Exploring L2 teachers' knowledge of their impact:

Working towards a theoretical model based on pre-service and in-service L2 teachers' reflective-narrative accounts

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2019

1. The focus of the dissertation and the main chapters

The research in this dissertation is exploratory in nature: it aims to explore the underlying knowledge that L2 teachers rely on when engaged in and reflecting upon L2 learning-teaching as an inherently relational activity, in which the teacher's impact fundamentally shapes students' engagement in learning and in the activity itself. In line with this aim, the dissertation positions L2 teachers' knowledge of their impact (LTKI) as a construct to be used for framing the knowledge that allows L2 teachers to make their classroom impact a favourable one (Hattie, 2012), to engage in 'relating' as a specific and regular classroom activity (Mercer, 2018), and thereby to increase the effectiveness of their teaching.

Regarding its theoretical focus, the dissertation looks primarily into the historical and paradigmatic roots of how L2 teachers' knowledge is conceptualised today, as well as into the growing amount of research that seeks to understand the relational processes involved in L2 learning-teaching and the ways in which L2 teachers make sense of these processes. Concurrently, the theoretical chapters (Chapters 1-3) draw attention to the conceptual and terminological disparity that now characterises research into L2 teachers' sense-making about their roles and impact in L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity (Freeman & Johnson, 2005), and present LTKI as a more fitting conceptual focus for such research. In setting up this research agenda, the theoretical chapters also lay out the rationale for using L2 teachers' reflective-narrative accounts as a means to explore and conceptualise the knowledge they relied on while carrying out the reflective activity (Borg, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Woods & Çakır, 2011), and introduce grounded theory as an analytical framework for doing such exploratory work in the qualitative research tradition (Creswell, 2007; Dörnyei, 2007).

As the central underlying assumption of my exploratory work is that L2 teachers rely on a specialised body of knowledge (i.e. L2 teachers' knowledge of their impact; henceforth LTKI) when reasoning about and acting upon their own interpersonal impact within L2 learning-teaching (see Section 2.3), in the first three chapters I frame my research and argue for its relevance by reviewing current conceptualisations of L2 teachers' knowledge (Chapter 1) and of L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity (Chapter 2), and by setting up a theoretical-methodological framework for my grounded-theory project in which LTKI as a theoretical construct is examined through the reflective-narrative accounts of pre-service and in-service L2 teachers primarily (Chapter 3). Then, based on this multi-faceted theoretical-methodological framework, the focus of the dissertation is shifted to the three empirical studies (Chapters 4-6) through which my exploration of the LTKI construct has been carried out thus far.

More specifically, the empirical part of the dissertation (Chapters 4-6) comprises three separate but conceptually intertwined qualitative studies, in which the recursive analysis of reflective-narrative data gradually led to a better understanding of the LTKI construct. In each study, the exploration of key conceptual units is underpinned by data excerpts drawn from different groups of participants, including Hungarian in-service L2 teachers (n=22) as well as Austrian and Hungarian L2 learners (n=24) in Chapter 4, Hungarian (n=12+18) and Turkish (n=17) pre-service EFL teachers in Chapter 5, and another group of Hungarian in-service L2 teachers (n=15) in Chapter 6. Crucially, despite the participants and their reflective tasks being different in the three studies, the presented results allow for a better understanding of eight conceptual units (i.e. domains) that are thought to form part of LTKI as a larger underlying construct. To provide a better insight into the multi-phased analytical process that runs through the empirical chapters of the dissertation, a structured overview of my exploratory research is put forward in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Overview of the three qualitative studies as parts of my grounded-theory project and presented in the empirical chapters of the dissertation

