



Content list available at <http://ijltr.urmia.ac.ir>

***Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research
(Book Review)***



Urmia University

Autonomy, Agency, and Identity in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language, (Mark) Feng Teng, Springer, Singapore, (2019), +132 pp., ISBN: 978-981-13-0727-0 (PBK).

Alireza Bonyadi ^{a,*}

^a *Islamic Azad University, Iran*

Acknowledging the importance of learner autonomy (LA) as one of the hottest concepts in EFL contexts, the author of *Autonomy, Agency, and Identity in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* has endeavored to explore critically these notions within the context of recent research findings. Throughout its eight chapters, the book aims at providing EFL teachers with frameworks connecting the three notions so that they can equip themselves with a deeper “understanding of the challenges in EFL teaching and learning” (p. x). While chapters 1-6 elaborate on the different theoretical aspects of Autonomy, Agency, and Identity, chapters 7 and 8 each includes a qualitative research paper on teachers’ and learners’ identity respectively.

Based on the premise that “the theoretical discussion of LA is far from consistent, coherent and systematic” (p. 2), the first chapter, entitled as *Learner Autonomy: An Educational Goal of Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, initially reviews the different definitions of the LA construct. The chapter summarizes the main ingredients of learner autonomy that are agreed upon by scholars. The significance of the term as viewed in the other disciplines has been elaborated on. The author then has touched upon the recent criticism voiced by Hand (2006) who raised some doubts on the over-exaggerated importance of LA in education. It underlines some consensus on the nature of learner autonomy arguing that the extent of its realization would not be the same in every contexts. Acknowledging that “learning can occur without teaching and that teaching does not ensure learning” (p. 16), the chapter highlights the effectiveness of provoking learners’ motivation and interest in education.

Chapter two, *Teacher Autonomy: A Buzzword in Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, is devoted to clarifying the issue of teacher autonomy in EFL contexts. In line with the new trend in EFL teaching focusing on learner-centered approaches, the chapter argues that the role of teachers should be redefined accordingly. Referring to the multi-faceted nature of teacher autonomy, the author indicates that for further clarification of teacher autonomy there is a need to take into account other sociocultural, educational and personal factors. It has been argued that teacher autonomy would in turn affect “the development of learner autonomy in foreign language education” (p. 22) indicating an interrelation between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy.

* Corresponding author: English Department, Urmia Branch, Islamic Azad University, Urmia, Iran

Email address: a.bonyadi@iaurmia.ac.ir

The chapter further suggests that through engaging in action research, professional practices and teacher collaboration activities, it is possible to develop teacher autonomy. The author concludes the chapter by presenting his own positive reflections on teacher autonomy.

Chapter three, *Learner Identity in Foreign Language Education: Research Nexus and Implications*, has focused on the relationship between language learning and construction of learner identity. According to the author, the constructed identity can potentially affect language learning. That is, learners with a high sense of identity are expected to be much more active in their language learning process compared with those with a lower sense of identity. The chapter then reviews the factors affecting learners' identity. Asymmetric power relationship between teachers and students, lower level of students' cognitive awareness, and the immediate institution system of learners are among the factors. Suggestions have been put forward on dealing with the factors affecting identity construction at the end of the chapter.

To further explore the construct of teacher identity, chapter four, *Teacher Identity in Foreign Language Education: From the Perspective of Teacher Autonomy, Communities of Practice, and Affordances* elaborates on the complex interaction between teacher identity, teacher autonomy and communities of practice. The author has taken identity as an entity "that evolves along with the complex and dynamic social and educational discourses" (p.50). It has also been argued that identity construction would not be possible unless teachers are engaged in a community which is regarded as social milieu for learning and sharing. Of course, this engagement should be coupled with exercising their agency in taking advantage of the affordances offered by the community or workplace.

