Learner diversity in the adult ESL classroom: Teachers’ principles and practices

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Learner diversity is a common feature of the adult English as a second language (ESL) classroom and can manifest itself in many ways including different ethnic backgrounds, first languages (L1), educational experiences, cultural values, and current English proficiency. There is, however, limited empirical research examining teachers’ principles and practices relating to learner diversity in the classroom, a phenomenon which poses a challenge for novice ESL teachers. To address this gap, this study examined how experienced ESL teachers understood their pedagogic principles and practices when addressing learner diversity in their classrooms. The research recruited ESL teachers within the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), a large-scale and extremely important program that provides English training to eligible migrants and refugees in Australia. A qualitative case study design was employed recruiting two experienced teachers teaching different level classes within the AMEP. Using a combination of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, four significant aspects of diversity across the learner groups were identified, only one of which – English proficiency level – was common to both groups. While the participants did share some principles relating to this common aspect of diversity, they also held several different principles. Notably, the study found that the participants’ practices were not aligned with any particular teaching method but instead, were determined by the specific nature of their teaching context and the pedagogic principles applicable to that context.

Introduction

The second language (L2) classroom is a community of individuals brought together to learn a language. Such communities are often characterised by significant diversity, with learners coming from across the world, each with their first language...
(L1), educational experiences, learning goals, cultural values, and current English proficiency. One context in which this diversity is particularly salient is the adult migrant and refugee ESL classroom (Burns & Hood, 1997).

How individual teachers think about learner diversity and how they should address it in their classroom contributes to their pedagogic principles. Pedagogic principles reflect teachers’ ‘individual philosophies of teaching and are developed from experience of teaching and learning, from teacher education experiences, and from teachers’ own personal beliefs and value systems’ (Richards, 1998, p. 60). Borg (2006) views teacher cognition as a ‘personally-held practical system of mental constructs held by teachers and which are dynamic – i.e. defined and refined on the basis of educational and professional experiences throughout teachers’ lives’ (p. 35). Both of these descriptions highlight the role of experience in the evolution of teachers’ thinking about their practice. Day by day, experienced teachers assess, often unconsciously, which principles are most appropriate to their teaching context and adjust their classroom practices accordingly (Breen et al., 2001; Ulichny, 1996). This study is based on the premise put forward by Kumaravadivelu (2001) that pedagogy ‘must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu’ (p. 538).

Adult migrants and refugees often face considerable barriers in the classroom. It is not uncommon for teachers of this learner cohort to have low expectations of their learners or see them as deficient, leading teachers to offer their learners fewer learning opportunities and learners to take on language learner identities reflecting the negative attitudes of the teacher (cf. Black & Yasukawa, 2011, and Tett et al., 2006, both cited in Ollerhead, 2012). Nevertheless, there are also many examples of teachers who embrace their learners’ diversity, seeing beyond their current English language limitations. Understanding the pedagogic principles and practices of such teachers can provide significant insights into working with adult ESL learners from migrant and refugee backgrounds and can also be a valuable resource for less experienced teachers in developing their principles and practices situated within their specific teaching contexts. Thus, this study seeks to bring together two important areas of L2 teaching: how teachers use pedagogic principles to guide their practice, and learner diversity. Also, it is set within a framework which acknowledges that all teaching and learning takes place within specific social and cultural contexts.

**Literature review**

To understand the importance of learner diversity in the language classroom, an understanding of research into teachers’ beliefs, principles and practice, and how
individual and cultural diversity can influence language learning and teaching is important. Due to the large body of research into teacher beliefs, literature was selected for the significance of its impact on the field, its focus on the relationship of beliefs with classroom practices, or the inclusion of highly experienced teacher participants. Learner diversity has received less research attention but can manifest itself in many ways. Due to space limitations and as this study explored four aspects of diversity, the literature review presents key studies on each of these aspects with a preference to the context of AMEP.

**Teachers’ principles and practice**

Research into teachers’ beliefs, principles and practices has a long history within the language learning field. More recent research has tended to focus on the relationship between beliefs or principles and practices, and how they are influenced by personal or contextual features such as teacher experience or the learning environment.

