagine places where they are perhaps graduate students, nursing students, caregivers, and contributors to society who

benefited from having studied English in New Zealand and undertaken practicums in rest homes.

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