

An Interview Between Julia Aigner and Sarah Mercer

Julia Aigner, *University of Graz, Austria*

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6116-9586>

julia.aigner@uni-graz.at

Sarah Mercer, *University of Graz, Austria*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2558-8149>

sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at

Julia Aigner

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me and share some of your insights as an experienced researcher in the field of psychology of language learning and teaching (PLLT). To start, can you tell me a little bit about what initially drew you to do this kind of research?

Sarah Mercer

I am delighted to have this conversation with you. Thanks for being interested in my story! So, I got into psychology actually from my experiences in practice as an English language teacher. I was interested in my learners, and what was going through their minds and what they were experiencing in class. My teaching experiences were the trigger for what then became my master's (MA) thesis which looked at language learning strategies. In class, we

worked on an experimental approach to learning and working with language strategies, and learners tried out different strategies, and then reported back for discussions in class about what worked or not and why. There have been a number of such experiential models, and I was inspired by the work of scholars such as Rebecca Oxford and Andrew Cohen. What I discovered in the thesis was that teaching the learners strategies did not explicitly improve their language skills, but the strategy training did give them confidence and agency. It empowered them with a sense of control and expectation that they could direct their own learning; a state which would ultimately lead to language improvement albeit the effects of the strategy instruction were indirect through these psychological states. At the time, I did not have the words to describe these changes I was witnessing in my learners. So, I then

went and spoke to some people in the psychology department to ask, “what is happening to my learners and what are these things they are experiencing and reporting upon?” These kind colleagues gave a naïve academic stranger time and help. Importantly, they gave me the words to find out more about the phenomena I was witnessing and those key constructs for me at that time were self-efficacy and agency. Once I had the language, it opened up this whole world of research and notions that I could explore further as well as the influential work of Albert Bandura. It introduced me to and gave me access to a whole field of research about what, in my view, really matters for successful learning: what is going on in the heads and hearts of our learners? And so began my journey into trying to understand more about the psychology of language learning. I have never looked back since then.

Julia Aigner

And where did you go from there?

Sarah Mercer

After I had finished my MA, I remained fascinated with this new world that had opened up for me. I started getting interested in other aspects of psychology, especially emotions. Then I decided to do a PhD, not because at that time I thought it would necessarily help my career, but because I wanted to know more. I was just curious, I wanted to be a better teacher, and I believed learning more about language learner psychology would make me a better teacher. I have always believed that research done thoughtfully can improve your teaching. It can make you more sensitive, thoughtful, and critical as an educator. It gives you a skill set that is ultimately highly practical. So, interestingly, despite the pathway I have ended up following, my initial drive was not academic at all, but was in fact practice driven.

Julia Aigner

It is interesting that you did not actually start out with academic ambitions in mind, especially looking at how everything turned out. So, you started with agency and self-efficacy in your MA. How has your research focus shifted over the years, and why?

Sarah Mercer

That is relatively easy for me to trace. As a language teacher myself, of course, I was interested in language learners initially. It was all about the language learner in the beginning. My PhD was about self-concept, and then my research was about learners’ agency, emotions, beliefs, motives; all aspects of learner psychology. While working on this, I became really interested in complex dynamic systems theory. This is a lens for looking at the world seeing, for example, language classrooms in terms of systems that have dynamic and emergent qualities, and which are in this permanent state of shift and where there is no linear causality at the heart of the structures and relationships, in which all aspects of the system are interconnected and sensitive to each other through relational connection. When you look at a language classroom in these terms as a complex dynamic system, you realize that the hub of all those relationships is the teacher. The teacher is at the heart of everything. So, I thought, if we are going to understand the language classroom as a system of relationships with the teacher at the centre of those relationships, what do we know about the teacher in terms of their psychologies? Consequently, I started looking for research on (language) teacher psychology and I was surprised to discover that there was relatively little out there. There was an impressive body of work on teacher identity and teacher cognition. Those two domains were well established, even though they too typically focused a lot on early career teachers with less related work on teachers at other stages of their career. However, compared to the extensive and increasingly complex and diverse body of work dedicated to understanding learner psychology, there was comparatively little on teachers. We knew relatively little about their motives, emotions, personalities, and needs. That struck me as a huge gap. If we look at any model of language teaching and learning, the teacher is a core part of that process, so to not understand such a key stakeholder is a huge oversight. We cannot claim to understand processes of teaching and learning if we know so little about the experiences and perceptions of the teacher. So, that led me to become interested in researching language teachers and their psychologies. More recently, I have been working with ecological models stemming from my work on wellbeing which looks at agency as well as structure and system. And

from an ecological perspective, another group of teachers who are central to the language education ecosystem are language teacher educators who are equally, if not more so, neglected than language teachers. This population has become the focus of much of my recent work.

