

Book Review

Beliefs, agency and identity in language learning and teaching

Authors:

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

Publisher:

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

ISBN:

9781137425942

Pages:

237

In the last decade, the use of research designs that are able to capture the complexity of belief development and related individual differences has been paramount in the field of SLA. In response to this research call, Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, and Ruohotie-Lyhty explore the phenomena of beliefs, actions, identity, and their interrelationships in the learning and teaching of English and other foreign languages through studies that are contextual, longitudinal, and interrelated. This reader-friendly and, at the same time, scientific and solid volume will surely be illuminating for language students, novice and experienced teachers, teacher educators, as well as second language research scholars from all over the world.

The edited collection is divided into ten chapters. In the first chapter, the authors explain the purpose and organization of the book and describe its intended audience. The second chapter defines the constructs addressed in the studies (i.e., beliefs, agency, and identity) and provides an overview of these in applied linguistics and second language education research. This concise and rigorous review of the literature serves as a background to the seven studies reported in the subsequent chapters, and testifies to the authors' thorough familiarity with and expertise in the field.

Chapters Three to Nine are divided into three parts, which include studies conducted among different populations (i.e., young learners, advanced learners, and teachers) and with the help of various modes of data collection (i.e., oral, written, and visual). Part I is composed of Chapters Three and Four written by Mari Aro, which report on two related longitudinal case studies carried out among young learners of English as a foreign language (turning into young adults) on beliefs about the learning of English and agency. In both studies data were collected through interviews conducted over a period of 14 years, using a dialogical approach. Whereas Chapter Three reports on a group of learners' beliefs and belief development, Chapter Four focuses on two of those participants' development of agency.

The second part includes three studies about belief development, motivation, and identity among advanced English learners or other foreign languages on university teacher education programs, which are reported in Chapters Five through Seven. Chapter Five, written by Ana María Barcelos, explores six Brazilian student teachers' beliefs about teaching English, their motivations to become teachers of English, their prospective teachers' identities, and the changes in these individual differences as student teachers take the practicum. Data were collected over a period of three years through written and oral narratives. In Chapter Six, Paula Kalaja follows a contextual approach to trace the development of Finnish university students' beliefs about English compared to those about their native language, and the development of their identities from learners to professionals. Data were collected twice over a period of four to five years, and they were analyzed through discursive analysis. The study reported in Chapter Seven, also written by Kalaja, is a follow-up study to the research mentioned in the previous chapter, and it describes a group of Finnish student teachers' visions regarding the teaching of a foreign language class right after graduation. This research was also framed within contextual approaches to the study of beliefs, more specifically sociocultural theory, and data were collected through visual narratives.

The third and last part of the book consists of two related studies written by Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty about a group of foreign language teachers in the Finnish school context, and their teaching practices. Chapter Eight reports on the development of their beliefs about teaching foreign languages when they were novice teachers (with three or four years of teaching experience). It explores how teachers construct the school environment in their discourse, and the importance this has for their beliefs about good foreign language teaching. By contrast, Chapter Nine reports on the development of the professional identities of experienced teachers (with nine to ten years of work experience). Five of the

eleven teachers who participated in the previous study were involved in the follow-up study reported in this chapter. On both occasions, data were collected through interviews.

In Chapter Ten, the authors summarize and compare the empirical studies reported in Chapters Three to Nine, and they elaborate on the theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical implications. This chapter is useful for researchers, novice and experienced teachers, and teacher educators as it includes both research and teaching implications drawn from the studies. The chapter ends with the discussion of the strengths and limitations of the studies reported, and a list of suggestions for further empirical investigations, which can enlighten scholars interested in embracing similar approaches in their own research.

Regarding the structure and the way in which the book is written, each of the three parts has a title that reflects the populations studied and the longitudinal nature of the work. For example, Part I is called *Learning English as a foreign language: From school children to young adults*. Furthermore, each part begins with an introduction to the chapters included in that section, which enables the readers to know how the chapters are organized and what to expect in that particular section. This brief introduction is accompanied by a quotation taken from the participants' data. By doing this, participants are given a voice, and readers can learn from their experiences. Through the use of excerpts from participants' data, the authors adhere to the characteristics of strong qualitative writing, making it personal and engaging. As Murray (1989) claims, voice is "what attracts the reader and communicates to the reader. It is that element that gives the illusion of speech" (p. 150). All the chapters follow a similar organization, including a background, aims of the study, data collection and analysis, findings, discussion, and a summary. Finally, at the end of each chapter, there is a table summarizing the study, allowing readers to focus on the salient aspects of each research project. Although the book is academic and well-grounded in theory, the language used is simple and easy to understand, making it accessible to a wide range of potential readers.

The longitudinal nature and approaches of the studies, the populations included, the various modes of data collection and analysis, the thorough discussion of the findings with different implications, and the organization and style of the book make this piece revolutionary and appealing to a diverse audience, including student teachers, novice and experienced teachers, teacher educators, and scholars. SLA researchers agree that there is a strong need to modify our research designs and adopt approaches that will lead to a greater understanding of learners and teachers' individual differences, including their development and interrelationships. Without a doubt, through *Beliefs, agency and*

identity in foreign language learning and teaching, Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, and Ruohothie-Lyhty have demonstrated that they are pioneers of such innovation.

Reviewed by
María Matilde Olivero
National University of Río Cuarto, Argentina
University of South Florida, U.S.A
mariaolivero@mail.usf.edu

References

Murray, D. (1989). *Expecting the unexpected: Teaching myself and others to read and write*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.