	Participants and type of data	Research questions	Main outcomes
Study 1 (2014-2016)	• 10 Austrian university-level EFL learners • 14 Hungarian university-level EFL learners • 22 Hungarian in-service L2 teachers *Type of data:* reflective-narrative texts (essay format)	**Phase 1:** • What are the characteristics that L2 learners and in-service L2 teachers attribute to demotivating L2 teachers? • To what extent are learners' and teachers' beliefs and attributions similar or different from each other?	• Exploring the concept of teacher-induced L2 learning demotivation from the perspective of L2 learners and teachers
		Phase 2: • How can the conceptual categories of the study be used for exploratory work on the LTKI construct?	• Identifying four conceptual domains as components of LTKI • Framing the relationship of the components as a complex dynamic system
Study 2 (2016-2018)	• 12+18 Hungarian pre-service EFL teachers (two groups)	**Phase 1:** • What are the teaching-related beliefs and dispositions that characterise pre-service EFL teachers in an early phase of teacher education?	• Providing an overview of salient themes and categories in pre-service EFL teachers' teaching-related conceptions

	• 17 Turkish pre-service EFL teachers *Type of data:* short reflective-narrative statements (reflective template)	• To what extent are the expressed beliefs and dispositions similar or different in the three examined groups?	
		Phase 2: • In what ways are the salient conceptual domains identified in the study related to the emerging LTKI construct?	• Identifying five other conceptual domains as components of LTKI • Proposing a provisional model of LTKI
Study 3 *(2017-2019)*	• 15 Hungarian in-service L2 teachers *Type of data:* reflective-narrative texts (essay format)	• What insights can be gained about the LTKI construct if in-service L2 teachers are asked to reflect specifically on the impact they have on students' learning? • What does the analysis of their reflective-narrative accounts reveal about the conceptual domains represented in the provisional model of LTKI?	• Re-examining the identified conceptual domains and their relationship • Finalising a tentative model of LTKI

2. The findings of the exploratory research into LTKI

In summarising the main findings of the dissertation, the first note must be taken of the LTKI construct, and the concept itself as a viable alternative to other concepts that are currently used in research focusing on the relational processes involved in L2 learning-teaching and the ways in which L2 teachers make sense of these processes. Crucially, even though the studies in this line of research have now started to substantiate a perspective on L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity of students and teachers (Freeman & Johnson, 2005) and on 'relating' as an activity that L2 teachers are supposed to carry out as part of their 'teaching' activity (Mercer, 2018), they are also characterised by an apparent conceptual and terminological disparity concerning the forms of underlying knowledge that L2 teachers operationalise when engaged in or reflecting on L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity.

Thus, as a response to recent research into L2 teachers' socio-emotional intelligence (Dewaele, Gkonou, & Mercer, 2018; Gkonou & Mercer, 2017), relational beliefs (Gkonou & Mercer, 2018), or empathy and responsiveness (Henry & Thorsen, 2019; Warren, 2018), the dissertation proposes a narrower focus on LTKI as a specific area of L2 teachers' knowledge (Woods & Çakır, 2011), and as a construct that underlies L2 teachers' sense-making about their own impact on students' engagement in and experience of classroom L2 learning (Hattie, 2012). Arguably, by proposing and elaborating this

conceptual focus, the dissertation indicates that my exploratory research on the LTKI construct is situated in a social-constructivist framing of L2 learning-teaching (Lantolf, 2011; Ortega, 2011) and L2 teachers' knowledge (Golombek, 2009; Johnson, 2006, 2009, 2015), in which LTKI is regarded as a conceptual tool (Freeman & Johnson, 2005) that L2 teachers operationalise when engaged in L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity, and also when engaged in reflective-narrative activities that require them to draw upon this area of knowledge. In the latter regard, and in line with what researchers of reflective teaching suggest (e.g., Bartlett, 1990; Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2012), a main methodological finding of the dissertation is that the exploration of LTKI as a knowledge construct can be carried out through the written products of L2 teachers' reflective-narrative activity; even though this often means that the salient conceptual categories are inferred from the data by one or more analysts (Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