As for why the topic of wellbeing specifically has dominated so much of my research in recent years? Well, I suspect there was probably a little bit of introspection and self-reflection that triggered that direction, but also, to be honest, when you start talking to teachers about their psychology, no matter what topic you start with, it always ends up with issues surrounding wellbeing. So, once I started having those conversations with teachers and started to look at what comes out of those conversations – plus a degree of personal introspection – it took me very quickly to the topic of wellbeing which connects so many facets of psychology and is also a central notion in positive psychology which is another lens which has been so impactful for my own work.

Julia Aigner

It is interesting to trace the journey across areas of scholarship from different participants to different topics and constructs. Have there been any other critical incidents in your career that shaped the path you are on?

Sarah Mercer

So, there are key experiences and people such as doing your PhD, your PhD supervisor, attending certain conferences, meeting and working with certain people, having conversations with academic heroes, building up work relationships with people, having opportunities to learn and grow, engaging with teaching in diverse contexts, and, of course, becoming the professor in Graz and becoming Head of the English Language Teaching Department was a massive change. Even after all these years, I still feel that this leadership role is one that I am growing into. I do not always get it right, and I constantly feel I am trying to do a better job, but it is one of the most rewarding parts of my job – having a great team of people that you can work and learn with, support, and watch develop. At the beginning, it was daunting, but with time and help from others, you grow into the role, becoming more confident. You learn to let go of some things that you did before, and you adjust your own working style to embrace the new role and responsibilities. Nobody tells you how to be a professor and run a

department and team. You learn by doing, and I'm sure I have made a million and one mistakes along the way, but upwards and onwards with the hope to always do better than before.

Julia Aigner

Of course, there are certain things and roles that nobody can prepare you for and you have to learn by doing and finding your own way. Looking back now, if you had to give your past-self one piece of advice, what would it be?

Sarah Mercer

Do not be afraid of doing it wrong. Do not let the fear of making mistakes hold you back from being your authentic self and trying out new things whether that is in research, teaching, or leading. Especially as a woman, going into a role of leadership where you might not even be welcome in that position, you can be intimidated into thinking that you have to do everything perfectly. You may feel everyone is just waiting for you to make a mistake. But there is no one right way of doing most things. With time and support from the right kind of mentors and friends, you learn how to do it on your own terms, and you develop your own confidence to be your authentic self. Having said that, of course, authenticity itself is something that is easy to say, but it is hard to do, particularly when you feel judged and observed at every step. You need to realize that some people will like what you are doing and how you are doing it, and some people will not. I think this is perhaps especially hard for women to hear and respond to, as we are socialized from young to be people pleasers and to not upset people. Breaking free of all of that can be really difficult for anyone in academia, but perhaps particularly still for women. Forging your own path, whether that be teaching style, leadership style, or even research style, requires confidence and courage. I think this would be my advice to my younger self – be brave enough to be yourself, find the right kind of people to support you, and let go of perfection.

Julia Aigner

Is there any advice that you would give early-career researchers now? Maybe something you did yourself and you believe to be crucial for others as well?

Sarah Mercer

Always follow your heart. Do what you really want to do, not what you think you ought to do in terms of research and work, although I realize some decisions will out of necessity be pragmatic. I guess I have been extremely lucky in my career in how it worked out, but I also always chose to research things that I was interested in, and I wanted to do. Let curiosity be your guide and never lose your drive to learn more. Being able to research is a great privilege and a wonderful way to keep growing and expanding what you know. Lean in to and enjoy the chance to find things out through research and this journey will be sure to take you to interesting places!

Julia Aigner

Speaking of advice, but more focused on research methods now: Have you learned any methodological lessons that you would want to pass on? Is there anything that you notice that especially younger researchers tend to overlook?

