Interview with Martha Bigelow

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Martha Bigelow is a Professor in Second Language Education at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. She has been engaged in community-engaged and school-based research with East African youth for more than ten years on the intersections of literacies, language learning, schooling and (racial, religious, gender) identities. She has published numerous journal articles and two books related to her work with adolescent Somali refugees in the United States: *Literacy and Second Language Oracy* (2009, Oxford University Press) with Elaine Tarone and Kit Hansen and *Mogadishu on the Mississippi: Language, racialized identity and education in a new land* (2010, Wiley Blackwell). She is the co-editor with Johanna Ennser-Kananen for the *Routledge handbook of educational linguistics* (2015) and she is currently working on a book with Doris Warriner entitled *Relationships, reciprocity and research with minoritized communities: Methodological meta-reflections on power and equity* (Multilingual Matters).

*Professor Bigelow kindly agreed to this interview as she was presenting at SLS Symposium, MSU. I conducted it on February 23rd, 2017 at Kellogg Center, East Lansing, MI.*

How did you first become interested in SLA?
M: I guess it happened when I learned Spanish, in my early 20s. I had been an English Literature major and then I was a secondary high-school English teacher. I was licensed to do that, but I actually never did that job, beyond student teaching, because I went directly into the Peace Corps. So, then I learned Spanish and I dove into teaching English as a foreign language before ever knowing how to do that. I became fascinated with my own process of learning and teaching, as well as watching my students learn English.

What are your personal experiences with learning languages?
M: I studied Latin in high school and I studied French in college, but I didn’t learn French. I really didn’t think I was a good language learner until I went to the Dominican Republic, where I learned Spanish pretty quickly. And I’ve been speaking Spanish my whole life.

Moving on to your research, let’s talk about your work regarding Somali refugees. Why Somalia, first of all? What sparked this interest?
M: What sparked the interest was the fact that we have the largest Somali community in the United States in the Twin Cities [ed., Minneapolis]. So, when I first came to the University of
Minnesota as an assistant professor, all of the teachers that I was working with kept telling me about Somalis and kept asking me about Somalis. I was lucky enough to get a small grant that allowed me to hire a grad student, in my second or third year at the University of Minnesota, and I did an SLA study in the community. Me and my student, and Elaine Tarone, and the rest is history, right? That SLA study was more in the cognitive realm. The grant also came at the same time as I got a single semester leave, as a junior faculty member. The grant plus the time gave me the time to spend in the community. So, people got to know me, I got to know the community. And then what happened was the kids basically told me what my research should be. Then, I shifted toward more qualitative questions that had to do with literacy and schooling. I worked a long time with girls and working with one group led to questions with different groups, in an iterative way. The community was also always telling me what they needed. There was a lot of synergy there. So, while I was working with girls, I felt I needed to understand more about boys, so I did a focus group that had boys in it. Kind of like focus group identity study, racialized identity. That led to a lot of advocacy in the community, working with police departments. I guess I follow my tangents based on what the community leads me toward. To me, that’s what engaged scholarship looks like. You’re doing things with the community, not just to form your own academic dialogue with researchers in the field, but to work with the community. And then, for me it became very rewarding and synergistic because I felt like I was a part of something great. I felt happy in academia. I enjoyed my time with the community.

So, were you accepted by the people straight away?
M: Yeah, I worked at it. I spent a lot of time learning and they very generously taught me about Islam. It took a while to get invited to people’s homes. It wasn’t like you have instant access. With the kids, I didn’t have access to every realm of their lives. I had a lot of access to their out-of-school spaces, but they never invited me into their school spaces. I don’t think they wanted me to see them at school.

Were they schooled in the mainstream schools?
M: They were in charter schools and mainstream schools, but they didn’t ever let me come to school, those girls. Later I wanted to do more classroom-based research so I made connections directly through the teachers and got access that way. The schools were unbelievably welcoming. The community was welcoming. The kids were welcoming to a certain degree. As an outsider, you’re legitimized through the teacher, too. I felt comfortable in the classroom and the kids got comfortable with my video recorder. But, you know, it’s always partial, what they will let you see.

So, what projects are you working on currently?
M: I’m working on a book with Doris Warriner titled Relationships, reciprocity and research with minoritized communities: Methodological meta-reflections on power and equity. I’m still working on some classroom data that I have from classroom with East African refugees and
multilingual teacher. That’s going to be a paper that explores the different uses of their multiple languages for learning.