As for the insights that were gained about the LTKI construct through the analysis of in-service L2 teachers' and pre-service EFL teachers' reflective-narrative accounts, a number of conceptual outcomes ought to be recounted here. The most important of these is, arguably, the framing of LTKI as a multi-componential construct in which the complex interrelationships of eight salient conceptual domains result in the emergence of a collective body of knowledge, allowing L2 teachers, at any level of professional development, to make sense of their own impact on students' engagement in and experience of classroom L2 learning. In line with what other studies have suggested about the nature and development of L2 teachers' knowledge and cognition (e.g., Borg, 2006; Feryok, 2010, 2018; Woods & Çakır, 2011), the dissertation also contends that LTKI is likely to subsume both propositional and procedural knowledge (Shulman, 1986/1994), which L2 teachers develop and appropriate through the formal study of L2 learning-teaching, through learning in personal-experiential ways, and through the reflective-narrative activities in which these forms of sense-making are brought together (Borg, 2003).

To support these claims with a concrete example, in one of the empirical chapters it is suggested that the terms 'intrapersonal knowledge' and 'interpersonal knowledge' (i.e. two components in the LTKI construct) refer to both propositional and procedural knowledge that L2 teachers have acquired about intrapersonal factors such as being aware of one's professional wellbeing, setting personal-professional goals, or increasing one's self-efficacy, and interpersonal factors such as being aware of students' developmental and relational needs, striving to know students as individuals, or respecting others' lives and ideas. As in the case of the other conceptual domains, procedural knowledge is also relevant in the framing of intrapersonal and interpersonal

knowledge in that L2 teachers should not only have a statable knowledge of the factors listed above, but also make sure that their underlying knowledge is manifest in their classroom actions (cp. Feryok, 2018), allowing their students as well to develop understandings in the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. At the same time, it must be noted that the insights gained through the participants' reflective-narrative accounts were insights into their propositional knowledge only, thereby calling for further research in which the procedural aspects of LTKI can also be examined in more detail.

In addition to supporting the framing and identification of the eight conceptual domains as congenial components in the LTKI construct, the analysis of the participants' reflective-narrative accounts also gave insights into the apparently complex interconnectedness of those components in L2 teachers' sense-making about their classroom impact. These insights, in turn, led to a tentative framing of the LTKI construct as a complex dynamic system, contending that the eight conceptual domains identified in the dissertation can be supposed to co-exist and interact in complex ways to form the body of knowledge labelled as LTKI, and to change dynamically over time (Feryok, 2018, p. 108) as a teacher's knowledge becomes gradually more extensive due to formal study and learning in personal-experiential ways (Feryok, 2010; Woods & Çakır, 2011). Again, while this CDST (i.e. complex dynamic systems theory) perspective on the LTKI construct has fundamentally influenced the conceptual outcomes of my exploratory research, it must be noted that neither of the three empirical studies (Chapters 4-6) provided sufficient insight into the way in which LTKI is related to L2 teachers' classroom actions and practices, and the way in which the prominence of the identified conceptual domains may change over time within the system. To look further into the relevance of CDST in the framing of LTKI is, in this sense, a crucial task for future research.

Despite these limitations and questions raised for further research, it must be emphasised that the three studies of the dissertation allowed for a tentative model of LTKI to be put forward as a major outcome of my grounded-theory project. In this model (Figure 1 below), the eight salient conceptual domains are graphically represented as congenial components in the LTKI construct, contending that LTKI as a specific area of L2 teachers' knowledge is currently thought to be best framed as a complex dynamic system, in which the complex interrelationships of the components allow L2 teachers to develop coherent understandings of their roles and impact in L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity. In turn, these understandings and LTKI itself are thought to be best framed as conceptual tools (Freeman & Johnson, 2005) that L2 teachers operationalise when engaged in L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity, and also when engaged in reflective-narrative activities that require them to draw upon this area of knowledge. Considering, however, that the exploratory data the three studies provided only limited insights into the

