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Book Review

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Kalaja, P., F. Barcelos, A. M., Aro, M., & Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2016). Beliefs, Agency and Identity in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 9781137425942.

This publication comprises seven empirical studies on beliefs, agency and identity as a response to the need for contextual, longitudinal and interconnected studies in foreign language learning and teaching. The underpinning argument of the book is that our beliefs about foreign language learning inform our actions, while both beliefs and actions affect our sense of self, our identity (MacLure, 1993; Norton, 1997; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004; Woods, 2003). This holds true for students and their learning as much as for teachers and their teaching. Building on former studies within contextual approaches (e.g., Borg, 2006; Barnard & Burns, 2012), beliefs, agency and identity are presented as interconnected phenomena against a backdrop of sociocultural and dialogical theories (e.g., Johnson, 2009; van Lier, 2008). As such, they are addressed by an emic (insider) perspective, various theoretical starting points and data of longitudinal nature, ranging from 3 to 15 years. The aim of the book is twofold. Primarily, it aims at a deeper understanding of the role of beliefs in foreign language learning. Secondly, it aims at learning about the beliefs held by specific groups of Finnish and Brazilian individuals involved in teaching and learning foreign languages. While English and other European languages are addressed in these studies, systematic comparisons across the studies in that regard are beyond the scope of this volume.

After two introductory chapters, the book is structured in storyline fashion, transitioning from young learners (Part I, two studies) to student teachers (Part II, three studies) to in-service teachers (Part III, two studies). The structure of Chapters 3-9 resembles that of journal articles, yet the language is made more accessible to a wider audience. A critical evaluation of the reported studies and the overall contributions of the book are discussed in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 1 is a succinct overview of the purpose and structure of the book, and a brief argumentation about the place of this compiled research in the wider academic discourse on beliefs in foreign language teaching and learning. The authors argue that an emic (or insider) perspective can highlight the “subjective nature” of foreign language learning and learner beliefs, which are here examined in conjunction with “learner or teacher agency (the capacity to act), identity, emotions and/or actions” (p. 3). They proceed to explain the shared elements and

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variation among the studies, restate their aim, and provide a brief outline of the book per part and per chapter.

Chapter 2 sets the foundations for this book by reviewing the key issues of beliefs, agency and identity within the framework of applied linguistics. An overview of the comparatively short, yet more complex, research developments in learner beliefs is followed by teacher beliefs. Agency is discussed in light of theoretical conceptualizations and studies, where learner agency is more prominent than teacher agency. After that, learner and teacher identity are presented, and developments in related research are historically reviewed. The authors argue for “more sophisticated or sensitive research designs” (p. 13) that bring interrelationships to the fore, and novel theoretical starting points. In addition to that, while contemporary theorizations can be characterized as non-individualistic, the authors argue that agency is a useful tool in picturing teachers and learners in their environment as active participants. The chapter concludes with an overview of the next chapters and a summary of the reported studies in table form.

Chapters 3 and 4 report two 14-year-long studies on young Finnish learners of English as their first foreign language. Departing from a contextual and dialogical approach, Chapter 3 focuses on language learners’ beliefs and the influence of authoritative ideologies and voices. While the school’s authoritative ideologies held much sway over participants’ beliefs, they later came to be a merely recognized part of their language learning history. Becoming young adults and gaining more experiences led to embracing more authoritative voices as well as to further re-evaluation and conceptualization of their beliefs. The author of this chapter argues for teacher awareness and “a shared understanding of language and learning as cross-contextual activities” (p. 44).

Chapter 4 reports a case study of two Finnish girls (from 7 to 21 years of age) who experienced English language learning quite differently at school. A dialogic perspective is adopted to address the participants’ development of agency over time. While they were both consistent from early on about preferred language learning activities, their school environment (teaching methods and expectations) impacted on their sense of agency. The author of this chapter argues that agency is individually felt, experienced and initiated, yet relational and collectively emergent. She draws attention to the repertoires of activities employed at school, suggesting they define what “a good, agentive language learner” is (p. 63). Moreover, she recommends reevaluating the assumptions, values and beliefs supporting current book-oriented foreign language learning environments at schools.

Chapter 5 reports on Brazilian teacher students’ beliefs about teaching English. Spanning three years, it examines the development of such beliefs alongside motivation and future teacher identities. The author of this chapter argues that beliefs and motivations play a fundamental role in teacher identity formation. Identities are sites of struggle, more acutely felt by prospective language teachers in Brazil, where the teaching profession in the public sector is marginalized and undervalued. Coupled with a lack of motivation attributed to highly demotivating extrinsic factors, beliefs about English contribute to weak future teacher identities. The author concludes with suggestions for supporting positive teacher identity at pre-service level.