We read some of your publications in class. The early papers were very much based on interaction, and then you shifted somewhat to the previously mentioned interests. Was there any specific reason for that or you just naturally developed different interests?
M: Well, like I said, the kids kind of led me down different paths. But I do remember very distinctively interaction with a teenage girl, and after we were done doing all of my very carefully crafted tasks and my protocol, she looked at me and said: “Can you teach me how to read?” And I said: “Yes. Especially if you bring three of your friends.” So, Mogadishu on the Mississippi: Language, racialized identity and education in a new land came out of that work.

Last semester, you taught Foundations of Second Languages and Cultures Education. Can you tell us a little bit more about this course?
M: That course is the first course that our Master’s students take in their programs. It’s an overview of issues in lots of different language contexts. We go through contextual issues in, let’s say, heritage language programs, English as a second, foreign or other language programs, foreign language traditional models, foreign language immersion, indigenous languages, and we have a bit on teacher education. Most of the students are teachers, but the emphasis is a critical examination of all of the different pressures each of those contexts have: the political tensions, teacher credentials, budgetary dilemmas, curriculum pressures. We go through all of that and then they read research in all of these areas.

That sounds very practical for someone who is about to become a teacher.
M: It’s super fun. They do a blog. It’s heavy on reading. I also do a mid-term assessment where they do a context comparison. In order to model multilingual teaching, they are allowed to do that assessment in any language they want or any mix of languages. So, it’s on me to find people that can help me read them. That’s kind of an innovation that I had. And they read the book by Sue Motha: “Race and Empire in English Language Teaching”. That’s a good one. It talks about some of the hot issues. We tackle the native speaker myth. One action thing that they do is that they find a job posting, native speaker-required, and they dialogue with the person about that. They write an email and ask why that’s a requirement, and say that they don’t think that should be a requirement. Teaching that book is a little bit jarring for some of the Chinese students and some of them get really angry, actually. They said: “Now I’m really upset that the native speaker was paid more than me when I did more work. I’m really angry that my Master’s Degree isn’t going to be as valuable as their so-called language ability.” It’s very disruptive to many of them, but kind of life-changing as well. They take that critical lens to the rest of their program.

It’s really important to have those kind of classes, I think. Because some students never ponder over such situations but simply accept them back in their countries.
M: One thing we practiced was saying: “I am bilingual.” A lot of the teachers were afraid to say that.

**In Chinese context, when teachers switch into Chinese while teaching they often get penalized financially by the school. It happened to me a few times. And I did this because I saw nobody could understand me.**

M: Oh my gosh. Well, sometimes the teachers just say: “I’m a Chinese and I’m a second language learner.” But they will never say they’re bilingual. So, we really worked on that. After we talked about what a native speaker is, and whether we could all say we’re native speakers, that was even harder. We did some therapy, [laughter] class therapy about who feels legitimized and who doesn’t.

**That sounds like fun, to take this class.**

M: I really enjoyed teaching this class, because we have a lot of methods classes, but this is not a methods class, it’s an issues class. A lot of it is reflecting on beliefs about language learning across all of those different contexts. Also, they’ll observe classes in context they’re unfamiliar with. We had one class that was only a weekend school language class, for Korean heritage kids. Many of them have never been in such classes and they were amazed by them.

**If I made you choose one, would you say you’re a teacher or a researcher?**

M: I would say I’m a teacher.

**So, how do you find yourself in the field, where there’s constant pressure to perfect your research skills?**

M: In our roles, in higher education, we’re teaching constantly. You’re not just teaching your assigned classes but you’re mentoring your juniors, your students, you’re serving in leadership roles in the community, and then you bring your teacher lens into all your research. I was a teacher long before I got my training as a researcher, but I feel like whenever I’m in a research space, I’m often thinking like a teacher. Methodologies where I’m only observing are kind of challenging for me, because it’s hard to bracket those thoughts of how instruction is happening or how learning is happening.