Terminology used to describe how teachers conceptualise their practice is varied and inconsistent. Terms include ‘beliefs’, ‘principles’, ‘implicit theories’, and ‘personal knowledge’ (Pajares, 1992). Besides, there are various levels at which these conceptualisations can sit, from highly abstract and general, through to very context-specific and narrow. Breen et al. (2001) propose that teachers’ beliefs ‘tend to be experientially informed and appear to become deeply held and largely context-independent’ (p. 472). They argue that teachers’ pedagogic principles are formed from their beliefs and inform their practices within specific teaching contexts. Thus, teachers’ pedagogic principles mediate between their more abstract beliefs and their choice of specific classroom practices (Breen et al., 2001). It is this understanding of the term ‘principles’ that is applied in this article.

According to Richards (1998), pedagogic principles ‘function like rules for best behavior in that they guide the teachers’ selection of choices from among a range of alternatives’ (pp. 53-54). In a case study of an experienced ESL teacher working with an ethnically diverse group of pre-university students, Ulichny (1996) explored decisions made by the teacher in class. The teacher held several principles such as ‘discuss authentic readings’ and ‘not discourage students by pitching the lesson too high’ (p. 193). During the class, it became obvious to the teacher that students were struggling with an activity involving an authentic text. She changed the activity to focus less on the text and reduce the difficulty of the task and by doing so, shifted from her principle regarding authentic texts to her principle about task difficulty. This suggests that context was significant in determining which principles and practices the teacher chose to apply.

One factor widely accepted as influencing the nature of the relationship between
beliefs or principles and classroom practices is teacher experience. According to Basturkmen (2012), teachers’ beliefs are informed by their experience and so more experienced teachers’ practices are likely to correspond more closely with their beliefs. Basturkmen et al. (2004) examined three teachers’ beliefs and practice related to a ‘focus on form’. They found some correspondence between beliefs and practice and that the relationship was stronger for the experienced teachers. However, they also noted many inconsistencies, leading them to argue that ‘the teachers’ stated beliefs offered only a partial window on practice’ (p. 268). In her study of four teachers’ beliefs and practices about oral corrective feedback (OCF), Kamiya (2016) found that the experienced teachers’ beliefs and practices were generally consistent whereas the inexperienced teacher could not articulate clear beliefs about OCF. Phipps and Borg (2009) agree that the belief-practice relationship is characterised by inconsistencies and suggest that some beliefs are more influential than others. Investigating the influence exerted by core and peripheral beliefs on EFL teachers’ grammar teaching beliefs and practices, they found that the teachers’ practices reflected their core beliefs rather than peripheral beliefs. Phipps and Borg conclude that core beliefs develop through experience and so are more strongly held.

**Learner diversity**

Learner diversity forms part of the wider social and cultural context within which language teaching and learning take place. Firth and Wagner (2007) argue that more socially oriented second language acquisition research does not attempt to exclude contextual aspects of learning, but instead considers them central to the development of a learner’s L2. From the teacher’s perspective, this socially situated view of language learning has seen a greater focus on the contexts in which teachers work, and how teachers view their practice within these contexts (Cross, 2010). According to Al-Amri (2010), this change in perspective has resulted in teachers being seen as facilitators who acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and needs of language learners, and who use this diversity positively in the classroom to promote learning.

There are many ways in which teachers think about and address learner diversity in the classroom. Senior (2008) argues that experienced teachers, in particular, engage in ‘class-centred teaching’ which embraces this diversity. In a collaborative action research project into learner diversity in the AMEP, Burns and Hood (1997) found that the participant teachers initially held negative views about diversity. However, during the project, these views changed as the teachers explored different aspects of their teaching practice. Diversity came to be seen not only as a reality of the classroom but also a resource for learning, requiring flexibility from teachers with a “multiple practices” approach to teaching and learning’ (p. 14). Lewis (1998) describes this as putting the ‘principle of strength in diversity’ (p. 279) into practice.
Many aspects of an English language learner’s identity can contribute to diversity in the classroom. In this section, we examine the aspects relevant to this research, namely, English proficiency levels, L1(s), ethnic backgrounds, and previous educational experiences.