participants' sense-making through their written reflective-narrative accounts, it must be highlighted that the theoretical model in Figure 1 is still a tentative one, calling for further research into the eight conceptual domains and their framing from a CDST perspective.
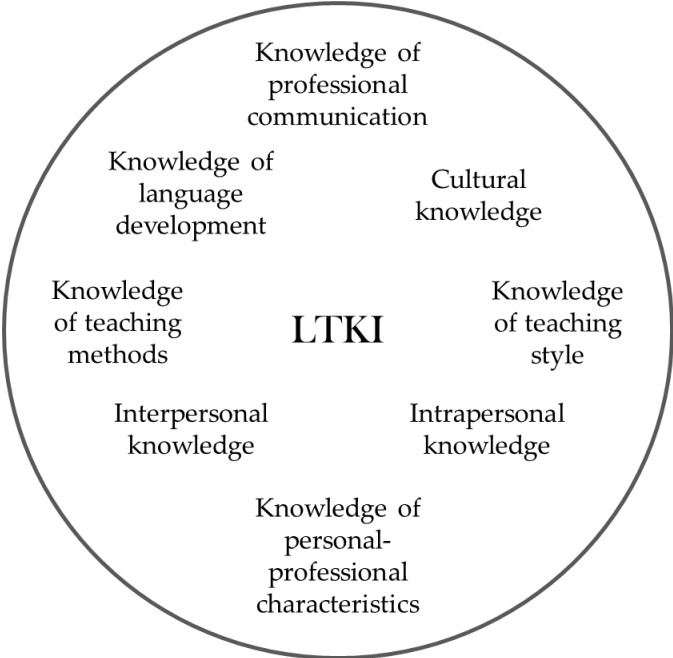

Figure 1. *Graphic illustration and tentative theoretical model of the LTKI construct based on the conceptual domains identified in Chapters 4, 5, and 6*

3. The limitations of the research

As for the limitations of the research, a most important one to reflect on is the way in which the different groups of participants were represented in two of the empirical studies (Studies 1 & 2), and particularly in the sections where the data from these groups were presented and interpreted. In Study 1, for instance, data excerpts from L2 learners' and in-service L2 teachers' reflective-narrative accounts were frequently juxtaposed in order to highlight similarities in their thematic content, even though the stated aim of the study was to focus primarily on the in-service teachers' perspectives and sense-making. For the latter reason, the contextual differences existing in the learner group (i.e. Austrian and Hungarian L2 learners) were also disregarded. Similarly, in Study 2 the data excerpts from Hungarian and Turkish pre-service EFL teachers' reflective-narrative accounts were mostly presented in joint thematic units and conceptual categories, as the underlying concepts were considered more important than the contextual differences. Considering, however, that the research aimed to accurately represent the emic perspectives of the participants, it can be concluded that the data from different groups of participants should

have been better separated in Studies 1 and 2, and the Austrian and Turkish educational contexts should have been introduced in more detail as well.

The second obvious limitation to reflect on is that the exploratory research in this dissertation was entirely based on the written reflective-narrative accounts of the participants, even though a focus on different types of data would also be desirable in gaining further insights into the LTKI construct. In this regard, it must be noted that the reflective writing tasks that were used for data collection invited the participants to produce short written reflective-narrative accounts, and did not allow for individual cases to be explored in sufficient detail or over a longer period of time. To counterbalance these limitations, it should also be pointed out that the reflective writing tasks were crucial tools for the participants to express their understandings of various teaching-related concepts in a structured and coherent way, and also for the researcher to collect exploratory qualitative data from relatively large groups of participants in a variety of contexts.

Finally, a third substantial limitation to address is that even though the conceptual work in this dissertation was grounded entirely in qualitative data, the analytical procedures were carried out by a single researcher rather than by two or more analysts focusing on the same dataset. This, in the case of a grounded-theory project, is a major limitation because even if the researcher had developed a thorough understanding of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of a given field, the reliability of coding and data analysis can be fundamentally enhanced if two or more experts collaborate in framing the emerging construct (Nunan & Bailey, 2009, pp. 429-430). Thus, although the recursive analysis of the participants' reflective-narrative accounts was thoroughly supported by secondary research into L2 teachers' cognition and knowledge (Chapters 1 & 2), L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity (Chapter 2), and the methodological principles of qualitative inquiry and grounded theory (Chapter 3), future research into LTKI through new or the existing data must be clearly based on a collaborative approach to the conceptual work involved.

