

Book Review

Beliefs, agency and identity in language learning and teaching

Authors:

Paula Kalaja, Ana Maria F. Barcelos, Mari Aro, Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty

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When I first heard about *Beliefs, Agency and Identity in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching* by Paula Kalaja, Ana Maria F. Barcelos, Mari Aro and Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty, I could hardly wait for its release. Investigating similar issues from the Polish perspective, I was eager to read what new contributions the authors would make and what research gaps the book would fill.

The volume consists of ten chapters organized into five sections: Introduction (Chapters One and Two), Part I (Chapters Three and Four), Part II (Chapters Five, Six and Seven), Part III (Chapters Eight and Nine) and Conclusion (Chapter Ten). The two opening chapters explain the purpose of the volume, point to the specificity of the presented studies (contextual, longitudinal, qualitative/interpretative) and elucidate the key issues listed in the book title which are relevant to the studies to be reported, that is, *beliefs, agency* and *identity*.

In Part I, Aro presents her two related studies on foreign language learning, as narrated by young learners who, during the course of the study (school

years one, three, five and at the age of twenty-one), turn into young adults. Reading about the participants' beliefs (Chapter Three) on how English is learnt and hearing the learners' authoritative ideologies and the way they connect them to their personal experiences over a span of time was really fascinating. In Chapter Four, Aro comes back to the two of the same participants, this time investigating their agency. It transpires that, during the school years, the learners' sense of agency was influenced by the extent to which their learning preferences coincided with the teacher's methods, whereas, as adult learners, they learnt how to use their own strengths as learners.

Part II is the only part of the book in which two authors submit their chapters. Barcelos (Chapter Five) traces the development of beliefs of six student teachers of English in Brazil about the language teaching profession, their motivation to become teachers and their future teacher identities. She provides information about the Brazilian educational context in which the teaching profession is mainly seen as a badly-paid job performed in poor working conditions by teachers whose professional identities are weak. Kalaja's two following chapters focus on the development of beliefs about languages of foreign language majors, mostly student teachers enrolled in an MA programme. In Chapter Six, using a sentence-completion task, she identifies four repertoires: Affection, Aesthetics, Vitality and Challenge, according to which the perception of language can be interpreted. Drawing on visual and verbal data, Chapter Seven focuses on the learners' images of language learning and teaching in a year's time. Both contributions by Kalaja can provide insights into the Finnish educational context and serve as important points of reference for future studies with regard to the interpretation of beliefs (repertoires) and the selection of research tools (students' drawings). That said, I am not sure why the visual narrative study focused on investigating the image of a language classroom in the not-so-distant future (a year). To my mind, asking for images in at least five years' time could have provided more interesting responses.

I found Part III, with Ruohotie-Lyhty's two chapters complementing each other, the most engrossing. Chapter Eight investigates the beliefs of teachers of foreign languages when they were still newcomers in the field, having worked for three or four years. The results of the study, including the identification of eight repertoires, are really insightful as it turns out that it is not the environment but the individual teacher's construction of the environment that affects the teacher's beliefs (p. 170). Those teachers who find the environment more restrictive tend to be more dependent than those who perceive the environment as supportive. Chapter Nine is a fascinating account of the development of identities of foreign language teachers ($n = 5$) over the period of a decade in which the changes and continuities are traced. The findings show that, with

years of practice, most teachers consider students' needs, although there are still those who resist changes in their practices. The study also implies that the stories of continuities may not suggest a stable identity but rather the effort exerted on the part of the teachers who try to diminish the importance of professional life and protect their conceptualizations of themselves (p. 200).

The concluding part provides the implications of the seven studies in terms of methodology, theory and practice, their evaluation and suggestions for further research.

The book is a successful contribution, both in terms of its organization and, in a way, novelty. The authors of all chapters provide orderly discussions of their studies, with clear introductions preceding each part and well-organized tabular summaries presenting the main information about each study, which makes the content easy to follow. The writers seem to suggest that this collection is somewhat ground-breaking as there are no other comparable studies in the field (p. 206). This seems true with regard to the span of time of some of the presented studies, the employment of visual modalities in the exploration of beliefs, the inclusion of similar studies in terms of topic, method and approach or the treatment of beliefs, agency and identity, however close to one another conceptually, in one volume.

On the other hand, I would appreciate to know why the generation of the data happened when the participants were twenty-one (Chapter Three) and nine years in the profession (Chapter Nine), rather than earlier, given that the previous data in both studies were regularly collected with annual intervals. Failure to provide such an explanation might leave the reader with the impression that the last rounds of data generation were conducted on account of planning to write the very volume, rather than the planning of the study. My other objection refers to the presentation of the content. Although the book counts 237 pages, the essential text is rather short, due to tabular summaries and, above all, return translations of the learners' accounts. I acknowledge the argument that some linguistic nuances can be lost in translations, the whole pages devoted to original sentences in Finnish or Portuguese, languages not so popular worldwide, were somewhat irritating to me. Publishing the book in English and addressing it mainly at international teacher educator readership, the authors can hardly presuppose that readers of the book will compare the translations with the original accounts so as to check their conformity. Perhaps the placement of original words in an appendix may not have diverted the reader's attention from the continuity of the text and would have been a sounder option.

These small reservations apart, I really think that the book fulfils its purposes and language teacher educators should make sure it finds its place on the shelves of their ELT libraries. It may also prove useful for language teachers, especially those

who are concerned about self-reflection and enjoy comparing their own work situations with other professional contexts. I am confident that Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro and Ruohotie-Lyhty's collection may really set the tone for the future research of identities, beliefs, agency and emotions of both language teachers and learners of all ages.

Reviewed by
Dorota Werbińska
Pomeranian University in Słupsk, Poland
dorota.werbinska@apsl.edu.pl