**English language proficiency**

Multiple proficiency levels are frequently found in adult ESL classrooms and are often seen as problematic. Detailing her experience teaching in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program in Australia, Na (2007) identified some issues associated with a multi-level classroom, including higher proficiency learners feeling bored and lower proficiency learners feeling frustrated, and the need for more complex teaching materials to cater for different levels. However, perspectives that view multiple proficiency levels as a resource for learning are also found in the literature. Hambling (1997) and Watanabe and Swain (2007) investigated the learning that occurs during interactions between learners at different proficiency levels. Both studies found that where the interactions were truly collaborative, both higher- and lower-level learners benefited from the mixed-proficiency groupings. Prescott (1997) explored same-proficiency grouping in her writing consolidation class. Throughout the term, she found that both groups progressed well with the higher-proficiency learners becoming increasingly independent and taking on more advanced work and the lower-level groups focusing on practice and revision tasks.

**L1**

Another diversity aspect found in ESL classrooms is learner L1(s). Considerable research has shown that appropriate use of the L1 facilitates L2 learning. Kim and Petraki (2009) found that classrooms in which Korean EFL learners could use their L1 were characterised by greater use of English and less confusion about learning tasks. Studying the L1 interactions between Mandarin-speaking beginner learners in Australia, Chau (2007) found that learners used their L1 to scaffold their L2 learning by helping to understand new vocabulary, question forms, and enhancing communication where they lacked the L2 skills to express an idea. In an Australian university ESL class, Larbah and Oliver (2015) found the use of a shared L1 (Arabic) fulfilled important pedagogical, communicative, and social functions. The use of multiple languages in the language classroom is now being seen as a reality for bilingual and multilingual users, a phenomenon known as translanguaging (Lyster, 2019; Wei & Zhu, 2014). Translanguaging pedagogy is recognised as a creative pedagogical approach that enables multilingual speakers to utilise their full linguistic repertoires, create their own social spaces and identities and make sense of their bilingual/multilingual worlds (Wei & Zhu, 2014).
Ethnic background
Closely linked to the diverse L1s found in adult ESL classrooms are the many ethnic backgrounds of the learners. Johnson and Chang (2012) argue that teachers need to respond to diversity in their classrooms through culturally responsive teaching. Using classroom observation and post-observation interviews within an adult ESL context in the USA, they found that teachers were sensitive to their learners’ cultural differences while also believing that their students should learn about North American culture. The teaching strategies used, however, were limited to fairly superficial activities such as comparing the learners’ ethnic dress or discussing American cultural icons. Using more comprehensive, culturally responsive teaching strategies in a small-scale study, Chen and Yang (2017) found the strategies increased student participation and communication.

Research by McPherson (1997) highlights the need to be sensitive about how and when culturally specific content is used in the classroom. Attempting to incorporate topics which reflected her learners’ cultures into her ethnically diverse adult ESL class, McPherson encountered reluctance from her learners. She explored this reluctance with the learners and found that they wished to move away from the racial tensions and social segregation they had experienced before coming to Australia. Through her choice of topics and activities she was requiring them to ‘expose and discuss the differences they were attempting to ignore’ (p. 29).

Educational backgrounds
Another characteristic on which learners differ is their educational background. Yates (2003) describes ‘cultures of learning’ which are based on the wider norms of a particular society. Learners familiar with the culture of learning in a certain classroom will have specific understandings of student and teacher roles, and expected behaviours. Where this does not match their current classroom, barriers may form for the learners. Exploring the experiences of Somali Bantu and Burundi learners in their adult ESL classes, Tshabangu-Soko and Caron (2011) found that learners struggled with the unfamiliarity, and relatively unstructured use, of the learning materials. Wette (2011a) found that experienced ESL teachers of adult migrants and refugees modified their materials to adjust to their learners’ lack of experience with the type of classroom they were in. This was largely successful, although all four teacher participants reported difficulties in designing a student-centred program given the diverse needs of their learner groups. Specific activities can also be unfamiliar and therefore challenging for students. Observing this in her own class, Acton (2017) successfully implemented some evidence-based interventions which increased her students’ willingness to engage in speaking activities.
Learner diversity is an important and defining feature of the ESL classroom and presents a significant challenge for teachers. However, with careful and creative management, diversity can also represent opportunities for both teachers and learners. Despite this, there is negligible systematic research into teachers’ beliefs, principles and associated practices addressing learner diversity. This study, therefore, explores how experienced adult ESL teachers’ pedagogic principles relate to the diversity of their learner group within the AMEP context. It further aims to understand how their practices in the classroom reflect those principles, and how these principles are put into action. Thus, the study contributes insights into teachers’ practices in handling diversity, which will be of benefit to (novice) teachers and language teacher educators. The following research question guided our investigation:

How do teachers’ pedagogic principles and classroom practices address learner diversity in English proficiency level, ethnic background, L1, and educational background?

The study
In line with the view of language teaching and learning as being situated in a wider social context (Burns et al., 2015), this study takes an emic perspective, eliciting the teachers’ explanations of their principles and practices, and how these related to their learner group. A two-participant case study was designed (Yin, 2014) and received ethics approval (HREC 17-247).

Participants
Given this study’s focus on the principles and practices of experienced teachers, experience was the key criterion for seeking participants. Two female teachers working for an AMEP provider volunteered to participate. As required by the AMEP, they were teaching to the Certificate for Spoken and Written English (CSWE) 2013-2018 curriculum. Anne1 was teaching a combined CSWE Level 2/3 for high-beginner to intermediate learners. Kim was teaching a combined pre-SWE/CSWE Level 1 class for very low to low beginners and was supported by a bilingual Mandarin-English classroom assistant. The teachers’ characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

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1Pseudonyms have been used for the teachers in accordance with the ethics approval for this study.
Table 1

Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>TESOL Qualifications</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Masters in TESOL / Applied Linguistics</td>
<td>English, Indonesian, German</td>
<td>Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>BA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language</td>
<td>English, Vietnamese</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Masters in Applied Linguistics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection and analysis

The research design comprised a 90-minute classroom observation with a 60-minute pre- and post-observation semi-structured interview with each teacher. The pre-observation interview included questions which first identified the actual aspects of diversity present in each classroom, and then explored the teachers’ principles regarding those aspects of diversity. The aspects of diversity present in each classroom (English proficiency, ethnic background, L1, and educational background) are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Aspects of Diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Anne</th>
<th>Kim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English proficiency</td>
<td>HIGHLY DIVERSE</td>
<td>HIGHLY DIVERSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multi-level class</td>
<td>Multi-level class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic background</td>
<td>HIGHLY DIVERSE</td>
<td>16 learners: predominantly Chinese, one Vietnamese, and one Iraqi student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 learners from more than 10 nationalities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>HIGHLY DIVERSE</td>
<td>Predominantly Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 10 L1s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
<td>Reasonably homogenous</td>
<td>REASONABLY DIVERSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A single non-participant observation (Dörnyei, 2007) was then conducted of each teacher’s class to collect direct evidence of the teachers’ practices related to addressing the learner diversity in their own classrooms. The observation was unstructured, with the data coming from notes taken throughout the class. The observation data were used firstly to identify the teachers’ actual classroom practices and secondly, as input into discussions with the teachers about the relationships between their practices and principles in the post-observation interview. In addition, classroom observations allowed a deeper and more holistic understanding of the context in which the participants practised (Patton, 2015).
A second interview was conducted with each teacher after the classroom observation. The aim of these interviews was to explore reasons why the teachers used specific practices, activities, and tasks, and how the teachers related their practices to their pedagogic principles associated with the aspects of diversity present in their learner groups. The interviews allowed the observed practices and their associated pedagogic principles to be discussed and validated with the individual teachers.

Data coding and analysis were conducted iteratively throughout the data collection phase. The pre-observation interview data were used to establish the aspects of diversity relevant to each class. The data were then analysed using inductive and deductive thematic analysis, coding each teacher’s own language line by line to identify principles and practices related to diversity.

The aspects of learner diversity established in the pre-observation interviews formed the basis of each classroom’s observation. The field notes from each observation were analysed to identify the teachers’ individual practices and the contexts within which those practices were used. The initial pedagogic principles and the individual practices for each participant were then used as the basis for the post-observation interviews.

Data from the post-observation interviews were analysed to refine the pedagogic principles and identify the related practices, and was coded in a similar way to the pre-observation interview data. The codes from all data sources were synthesised and triangulated (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to produce a common list of principles which were supported by participant quotations, and related practices which were supported by observations. As the final data analysis step, each teacher was provided with a written summary of the principles and related practices extracted from their individual data and asked for their feedback. Using this method of member-checking improved trustworthiness and ensured the representation of the participants’ voices in the data (Brear, 2019). The teachers’ feedback led to the refinement of the final list of pedagogic principles and related practices.

**Findings and discussion**

As identified during the pre-observation interviews, only diversity of English proficiency level was common to both classrooms. Diverse ethnic backgrounds and L1s were present in Anne’s classroom and diverse educational backgrounds in Kim’s learner group. Nine principles relating to these four aspects of learner diversity emerged from the data. The principles associated with the varying levels of English proficiency were:
(1) have different expectations of different learners;
(2) support lower-level learners while challenging higher-level learners;
(3) provide additional optional learning opportunities;
(4) allow learners to work at their own pace; and
(5) present the same content in many different ways.

Further, in order to address the diverse ethnic backgrounds of their students, the
teachers’ principles were:

(6) use learners’ culture and experience as input for learning; and
(7) acknowledge learners’ non-English-related knowledge and skills.

Finally, the teachers emphasised the need to:

(8) support L1 use in the classroom as long as the primary focus is on learning English; and
(9) support learners with limited educational experience to develop learning skills.

These are their principles for addressing the students’ L1s (Principle 8) and diverse educational experience (Principle 9).

In the following, we illustrate all nine principles by providing details about these teachers’ practices for the four aspects of learner diversity. We discuss salient aspects of each principle. Appendix A provides a full overview of all nine teachers’ principles and practices and contains illustrative examples from our data.

**English proficiency**

The fact that both teachers held Principle 1 (*have different expectations of different learners*) and Principle 2 (*support lower-level learners while challenging higher-level learners*) despite the different teaching contexts suggests they may be core principles (Breen et al., 2001). There are frequent references in the literature to these or similar principles within many different contexts. For example, Lewis implemented the ‘principle of strength in diversity’ through using ‘one person’s abilities to support another person’s weakness’ (1998, p. 279). She based vocabulary and fluency lessons on various themes which enabled different students to take on the role of expert. These students then supported the other students through a series of class discussions.
In their practices supporting Principle 1, both teachers asked for more complex and/or accurate output from some learners more than from others. However, how these practices were employed were quite different. Where Anne believed that a higher-level learner was capable of producing more complex speech, she would probe for more information through questioning. Kim, with the pre-beginner class, was more explicit, directing more advanced learners to produce question forms and lower-proficiency students to provide the answers. Although Kim’s learner group represented diverse levels of English proficiency, she elaborated little on this aspect explicitly in the first interview. However, through the classroom observation and the post-observation interview, it became clear that she was very aware of this diversity and responded to it in many ways. The different practices indicate that while both participants believed that they should have different expectations of different learners, the way this can be achieved is dependent on the specific learner group, supporting Breen et al.’s (2001) finding that teachers working in different contexts may associate quite distinct practices with the same principle.

A similar pattern was observed for Principle 2 (support lower-level learners while challenging higher-level learners). Both teachers used some form of group work which is almost universally put forward as good practice (e.g., Brown & Lee, 2015; Ur, 2012). Kim demonstrated Principle 2 with several different practices, including separating extremely low-level learners into their group with the bilingual assistant. Anne had more proficient learners work with lower-proficiency learners in pair and group activities, encouraging the higher-proficiency learners to help their less proficient partners through prompting and questioning. One such practice that Anne demonstrated during the class was using higher-proficiency learners as a model for lower-proficiency students. She described this happening often during group activities without her explicit intervention. Despite using the same activities for all learners in her class, Anne set many of them up through collaborative work that challenged higher-level learners without overwhelming lower-proficiency learners.

Hambling (1997) reported considerable success in using this technique in her multi-level class although she also pointed out the need for teaching the stronger learners not simply to provide answers to their partners. In larger mixed-proficiency groups, Anne self-reported encouraging learners to ‘negotiate roles’ such as the spokesperson or the scribe and was observed to set up activities that required collaborative work to achieve the group outcomes. These practices are supported by research showing that where such interactions were truly collaborative, both the higher- and lower-proficiency interlocuters demonstrated learning (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). In addition, these groups provide a less threatening environment for learners to test out language assisted by their peers (Carter & Henrichsen, 2015). In setting up a
learning environment in this way, Anne enabled the learners to provide each other with the human mediation that sociocultural theory perspectives argue is central to L2 learning (van Compernolle & Williams, 2013).

For group work in Kim’s classroom, learners were separated into similar instead of mixed-proficiency groups. This allowed her and the classroom assistants to provide more targeted assistance to lower-proficiency students, while encouraging the higher-proficiency learners to work more autonomously. The success of this type of practice was demonstrated by Prescott (1997) who found that placing higher-proficiency students together and giving them strategies for working autonomously resulted in them becoming more independent of the teacher. Again, the implementation of different practices to support a common principle demonstrates the participants’ awareness of, and responsiveness to, their learners’ needs within their learning contexts.

The teachers also held some principles that were not shared. These were more specific to the individual teaching contexts, possibly reflecting Breen et al.’s (2001) concept of ‘peripheral’ principles. Anne believed that she should provide additional optional learning opportunities for her class (Principle 3). This reflected her learner groups’ potential capacity to take on extra learning challenges in contrast to Kim’s learner group that was not at a proficiency level which allowed that degree of independent work. The main practice used by Anne to support her principle of optional learning opportunities was to ‘encourage learners to do out of class writing on a topic of their choosing and to give individual feedback to all learners who took advantage of this’. This allowed motivated learners to improve their skills, without putting pressure on other learners who may not be willing or able to spend time outside class on learning activities (Ur, 2012).

Also respecting the individual needs of her learners but taking a different perspective, Kim believed that she needed to allow learners to work at their own pace within the classroom (Principle 4). This principle reflects her understanding that different learners find different aspects of language learning more difficult than others. She provided her learners significant amounts of time to work through activities. The higher-proficiency learners were able to review and consolidate while the lower-proficiency learners received assistance. Her previously discussed practice of grouping and pairing of learners by proficiency also supports this principle. As Breen et al. (2001) note, a single practice can be related to more than one principle.

Kim also held the principle present the same content in many different ways (Principle 5). She referred frequently to the need to expose her learners repeatedly to essential language such as greetings, specific vocabulary, and specific grammatical structures
in order for them to acquire the target language. Her observed practices supported this principle, employing modelling, whole of class drilling, pair work, reading, and writing. Each activity she used – for example, matching pictures on a worksheet to reinforce vocabulary – was simple and structured and led logically to the next activity. Many texts on language teaching advocate short, structured activities and carefully chosen interactions using authentic language for learners at a low proficiency level (e.g., Brown & Lee, 2015; Harmer, 2013). In her Australian research findings, Hanrahan (1997) also found that low-level ESL adult learners benefitted from starting with very structured activities and moving gradually to more open-ended tasks.

**Ethnic background**

Anne’s class comprised a wide range of nationalities and her principles to use learners’ culture and experience as input for learning (Principle 6), and to acknowledge learners’ non-English related knowledge and skills (Principle 7) reflected this diversity. These principles are consistent with the concept of culturally responsive teaching (Woldkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Anne used the learners’ cultural backgrounds and experiences as the basis for a class ultimately aimed at developing a list of learning strategies for an assessment task. Moving beyond the superficial activities of talking about national holidays or typical foods often found in ESL classrooms, she initially asked the learners to identify a skill they had acquired in the past and discuss what techniques they had used to develop it. This led to more specific discussion about different educational systems and ways of learning, strongly rooted in the learners’ own experiences. Through this practice, she allowed the learners to decide what elements of their own culture they wished to include in the discussion, avoiding the potential limitations and problems identified by Johnson and Chang (2012) in attempting to introduce culture into the classroom. In addition, Anne’s practice of asking individual learners to do specific tasks allowed them to make their peers aware of their non-English related skills and was a way of helping them deal with the frustration and embarrassment that can accompany learning a new language as an adult.