Sarah Mercer

I suppose this is still the same idea of following your heart topic-wise but also methodologically. I have witnessed waves of fashions and fads in research, and I was witness to some of the paradigmatic wars of the quantitative-qualitative debate. When I was doing my PhD, the only person I could draw on as a qualitative scholar in areas of learner psychology (or broadly then learner individual differences (IDs)) was Ema Ushioda, who was working qualitatively. She was the only one who stood out as doing great and original qualitative research, and so she was a huge role model for me. Indeed, it was also important for me to see a female scholar being successful on her terms. As the gender balance remains often skewed in academia to this day, I often think how important Ema was as an aspirational model, as a woman, and outstanding scholar.

In terms of qualitative research, I have always been a qualitative scholar heart and soul. I love the messiness of the real world. I want to know people as individuals. The numbers just do not excite me the same way. They do not tell me the stories that I want to know. I think that is something that also goes back perhaps to my heritage as a language teacher. Thankfully, over time, we came as a field to a point where I thought we had acquired a kind of mutual understanding and respect, and where a kind of balance was established between diverse methodological approaches

including increased mixed method work. However, at present, some of the discourse I witness globally worries me in suggesting a possible regression that implies that *real* research (and by implication the *best* research) is quantitative. There are a number of reasons for this perhaps including among others the fashions for big data and supposed 'evidence-based' practice, where in fact only a certain type of evidence is considered valid. This development frustrates me because it limits the whole field as there should never be only one approach to a field as complex as language learning and teaching. The more plurality of perspectives and methodologies we maintain and nurture, the richer and broader our understandings will be. So, my advice to younger researchers regarding methodologies is to avoid falling into this outdated paradigm battle. Value and appreciate different types of research and sources of knowledge and learning. Recognize that we learn different things from different ways of looking at the world whether that is in terms of research or source of knowledge. Diversity is a strength. You will naturally develop your own preferences but keep an open mind to learning from a range of lenses and perspectives.

Perhaps another related thing I would hope that younger researchers acknowledge, especially in our field, is real respect for teacher expertise and knowledge. This notion of epistemic justice in terms of equity, of recognizing the value of teacher knowledge and expertise, or indeed all kinds of diverse sources of knowledge and insights, is something the field has been a little slow to recognize and fully engage with. In some corners of the field, an arrogance of talking down to teachers persists, and their wisdom is rarely listened to unless it is expressed in traditional academic terms. Yet, teachers, who have spent years engaging with learners and complex classroom dynamics, have a vast knowledge base and wealth of experience that can be learned from, no matter in what form it is shared or articulated. We all benefit when we can share what we know with each other, as equals, respectfully and in diverse ways. This opening up of discourse spaces, ways of knowing, ways of sharing, and ways of understanding would be beneficial for all of us. We all have something to share and so it is vital we do so with humility and remain open to learning and listening to a range of experts. And, indeed, while it is really great to see some serious efforts being made in this regard, there

remains scope upwards for us all to work at improving this balance and sharing of knowledge!

Julia Aigner

Thank you so much for sharing so much about your own journey and passing on advice and lessons learned. You are now an established researcher in the field of PLLT, but we have not yet really talked about the field itself. As the current President of IAPLL (International Association for the Psychology of Language Learning) and former founding editor of this journal, JPLL (Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning), can you tell me a little bit about how you have witnessed the development of the field of PLLT?

Sarah Mercer

It has been wonderful to witness the growth of PLLT as a field. There were many motivations behind those of us who were active in promoting the field. Primarily, it was because when I did my PhD, there was no such notion as a field of PLLT, but there was a subfield of IDs but that basically focused largely on motivation, as well as some vital work on anxiety such as by the wonderful Elaine Horwitz. But even motivation as a core ID was still somewhat marginalized in SLA (second language acquisition) research despite some of the most highly cited and brilliant scholars in the whole of applied linguistics working in these areas such as Zoltán Dörnyei, Jean-Marc Dewaele, and Peter MacIntyre. There was also lots of other related work taking place that was more firmly anchored in the classroom such as autonomy research and strategy work, but it did not feel as if there was a single coherent space to bring all these related bodies of work together. However, there were some important books on the topic explicitly using the word psychology and founding figures in this field include Zoltán Dörnyei as well as Marion Williams among others.