**There are many young researchers who don’t have any previous training in teaching, so what in your opinion could institutions do to help those researchers become better teachers?**

M: My institution has a center for teaching and learning for people who want to get better at teaching. They are matched with senior or more experienced professors. They get coaching and support. I think that’s important. In my field, I’m in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, we don’t admit people into our program unless they’ve had teaching experience prior. That’s because people who graduate from our program usually step into a teacher-educator role at some point and how can you do that without having been a teacher? I mean, it’s possible but
it’s hard and even our Minnesota Board of Teaching doesn’t allow you to teach courses for teacher licensure unless you have certain credentials. It’s very minimum, what we’re required to have, but you have to have some teaching background. It’s actually legislated. Some of us debate that, because sometimes we want to assign an instructor to a class and they a similar but not perfect teaching background match to that class, so we don’t like to be constrained. It’s hard to say somebody can teach elementary level students if they’ve never been an elementary school teacher. I want to add that making the switch from being a teacher to teacher education is not easy either, because a lot of times what people do when they make that switch they just base all of their thinking on their own experience, rather than bringing inquiry into teaching dilemmas.

**After a while it’s really difficult to still have questions, because you got into routine and you think you’ve got everything figured out.**

M: Right. And your job is to help them develop their own philosophy, practice and beliefs. I know, myself included, a lot of people are having a hard time making that shift to teacher educator.

**In your opinion, what are some challenges that we have in the field of SLA right now?**

M: I guess one of the things I’ve been trying to do, pretty much my entire career, is include more marginalized communities into our research corpus. Because I don’t feel you can safely develop SLA theories if you only work with a very narrow slice of a language learner type. I feel like there’s a lot of exciting things, too. Methodologically, the field’s opened up, so you can get research published that uses a lot of different methodologies now. That’s really exciting. It’s challenging to keep up with everything. But right now, I feel like our biggest fight actually is political. We have a new Secretary of Education that does not champion public education. I feel like the next four years are going to be the biggest fight of our careers.

**That even comes from above her. The whole trend is very saddening.**

M: Very disheartening. Those of us that work with communities, we have to recognize that possibly conversations that we have in communities and with teachers have a lot to do with policy. As people in second language studies and education, we need to be policy people now. We need to give our time to stakeholder groups, advocacy groups that are trying to advocate for minoritized communities. It’s a challenge to build capacity to be able to contribute to policy discussions.

**Would you see such contributions in terms of activism?**

M: Yeah. But it’s technical expertise too, that you give about multilingualism. Right now, with ESSA [Every Student Succeeds Act], there’s all kinds of decisions that are being made right now at the state level that we have expertise on and we need to be at the table. My colleagues and I are spending hours at meetings at our Department of Education. You need to be there because there are all kinds of things that they’re discussing. Simple things even, like the home language
questionnaire, which is required. We are living in this ethnocentric nationalistic new world order that basically dismisses anything that you can learn through having multiple cultural linguistic lenses. It’s terrifying. Those are probably our biggest fights at the moment.

**For those of us who are trying to become researchers, in your opinion what constitutes a good researcher?**

M: A good researcher comes up with the real question that they really don’t know the answer to. That’s the most exciting, right? A good researcher remembers why they came into the field and tries to hang on to some glimmer of that. A good researcher is an ethical researcher that treats their participants fairly and well. A good researcher is analytical, dives into data. It’s not about getting good data. It’s about doing a good analysis. In terms of researcher dispositions, I think it’s good to be reflective and really love your data. Spend a lot of time with your data. But you have to be able to produce, too. So, I think that doctoral students who are product-oriented, get done faster. They don’t have as much angst about producing. I’ve just noticed that over the years. Lots of different people can finish a PhD, but the ones that tend to get done quickly start writing and don’t have any hang-ups about writing.

I’m the only person in my cohort who is on the qualitative side of research and the writing and analysis are the most exciting parts, for me.

M: You know, with qualitative research a lot of it is learning by writing. I feel like the write-up is the analysis and the exploration.

**What general advice would you give second language researchers and teachers?**

M: I don’t know if this is very lofty advice, but I would say: make everything count at least once, preferably twice. So, if you do a conference presentation, produce a manuscript. If you do a course paper, do a conference presentation. Just try to make everything count more than once. If you can get synergy between your classes, then you know you’re in the right space. Because you’re reading about something that’s somehow complemented by something you do in another class. Then, it all takes shape together rather than having your learning in silos.

**OK. Before we finish, is there anything you’d like to add?**

M: Maybe I’d say: don’t ever forget the passions that brought you into the field in the first place. If it was language learning, keep learning a language. If it’s culture, keep exposing yourself to new cultures. Try to not forget why you got into it and keep getting out there. I guess, I see sometimes professors who somehow aren’t with kids anymore, even though that was their first love. I think that can be really degenerative, so just keep reminding yourself why you got there.

**Thank you so much for your time.**

M: Absolutely. Nice talking with you.