**L1**

Associated with the diverse ethnic backgrounds of Anne’s learner group was the large number of L1s. Anne considered this an advantage as it encouraged the learners to use their common language, English, when communicating with each other. However, she also reported having a positive attitude towards L1 use in situations where it assisted with learning English, as articulated in Principle 8, **support L1 use in the classroom as long as the primary focus is on learning English.** This was evident in her reaction to a group of Middle Eastern learners using their L1 for group discussion but
presenting their summary to the class in English. Anne’s practice supports Chau’s (2007) recommendation and Larbah and Olivers’ (2015) findings that using a shared L1 can enhance group participation and collaborative learning. Anne’s cautious use of L1 also supports Lyster’s (2019) conclusion that translanguaging must be used judiciously in the classroom and when it is a cognitive support mechanism for second language development.

**Educational background**

An aspect of diversity prevalent in Kim’s learner group was the range of educational experience and therefore, knowledge of classroom behaviour. Kim had some learners with considerable educational experience and others who lacked even the basic skills such as taking notes from the board, writing the meaning of new vocabulary, and using their L1 to write the ‘pronunciation’ of an English word. Kim believed that she should **support learners with limited educational experience to develop learning skills** (Principle 9) by helping her learners develop the skills necessary for participating effectively in the classroom.

Kim’s practices were divided between being directed towards the whole class and focused on individual learners. At a class level, she stressed the importance for the learners to understand classroom instructions in English so that they become less reliant on the bilingual assistant. A key point was her consistency in using the same words and gestures to allow the learners to become familiar with the instructions, a technique supported by Brown and Lee (2015) as helping to clarify spoken language. In research looking specifically at the teaching and learning value of gestures, Matsumoto and Dobs (2017) found that the use of gestures is important for both teachers and learners in reinforcing meaning and showing understanding.

**Conclusions**

This study has attempted to examine second language teachers’ principles and practices in handling learner diversity, an aspect that can present a significant challenge for beginner teachers. Through a qualitative case study involving two experienced teachers, the study revealed that teachers held a range of pedagogic principles which they demonstrated through a series of classroom practices. These principles and practices were not static, but were shaped by and shaped the context that the teachers worked in. These teachers’ ability to embed individual principles in their teaching practice in a way that relates to learner difference seemed to be an effective approach in their classrooms and is an important skill. It highlights the need for language teachers to develop skills in making modifications and negotiating practices in responses to different learning constraints, ‘to face the uncertain,
multifaceted demands of the ELT classroom’ independent of curricular or syllabus commitments (Wette, 2011b, p. 144).

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, firstly ascribed to the small teacher sample size. A larger sample might have enabled more practices and principles to be revealed. Additional observations and other data collection methods could have also contributed to further insights into teaching practices concerning learner diversity. Further research is needed to address these shortcomings. Nevertheless, the study offered novel insights into teachers’ principles and practices on learner diversity.

Notably, the participants’ practices did not comply with any particular teaching method but instead, were determined by the specific nature of their teaching context and the pedagogic principles applicable to that context. The findings of this study reflect Kumaravadivelu’s (2001) suggestions for teachers to follow a pedagogy of particularity which facilitates the ‘advancement of a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy’ (p. 544) and a pedagogy of practicality which encourages ‘teachers to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize’ (p. 545). This has practical implications for language teacher education courses. As part of their training, ESL teachers must be encouraged to reflect on practice and explore their beliefs in relation to different contextual constraints. An eclectic and contextual approach to teaching can be cultivated through exposure to different teaching methods and discussion of their applicability to diverse teaching contexts in order to empower teachers’ pedagogical decision-making.