Outside of publications, perhaps the first notable milestone was the first PLL Conference in 2014 in Graz which showed that not only was a field of psychology of language learning a valid notion, but that there was already a vibrant community with whom this resonated and who vitally identified as PLLT scholars. A key motive was then to establish the notion of PLLT more firmly to give early career academics the confidence to pursue work in this area and find connections across ideas and constructs. We wanted to create a space which made it easier for the next generation to commit to PLLT work so they can turn to

supervisors, funders, and other stakeholders and say with confidence: This field has a regular conference, a journal, an international association, and a book series. I can hold the identity as a PLLT scholar. It is a thing! With representation, it is easier to embark on this kind of research but also to build connections and community. I identify very strongly with the PLLT community, and it is wonderful to see how people come together, share their work, collaborate, support each other, and celebrate the human dimensions of learning and teaching languages. I am thrilled to feel at home among such a wonderfully welcoming and warm community.

Julia Aigner

What a great development, and within a relatively short time span of about 10-15 years. Where do you see the field headed in the future?

Sarah Mercer

As you said, it has already grown so much, but this also means that I am really excited to see what the next 10-15 years will look like. For the community, I imagine new local associations, conferences, organizations, events, networks, research projects, or cooperations. This journal is expanding and going from strength to strength and the association has an amazing set of volunteers who are also ensuring it remains a vibrant and growing field of activity and opportunity. I hope very much that upcoming scholars feel an affinity with the community and a willingness to get active and engaged to ensure its sustained future.

For research, it is also an exciting time. Methodologically, there are constantly new opportunities, new ways of exploring data, generating data, interpreting and working with data. We can draw on technological advancements, but also creative methodologies opening up original and fresh ways of generating understandings. Naturally, there are dramatic developments in societies and education including the infamous growth of artificial intelligence, which affect people psychologically. Unpacking and understanding how learners and teachers respond to and experience these societal and technological changes will be an important strand of scholarship ensuring we do

not lose sight of the humans behind the systems and tools of education.

Julia Aigner

Speaking of future visions, I have a last question about your own future research. If you had unlimited resources, which topic/research would you pursue?

Sarah Mercer

Related to this, I am naturally interested in reflecting on how we can live and work together with technology in ways which are harmonious and respect the values of humanity. As researchers, I think we have a moral responsibility to approach the topic critically with a view to protecting and nurturing both teachers and learners. Rather than simplistically claiming that technology such as artificial intelligence is brilliant or terrible, we need to understand how it is affecting people, their attitudes, motivation, emotions, wellbeing, social engagement, future visions and goals, and so on. I strongly believe that as PLLT

researchers, we have an obligation to examine new developments of all kinds critically with a view to how they are impacting on the psychology and humanity of the key stakeholders in our field. This makes it an exciting time for research among the shifting landscape of language education.

A second strand of work that I am really looking forward to focuses on processes of contagion and looking at the connections between learner and teacher psychologies. Here I have the privilege of working with some great colleagues including the amazing Anna Mystkowska-Wiertelak who is my official research partner in our joint grant. I think that moving beyond individual psychology and looking more at connections and collective constructs is going to be an exciting new line of inquiry for many of us.

Julia Aigner

Sarah, thank you so much for your time and your valuable insights!

Authors' Contributions

Julia Aigner and Sarah Mercer drafted and revised the interview article.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The authors confirm that GenAI has not been used to draft or write any part of the article, to generate research ideas or assist in the interview design, or for language editing.

Funding

No funding or financial support of any kind was received by the authors.

Authors' Bios

Julia Aigner is a pre-doc University Assistant in the Department of English Studies, ELT Research and Methodology, at the University of Graz (Austria), where she is doing her PhD with Sarah Mercer as her supervisor. Her research interests include all aspects of psychology related to the learning and teaching of foreign languages, especially learner and teacher wellbeing and experiences of language teachers with different career backgrounds.

Sarah Mercer is a Professor of Foreign Language Teaching at the University of Graz, in Austria, where she is Head of the Section of ELT Research and Methodology. Her research interests include all aspects of psychology related to the learning and teaching of foreign languages. She is the author, co-author and co-editor of several books in this area, including one with Tammy Gregersen on language teacher wellbeing published by Oxford University Press, and one with Zoltán Dörnyei on language learner engagement published by Cambridge University Press. Her most recent single-authored book is *Compassion-based Language Education* published by Oxford University Press.