
**Bio:**

Mathew Hollinshead is a lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies in Japan. Originally from New Zealand, he has been teaching in Asia for 10 years and has a Masters degree in TESOL from the University of Auckland. His research interests include vocabulary, students autonomy, and motivation.

Sarah Mercer is Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at the University of Graz in Austria and has published in the last few years on the self, agency, strategies, mindsets, working with narratives and, more recently, on complexity theory and its application to the language classroom. She is the author of the book *Towards an Understanding of Language Learner Self-Concept* published by Springer (2011) and co-editor of two other volumes: *Psychology for Language Learning* published by Palgrave Macmillan (2015, co-edited with Stephen Ryan and Marion Williams) and *Multiple Perspectives on the Self in SLA* published by Multilingual Matters (2014 co-edited with Marion Williams). In May 2014, she organised the first Language Learning Psychology conference in Graz for May 2014 which aimed to bring together different perspectives and scholars from across the field to explore the interconnections between various aspects of teacher and learner psychologies. The event was so successful that it has become a biennial event with the next one being held this year in August 2016 in Finland (see: https://www.jyu.fi/en/congress/pll2016).

NB: This interview was actually done in Dec 2013 and updated for 2016 March. Of special note Sarah and her co-authors, Marion Williams and Stephen Ryan, were awarded the Ben Warren prize for their new book in the Oxford Teachers Handbook Series, Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching (OUP 2015) Sarah has also worked as co-editor on another edited collection with Peter MacIntyre and Tammy Gregersen entitled Positive Psychology in SLA (2016).

**TM: How and why did you get interested in studying the SELF and perhaps can you tell us how it overlaps and is distinguished from identity?**

**SM:** My interest in the self began with a curiosity about strategies. I was teaching an experiential approach to strategy training (see Mercer, 2003, for more details). At the end of the course, I did some evaluation to see whether the students felt the course had been helpful for them as language learners and, if so, in what ways. The thing that struck me about their responses was that they reported feeling more confident and empowered to tackle learning in other settings given their new arsenal of strategies. I concluded that one of the key benefits of the strategy training had not necessarily been direct linguistic gains but perhaps rather enhanced self-confidence and feelings of agency. And so it began - my never-ending journey to understand my learners’ sense of self, what it means for individuals, how it connects with their behaviours as learners, and to reflect on what we can do to enhance our learners’ sense of self.
To grasp the complexity of the self, try thinking about all the sentences you could begin with: I... I think, feel, like, dream, hope, want, remember etc., and then consider all the ways you could describe a person... passionate, shy, contemplative, eager, motivated, willing, stubborn, etc. The lists are endless. Doing a quick search of google scholar throws up literally millions of papers (today it provided over 3.5 million!) written about the self in some form. This vastness in the scope of the self helps us to appreciate why there are also a multitude of terms to describe it.

**TM:** As a researcher, what can you do to avoid being overloaded by all these possibilities?

**SM:** Essentially, researchers need to set some kind of boundaries to make researching the self manageable and in seeking to understand it, they have chosen to break it down into various aspects of the self, such as self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, and identity. I think it is important to remember that these are all facets of the same thing – our sense of self – but are simply different hypothetical constructs created to make sense of the inherent complexity of self. Whilst I think most of us feel that these distinctions do reflect phenomenological distinctions, they are extremely difficult to tease apart and people have drawn different conclusions about how they interrelate and are defined. For me, identity emphasises the relationship of the self to a particular context or group (real or imagined). This is not to say that other self constructs are abstracted from contexts, not at all, but identity researchers are particularly interested in a person’s sense of self in relation to some social group or context, be that a country, classroom, community of language users or even a social category group such as gender.

**TM:** Why might studies on the Self be important and helpful to regular foreign language teachers?

**SM:** For me, the self is at centre of all we do, think and feel. It is what guides us and helps us navigate and interpret the world around us. It is absolutely central to who we are and how we approach learning, and, of course, teaching. My work on the self has so far focused on learners; however, an understanding of the self can be equally important for us as teachers to help us to appreciate our own concerns, needs, wants and goals and to reflect on how these may be affecting our teaching.

I suppose my belief in the importance of the self stems from my views on teaching and learning, and my deep conviction of the importance of learner-centred approaches. I believe that teaching is primarily about understanding the individuals we work with as ‘real’ (to use Ema Ushioda’s concept), feeling, thinking human beings with lives well beyond the bounds of our classroom. I feel that a sensitivity to our learners’ sense of self can help us to develop positive relationships with the learners and give us the necessary background to teach in an appropriately differentiated way, as far as is realistically and contextually possible. Ultimately, placing the learners ‘selves’ at the centre of our teaching will hopefully foreground the human dimension of our profession and thus enhance the quality of life in the classroom and promote positive attitudes to the class and learning. For me, teaching is such a fundamentally social undertaking that an understanding of the self, whether teacher or learner, is crucial for its success.

**TM:** How would you explain dynamic systems theory to your graduate students?

**SM:** That’s not an easy question... in truth, it usually takes me several sessions if not a whole semester to explore this in any depth, so my response here is going to be necessarily superficial, but I’ll try and share some idea of how we begin and hope this helps answer the question.