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### APPENDIX A

**PEDAGOGIC PRINCIPLES AND SUPPORTING PRACTICES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English proficiency level</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) have different expectations of different learners</td>
<td>Probe for more information from higher-level learners through questioning.</td>
<td>Anne</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘you don’t expect the same from all of them’ (Anne)</td>
<td>‘if their first response was interesting I might ask a follow up question to get more explanation out of them’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Explicitly direct higher-level learners to produce question forms and lower-level learners to provide answers.</td>
<td>Kim</td>
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<td></td>
<td>‘I know who are able to ask and answer [questions] fluently and who haven’t been able to’</td>
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<td>(2) support lower-level learners while challenging higher-level learners</td>
<td>Using higher-level learners as models.</td>
<td>Anne</td>
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<td></td>
<td>‘ask for volunteers first so you get the more confident ones doing it first and the others know what is expected’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group or pair higher-level learners with lower-level learner so that the higher-level learners needed to help the lower-level partners through prompting and questioning.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage learners to negotiate roles in group work.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Set activities that require collaborative work to achieve the group outcomes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group learners into similar proficiency groups to allow more targeted assistance to lower-level learners and encourage the higher-level learners to work more autonomously.</td>
<td>Kim</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I divided the class into two groups, the fast ones together, so the ones that can ask and answer the questions by themselves together and . . . the slower ones bilingual support was in charge of’</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) provide additional optional learning opportunities</td>
<td>Encourage learners to do out of class writing on a topic of their choosing and give individual feedback on the writing.</td>
<td>Anne</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘they deserve a bit of extra time from me because they’ve put in the extra time’</td>
<td>‘I encourage them to do writing at home and I give them feedback’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principle</td>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) allow learners to work at their own pace</td>
<td>Provide significant amount of time for learners to do activities. Group learners into similar proficiency groups to allow higher-level learners to work faster. ‘if they have finished that it is good, they can read that again and they can learn things, like they can say the words more correctly, they can learn the spelling’</td>
<td>Kim</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) present the same content in many different ways</td>
<td>Use highly structured and short-duration modelling, whole class drilling, pair work, reading, writing, and speaking with native English speakers outside class to learn and practise specific vocabulary or grammar points. ‘first of all teach the vocab and then we use the vocab in the reading and then use the vocab for speaking and use the vocab in writing and then go back to more grammar and more reading . . . I just use the core vocabulary and I teach that in all skills, speaking listening writing and reading, and don’t introduce new vocab’</td>
<td>Kim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural background</td>
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<td>(6) use learners’ culture and experience as input for learning</td>
<td>Use the learners’ cultural backgrounds as the basis for a class ultimately aimed at developing a list of learning strategies. Allow learners to decide what elements of their own culture to include in activities.</td>
<td>Anne</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) acknowledge learners’ non-English-related knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Ask learners to do specific tasks which showed their non-English-related skills. ‘I sometimes ask them to do things to show their knowledge’</td>
<td>Anne</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>L1</td>
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<td>(8) support L1 use in the classroom as long as the primary focus is on learning English</td>
<td>Allow learners to decide if L1 would be a better tool for specific class activities.</td>
<td>Anne</td>
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<td>‘I don’t mind [learners using their first language], the only problem is if it’s stopping them from practising their English’</td>
<td>‘[using their L1 in a group] was fine because we were focused really on the concepts and they were able to make the comparisons and express the comparisons [back to the class] in English’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
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<td>(9) support learners with limited educational experience to develop learning skills</td>
<td>Ensure learners understand classroom instructions in English through repetition and non verbal language.</td>
<td>Kim</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘if we equip them . . . with the correct resources and then after they finish the class . . . and have more time, they can still keep reviewing and then their language will improve’</td>
<td>‘we’ve been doing . . . classroom instructions . . . they start to realise the words like listen, and then read, write, ask, answer’</td>
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<td>Ensure learners understand classroom instructions in English through repetition and non verbal language.</td>
<td>Use consistent verbal and non-verbal language for instructions.</td>
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<td>Explicitly teach learners how to use notebooks to record the essential language content from class.</td>
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