As an attempt to address the call for augmenting teachers' and learners' autonomy, chapter 5, *The Complexities of Learner Agency and Teacher Agency in Foreign Language Education*, explores the issue of learner/teacher agency in foreign language education. Going through different definitions of the term agency, the chapter reviews the complexities involved in adopting agentic behaviors in language learning. On his personal reflections upon agency, the author has highlighted teachers' professional agency in shaping their practices in teaching practices.

In chapter 6, *Interrelationship of (Teacher) Autonomy, (Teacher) Agency, and (Teacher) Identity in Foreign Language Education*, the focus is on the interaction between teacher autonomy, teacher agency, and teacher identity. Acknowledging the existence of complex interconnections between agency, identity, and autonomy, the author asserts that teacher agency facilitates both the development of teacher autonomy and identity formation. The chapter highlights the need for EFL teachers to develop their professional identities, adopt agentic behaviors and respond to constraints on autonomy in their practical teaching.

Chapter 7, *To Be or not to Be an 'Old English Lecturer': A Social Identity Theory Perspective*, presents a qualitative multiple case study research on teachers' identity. Drawing on social identity theory (SIT), the chapter aims at examining six English lecturers' identity construction experiences. As for data collection, the author has employed in-depth individual interviews, group discussions, narrative frame, and WeChat post. Based on the analysis of the data, the chapter reports the emerging themes of the study supported by the participant teachers' quotations transcribed verbatim. The study concludes that teachers' identity development is of multiple, dynamic, complex and multi-dimensional nature affected by different personal, institutional, and social factors. Furthermore, the relevant implications of the study for teacher education have been presented at the end of the chapter.

In a similar vein, the last chapter, *How EFL Students Learn English: From the Perspective of Identity Continuity and Identity Change*, gives the report of a qualitative research on learners' identity. Employing data collection methods such as autobiographical accounts, face-to-face interviews, observations, and informal interactions, the chapter, in particular, aims at exploring the relationship between three EFL learners' identity continuity and change and learning English as a foreign language. Discussing the findings of the study, the author asserts that "the structural learning contexts and learners' conventional practices could considerably impact identity construction and reconstruction" (p.134). The chapter provides a number of implications for teaching and learning English for EFL students.

The recent paradigm shift towards adopting learner-centered approaches in education has led many scholars focus on related constructs such as autonomy, identity and agency (Watson & Reigeluth, 2008). Thus, from this perspective, the book, *Autonomy, Agency, and Identity in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* with its detailed elaboration on the theoretical issues, can be regarded as an invaluable source for EFL researchers to operationalize the aforementioned constructs. Furthermore, it presents the implications in the form of frameworks and warnings. This is in line with the efforts of Schutz, Hong, and Francis (2018) who tried to unpack "some of the complexity of teacher identity, showcasing current research with data explored from diverse perspectives" (p. 4).

However, teacher/learner identity has been treated throughout the book without any reference to the dichotomy of native versus non-native English-speaker teacher/learner. The issue that has been fully elaborated by Yazan and Rudolph (2018) who emphasize 'diversity,' 'multiplicity,' and 'fluidity' of the concepts. Furthermore, it seems that too much emphasis on pure theoretical aspects of the notions requires novice readers to contemplate their understanding of the content. Meanwhile, sporadic cases of content redundancy can be detected throughout the book. As an example of the case, in an attempt to conceptualize teacher autonomy, *three models of teacher autonomy* have been repeated verbatim in chapter 4 (p. 52) and chapter 5 (pp. 81, 82). All in all, the volume is highly recommended for those researchers venturing into conducting research on autonomy, agency and identity in language education.

References

- Hand, M. (2006). Against autonomy as an educational aim. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32(4), 535-550.
- Schutz, P. A., Hong, J., & Francis, D. C. (Eds.). (2018). *Research on teacher identity: mapping challenges and innovations*. Springer.
- Watson, S. L. & Reigeluth, C. M. (2008). The learner-centered paradigm of education. *Educational Technology*, 54(3), 42-48.
- Yazan, B., & Rudolph, N. (Eds.). (2018). *Criticality, teacher identity, and (in)equity in English language teaching*. Springer.