To be honest, I actually think teachers are in a better position than most to appreciate what a complex dynamic system is as they work in one every single day – the language classroom is for me an excellent example. In my work with trainee teachers when exploring systems theory, I tend to begin by showing them a photo of a classroom in action and together we brainstorm all the factors (visible and invisible; immediate and further removed) that are affecting life in that classroom. As you can imagine, the list is almost endless and the longer we reflect on it, the longer the list becomes! Next we consider how these factors may (or may not) change across different timescales. So, we talk about how factors may be dynamic across the course of a few minutes with the frame of a task, or across a week, a month, a year or even the course of a lifetime. Then we discuss how changes on different timescales may be interrelated, so, for example, if a student becomes repeatedly motivated on tasks in class, this may be related to changes in their long-term motivation for the language. We also reflect on how change to one of the factors may affect changes elsewhere through a kind of ripple effect, such as becoming more motivated may help a learner to feel more willing to communicate in class and, as such, may help them to become less anxious and more confident about taking part in class activities, thereby affecting the group dynamics as a whole,
My initial interest came from my PhD in which I developed a network-based model of self-concept. At that point in time, I knew nothing of complexity theories or network theory, but it simply seemed the best way to describe the data I had generated. It was only later when I developed an interest in complex dynamic systems that it became apparent that one way to describe such systems is using networks and network theory. It was a revelation to discover the parallels to my own thinking even though I hadn’t had a clue at that point! In complexity studies, one of the challenges facing research is how to make such systems manageable for empirical study, and I am currently exploring the idea of whether describing such systems as networks and using network modelling might be one way forward. As an approach, it retains a holistic, interconnected view highlighting relationships but also makes the complexity somewhat more structured and simplified.

However, I have also found that network thinking can help me understand a range of different dimensions of areas of interest to me. For example, stemming from my empirical interest in networks, I have developed a more individualised, differentiated view of cultures and contexts. In network theory, there is not unsurprisingly an interest in social networks, but this does not refer solely to the online world but to social relationships generally. Thus, rather than talking about individuals being embedded in cultures, some network researchers refer to ‘networked individuals’ (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Doing so highlights how we are interconnected with a range of contexts spread across space and time in ways that are unique to us and our own personal histories. In this way, I have found it helpful to understand contexts and cultures as unique personal constellations of individual dynamic networks of connections, rather than as monolithic external entities with neat boundaries within which we are situated.

A second example from this line of thinking concerns the importance of relationships for understanding teaching and learning generally, given that networks are crucially concerned with relationships. Essentially, we are all connected to others and social relationships are central to our lives. This does not mean we all have to be socially extrovert, but people are fundamentally social beings. We do not live or learn in complete isolation, even if we may occasionally prefer to work or be alone. This is why I feel networks of relationships are at the core of teaching, and it is important to foreground the quality of all the relationships within the classroom – both teachers and learners and amongst learners – and beyond the classroom to the language and all the things that a learner may associate with it.

So, as you can see, my interest in networks is currently taking my thinking in many directions, but I am only at the very beginning of exploring the potential that it may offer to challenge and further our understandings of the complexity of language teaching and learning.

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TM: How do you foresee the future of our field?

SM: What a luxury question and where to begin! Obviously, my visions of the future are heavily coloured by my interest in complexity. One of the things I feel quite strongly about is the need to avoid being prescriptive in how we talk about teaching. If we truly recognise the complexity of learning and teaching processes and the diversity of contexts and individuals involved, it becomes clear that we can only really be guided by educational principles but not prescribed to by methods – as others have already suggested (e.g., postmethod discussions). This doesn’t mean that we should not seek to offer concrete advice in teacher training programmes and to educators, but perhaps rather that we become more humble and differentiated in how we talk about educational settings and the relative appropriacy of specific approaches.

The second point stemming from my personal background as a researcher is that I hope we will become even more tolerant and welcoming within our field of epistemological and methodological diversity. Even though I am excited about complexity theory, I do not feel everyone needs to jump on the same bandwagon – indeed, to do so would severely hamper growth and constructive debate in the field. Rather if we want a fuller understanding of the field, we need to embrace diversity not only in theoretical perspectives but also in methodological approaches. Indeed, such thinking has been one of the guiding principles underlying the book I had the privilege of editing with Marion Williams on ‘multiple perspectives on the self’. As you know, the area of self research is a quagmire of differing terms and perspectives; however, my view is that these need not necessarily be seen in competition as none of them can offer the definitive view of the self – just as no model of language learning or teaching can ever realistically claim to be the definitive model. Instead, to appreciate more fully the complexity of the self, I feel we can learn from each other considering what each approach has to contribute to the overall picture of the self and respecting different viewpoints, whilst, of course, retaining the right to disagree!

Finally, another personal wish for the future is to find more ways of bringing researchers and educators into dialogue and facilitating more genuine exchange and cooperation between the two. Both hold valuable knowledge and experiences, and I feel that our understandings of language teaching and learning can be greatly enriched by combining the expertise of both more consciously. Interestingly, I wonder whether complexity theories, as unlikely as this may sound, might bring us closer together. I feel most teachers intuitively recognise the complexity in their teaching and as researchers increasingly recognise that in their research and writing, perhaps both may find more common ground and recognise their realities more readily in the work of the other.

TM: Thank you so much Sarah! Is has been a pleasure.

List of recent books and publications by Sarah:


