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An Interview with Professor Simon Borg


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Background

Simon Borg first taught English as a foreign language in 1988, in Malta, then graduated from the University of Malta in 1990 and started teaching English in a state secondary school, also in Malta. He did my MA at the College of St Mark & St John (UK) in 1991 and taught for a few more years in Malta after that, starting a PhD at the University of Exeter in 1994. He spent two years in New Zealand from 1996, teaching, teacher training and finishing the PhD, and in 1998 he joined the University of Leeds. He left Leeds as a Professor of TESOL in 2014 to become a full-time consultant and remain a Visiting Professor there. He is also a 'Professor II' at University College Bergen. His PhD was about teacher cognition in L2 grammar teaching and the study of teachers' beliefs and knowledge. He also specializes in teacher education and professional development, teacher research, and research methods. What comes below is an interview with Professor Simon Borg on his academic achievements and issues related to teacher education conducted by the editor of IJLTR. KS stands for Karim Sadeghi and SB stands for Simon Borg.

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KS: Thank you very much Prof. Borg for so kindly accepting my invitation to take part in this interview. The first thing that I (and probably most our readers would be interested in knowing) is your becoming a full professor at quite a young age, with such a wide range of publications. Would you please introduce yourself briefly with a focus on your academic background and tell us how easy (or difficult) it has been to climb up your academic career ladder?

SB: Thank you for inviting me to take part in this interview. In terms of becoming a full professor, I know that in many higher education contexts around the world high academic rank is associated with age and experience, but in the UK that is not the case. At the University of Leeds there were very transparent but rigorous criteria for a professorship in relation to research (e.g. a very strong international profile), teaching and leadership, but age was not a criterion. I don't think we can ever say that achieving a professorship is easy; the criteria were demanding, but I was very driven to achieve my goals and I have always enjoyed academic work and these factors facilitated the process somewhat. I was also fortunate to work in an institution that supported staff very well in terms of career progression.

I've never really thought of my career in terms of climbing an academic ladder. I was doing things I enjoy in terms of research, teaching and leadership, and so the progress I made in my academic position over the years happened quite naturally.

KS: Could you talk about your books and scholarly articles? Please tell us how many publications you have and what the major focuses of these publications have been. How do you compare your first and last publications in terms of focus and topics covered?

SB: I've published roughly 100 articles, book chapters and books. The first was in 1992 and was based on a piece of language awareness work I had done for one of MA assignments. My early interest in grammar continued for a number of years but my focus was not on grammar per se but on how teachers taught it and why. In the mid-1990s little was known about such issues (and more generally about why teachers do what they do). So there was a clear gap in the literature that some of my best-known early publications started to address. My interest in teacher cognition has continued until today, but my focus has gone beyond grammar teaching and examined other issues such as teachers' conceptions of research and teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy. I have also written methodological analyses of teacher cognition research and my most recent forthcoming chapter is a critical analysis of how the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices is being studied today. More recently much of the writing has also focused on language teacher development.

KS: Looking at your publications, most of your work is single-authored. Is there any reason why you do not seem to favour co-authored projects or publications? Which type of activity (single, pair, team) do you suggest that other researchers follow?

SB: It would be wrong to suggest that I do not favour co-authored publications and about 20% of my work has been written collaboratively. And I am currently working on at least six projects that involve co-authored work. I think the ideal profile would include both single-authored and collaborative publications. Collaboration is important but in some contexts (in the social sciences), if an academic has too many co-authored articles questions might be asked about their ability to

publish independently. It can also boil down to personal working styles. Earlier in my career I preferred to work alone because it allowed me to work at my pace and collaborating would have probably required me to slow down.

KS: Which one of your works you have enjoyed the most? Which one of your books/articles you think is more seminal compared to others? Which one has been welcomed the most by the readers? Which area of your work would you like to spend more time on and why?

SB: Single-authored books are very satisfying to write but articles in the top research journals are subject to much tougher review processes and so probably carry a greater sense of achievement. I can't really say which one publication I've enjoyed most but the book 'Teacher cognition and language education' was probably that which shaped my career more than any other. Of course, the early research papers on teacher cognition were seminal because of their originality and importance in opening up a whole new area of inquiry in our field. But the substantive and methodological analysis of the field I presented in the book cemented my reputation as a leading scholar in language teacher education. The field has naturally moved on since the book was published, but many of the ideas outlined there remain relevant today and the model of teacher cognition developed there is also still widely cited. In terms of areas I would like to spend more time on, I feel I am working on the areas I am interested in (especially language teacher development); the challenge these days is creating time for research and writing given that I am no longer a full-time academic and work primarily as an educational consultant.

KS: Most of your recent contributions to the field of TESOL have been in the area of teacher research with a focus on teacher cognition. Could you talk about the main elements of teacher cognition and how researching this can better equip teachers for delivering quality lessons?

SB: I think it's useful first to clarify how my work on teacher cognition and teacher research is related. Teacher cognition focuses on teachers' understandings of their work. This focus can be applied to any aspect of teachers' work – so I have studied teacher cognition about grammar teaching, about learner autonomy and about teacher research. But much of my recent work has been about teacher research (i.e. teachers doing research in their own classrooms to support their own growth) more generally without a specific focus on teacher cognition.

To return to the question about the value of teacher cognition research, it is an important one to ask because much current research on teachers' beliefs is not carried out with a clear sense of purpose (I've discussed this in a blog at <http://simon-borg.co.uk/2016/04/>). I think teacher cognition can be looked at from two perspectives; one (and that which is of most direct value for teachers) is the reflective perspective. The idea here is that helping teachers become more aware of their cognitions (beliefs, knowledge, attitudes etc.) and how these relate (or don't relate) to their teaching can stimulate professional growth. The second perspective we can call the academic perspective. Here teacher cognition is being studied academically and without any immediate concern for supporting teacher development. Of course, ideally academic research will inform practice at the level of educational policy and the design of teacher education and development programmes, but research does not always affect practice in this way. Some studies, of course, manage to combine reflective and academic perspectives effectively, but one criticism I have of

recent academic work (especially on teachers' beliefs) is that it lacks any clear implications for practice.

KS: One further area of your recent engagement has been your role as a consultant in teacher education and professional development (PD) programmes. How do you link teacher cognition and PD? Do you think teacher research should be an integral component of PD programmes and whether such programmes should be continuing in nature?

SB: Again, I think it is important to separate out the different issues you mention here. Teacher cognition has been central to my work but my current consultancy work on teacher education and development extends far beyond a specific concern for teacher cognition. Similarly, while teacher research is one strategy that can support teacher development, my consultancy work does not focus solely on teacher research; in fact, on most of the educational projects I work teacher research would not be a suitable strategy and various other ways of supporting teacher development are used. I have always said that teacher research is one option available to teachers but that there are many others and that very often teacher research will not be the right option. For example, I have worked on projects where teachers of English have had little pre-service training and lack basic methodological skills. Introducing teacher research there would not be suitable because the priority is to improve teacher competence and confidence rather quickly. The best way to summarise my consultancy work, then, is to say that it involves designing, facilitating, and evaluating teacher development projects. This work allows me to combine my expertise in language teacher development and my competence in educational research. This work extends beyond a narrow focus on teacher cognition or teacher research.

KS: Given that the theme of the current issue of IJLTR in which your interview will appear is Teacher Education (edited by Professor Jack C Richards), what do you think are gaps in this area that both teacher educators and teachers should attend to in terms of theory and practice? Do you think teacher education programmes can solve all problems EFL/ESL teachers face in teaching English?

SB: The answer to second question is clearly 'no'. Teachers will face so many specific challenges in the course of their work that no programme can cater for all of these. What programmes can do, though, is to equip teachers so that they are able to resolve the challenges they face. This also involves helping teachers work collaboratively, and the notion of collaborative teacher development is currently a powerful one in the international literature.

In relation to the first question about gaps in the field, much of my recent writing has been about the continued dominance of training-based models of teacher development in our field and the limitations these have in promoting lasting change in teachers. Alternative, more situated, collaborative and ongoing models are needed (readers can look at the blog at <http://simonborg.co.uk/2016/07/> for more on this issue).

KS: What are your future research and publication plans? Most your research since you started publication has centred on teachers and teaching grammar, and more recently on teacher beliefs. Do you think there is still more to do in this area?

SB: It has been some time since I did any research on teaching grammar and most of my recent and forthcoming work is about language teacher development. This is an area where research remains limited and publications I am working on look at aspects of teacher development in a range of international contexts.

KS: If you were given a second chance to live the life you have lived, would you choose to be a teacher trainer again or would you prefer to take a different path? Why? Is there anything you wish you could have accomplished in your life/career that you haven't so far? How successful have you been in your job as a teacher educator?

SB: I'm very thankful for the career I've had so far and can't think of anything I'd want to change.

KS: Many thanks again Prof. Borg for so humbly taking part in this interview. It is a great pleasure for me and the IJLTR readers to get to know more about one of the vibrant and influential scholars in TESOL who will continue to lead the field. Is there anything else that you would like to add or share with our audience?

SB: Thank you again for inviting me to talk to you and your readers about my work. I hope that I and your readers will enjoy reading the special issue of your journal.