4. The pedagogical implications of the research

Despite the limitations highlighted above, it can be concluded that both the results of the dissertation and the procedures employed for data collection are important to consider from the perspective of L2 teachers and L2 teacher educators as well. Regarding the results, and also the theoretical framework in which the results are embedded, the dissertation is hoped to draw attention to the importance of awareness raising among L2 teachers for the relational processes that are inherently involved in L2 learning-teaching, to 'relating' as an activity that L2 teachers are supposed to carry out as part of their

'teaching' activity (Freeman & Johnson, 2005; Mercer, 2018), and to the fundamental impact that L2 teachers have on their students' engagement in and experience of L2 learning. In the latter regard, the accumulated reflective-narrative data and the outline of the LTKI construct can be seen as fundamental guidelines for L2 teachers to understand what their own classroom impact consists of, and how to focus on LTKI as an area of their knowledge that might be developed in deliberate ways.

With regard to the data collection instruments and procedures employed, the most important implications for L2 teacher educators are that the presented reflective writing tasks can not only serve as tools for eliciting L2 teachers' reflections on key teaching-related concepts, but also as tools for promoting the subsequent discussion of alternative understandings within local or even cross-cultural professional communities (Chick, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2012). By encouraging L2 teachers to participate in such collective reflective activities, L2 teacher educators have the opportunity to create space for the teachers' existing conceptions to change in favourable ways (Feryok, 2010; Kalaja et al., 2015; Yuan & Lee, 2014), and to enhance the skills and willingness of L2 teachers for collaboration (Barócsi, 2014), which is thought to fundamentally support teacher learning and professional growth.

5. Possible directions for further research

Altogether, it can be concluded that the conceptual outcomes of the dissertation are relevant in the exploration of L2 teachers' sense-making about their roles and impact in L2 learning-teaching as a relational activity, and in providing a basis for further research conducted in this area after the relational turn in SLA and TEFL/TESOL research. Although in the empirical chapters it was repeatedly pointed out that the current research design has only allowed for a tentative model of LTKI to be put forward, this model is thought to be applicable as a framework for coding, categorising, and interpreting additional reflective-narrative data collected for case studies of a few selected teachers.

This, arguably, is one of the main directions for future research on LTKI: it involves a more in-depth investigation of L2 teachers' sense-making through self-report data and through the observation of the teachers during classroom teaching and over a longer period of time. The reason for this is that different types of self-report data, including written reflective-narrative accounts, teacher journals, or interview data (Borg, 2006), may provide different and more in-depth insights into L2 teachers' sense-making about the relational processes involved in L2 learning-teaching, about their roles and impact in those processes, and thereby into LTKI as a construct that underlies that sense-making. If the collection of such data is carried out repeatedly over a longer period of time, the

results will also provide a better insight into the temporal changes that supposedly characterise LTKI as a complex dynamic system; this aspect of the tentative theoretical model must clearly be examined through further research. Additionally, if future case studies involve the collection of observational data as well, they may provide an insight into how the expressed understandings of L2 teachers are related to their classroom behaviours and actions; such insights would also be crucial in the framing of LTKI from a CDST perspective.

Finally, another main direction to consider is the formulation of a quantitative research framework, in which a data collection instrument is designed based on the components of the tentative LTKI model, and then administered to a larger number of L2 teachers in Hungary, or possibly in a wider variety of contexts. This way, the understandings that were gained about the LTKI construct through exploratory qualitative data could be tested and further developed, thus creating space for the tentative LTKI model to be re-examined in light of large-scale empirical evidence.

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