Chapter 6 examines how Finnish university students with English as their major or minor subject discursively constructed Finnish and English. The development of learner identity and beliefs about these two languages were

examined by means of comparison and contrast. The author of this chapter discusses four identified repertoires in light of dilemmas and subject positions. In addition, she addresses issues of identity construction as language gains intrinsic value, and “monolingual bias” (p. 178). The author argues against assuming perfection in one’s native language (L1) and idealizing native-like linguistic competence in either L1 or second/foreign languages.

Chapter 7 concentrates on Master’s student teachers’ beliefs – or visions – of teaching a foreign language and future teacher identities a year before graduation. Drawing on sociocultural theory within the area of applied linguistics, this follow-up study argues that beliefs may constitute future meditational means guiding future teacher practices. The author of this chapter discusses two competing discourses used by participants to compare and contrast past experiences of foreign language learning to their envisioned way of foreign language teaching in the near future. Moreover, she comments on identity as language learner and language user, and teachers’ use of either or both discourses in their future teaching practices. Finally, the author discusses her study in comparison to two other conducted in the English and Spanish context respectively.

Chapter 8 examines the development of newly qualified teachers’ beliefs about foreign language teaching. The author of this chapter elaborates on eight identified repertoires, four of which correspond to teachers as dependent actors (restriction, traditional ways) and another four to teachers as independent actors (autonomy, innovative ways). Being sensitive to individuality, ecological theory maintains that the individual’s uniquely constructed relationship with their environment affects their beliefs and ability to utilize affordances therein. The author argues that may account for a variation in the process of induction of newly qualified foreign language teachers, and discusses the complex interaction of beliefs and environment affecting pedagogical practice.

Complementing Chapter 8, Chapter 9 concentrates on the development of teachers’ professional identity as they become more experienced over 9 to 10 years. Narrative identity development, interviews and narrative analysis inform the research design. Identity change and teacher responsiveness is discussed alongside identity continuity and resistance to changing current practices. The author addresses the role of emotions and teacher-pupil encounters in either changing or consciously maintaining teachers’ conceptualizations of their professional role. She argues that not only traumatic experiences, but also everyday practices and interaction at school factor in teachers’ development or conservation of identity.

Chapter 10 brings all seven studies together under a critically appraising lens. The first section deliberates four methodological implications; comments on the theoretical implications of the three examined concepts, and the role of environment and emotions; and discusses practical implications in regard to foreign language student teachers, practicing teachers and teacher educators. The second section assesses the strengths and limitations of the reported studies. Finally, the third section makes some suggestions for further exploration in the area of beliefs, agency and identity.

What distinguishes this book is the combination of multifocal, interrelated conceptualizations and innovative, interconnected research designs. Despite their different theoretical backgrounds, the studies share an understanding of beliefs as context-specific and dialogically constructed concepts. Departing from the Classics informed by cognitive psychology (Horwitz, 1987; Wenden, 1986), this view of beliefs not only highlights their role in foreign language education, but

also enables their examination in conjunction with agency and identity, two other concepts that are popular in current educational research. Thus, the discussion is widened to include more aspects of teaching and learning foreign languages, while awareness is raised as to how personal meanings are involved in those processes. Concerning research design, the longitudinal (3-15 years) and multimodal nature of the data (e.g., oral, written, visual) renders the seven studies novel in the field of applied linguistics. The findings might not be generalizable, yet they emphasize certain aspects of foreign language education, identified within a substantial timeframe. Furthermore, the qualitative and interpretative approach to data collection and analysis complements the emic (insider) perspective taken to examine the subjective experiences of participants. Last but not least, the varying research foci regard either the development of beliefs over time or beliefs in relation to agency and identity. Across time and contexts, they bring to the fore challenges faced by learners, student teachers and practicing teachers partaking of English/foreign language education.

Although the reported studies give a more comprehensive picture of the Finnish (six studies) rather than the Brazilian (one study) context, the book is a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on beliefs, agency and identity in applied linguistics. Written with a broad audience in mind, this book is reader-friendly, as it is very well structured and easy to follow. Extending beyond specialized researchers, it addresses a readership interested in not only the particular concepts studied, but also the workings of foreign language education from young learners to experienced professionals.

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