Book Review

Autonomy, Agency, and Identity Issues from EFL Learners' and Teachers' Perspectives[1]

Reviewed by Hilal Peker[2], Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

(Teng, M. F. (2019). *Autonomy, agency, and identity in teaching and learning English as a foreign language.* Springer.)

Increasing recent emphasis on and emerging powerful discussions about the effect of social contexts on language learners and teachers have been affecting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) scholarship. Since the focus of the EFL field has shifted from theoretical abstractions to studying individuals as the raw material of EFL research within its social context, individuals' autonomy, agency, and identity have recently become crucial topics. Therefore, many attempts have been made to define these terms, especially from language learners' perspectives (e.g., Huang 2013; Mercer 2011, 2012; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2001). *Autonomy* has been generally defined as one's capacity to control one's learning (Benson, 2011; Oxford, 2003; Teng & He, 2015), while *agency* involves individuals' capacity to act (Gao, 2010) and it is "not only concerned with what is observable but it also involves non-visible behaviours, beliefs, thoughts and feelings" (Mercer, 2012, p. 42). Furthermore, Norton (2000) defined *identity* as individuals' understanding of their relationship to the society, how it is constructed through time and space, and additionally Peker (2020) defined it as "both how individuals perceive their selves to be and how they describe themselves based on the other individuals around within a small or large culture" (p. 186). These three important concepts have been dominantly examined either only from learners' perspectives or from teachers' perspectives; however, few scholars have examined these concepts from both language learners' and teachers' aspects.

Mark Teng's (2019) *Autonomy, Agency, and Identity in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* contains theoretical views and empirical studies on autonomy, agency, and identity that are both socially and psychologically constructed. It also examines these concepts from both language learners' and teachers' aspects. In this book, Teng discusses different conceptualizations of autonomy, agency, and identity and their implications for EFL teachers and learners. The book synthesizes theory and research findings for a better understanding of the challenges in teaching EFL while avoiding definitive or prescriptive remarks. The eight chapters in this book bridge learner and teacher perspectives; while Chapters 1 and 3 focus on learners, Chapters 2, 4, and 6 focus only on teachers. The fifth chapter focuses on both learners and teachers and the last two chapters (i.e., Chapters 7 and 8) involve qualitative empirical studies. In what follows, the chapters are discussed based on these three themes: Focus on learners, focus on teachers, and qualitative empirical studies.

Chapter 1 (*Learner Autonomy: An Educational Goal of Teaching English as a Foreign Language)* focuses on learner autonomy in relation to political and social development of learners, using perspectives derived from sociolinguistics, cognitive psychology, and metacognition and motivation. Teng reviews definitions of autonomy in detail, problematizing several stances in which the term is used. An interesting part of the chapter is its reflections on practitioners' concerns regarding learners' capability to take responsibility for their own learning (i.e., to be autonomous learners). In Chapter 3, *Learner Identity in Foreign Language Education: Issues and Implications*, the author transitions from autonomy to identity concepts. He elaborates on how supporting learners' positive identity construction may help them develop effective learning strategies. The chapter notes that previous studies on learner identity and language learning have been limited to second language situations (i.e., ESL contexts), and that learner identity should also be examined in foreign language situations (i.e., EFL contexts). In this chapter, the factors affecting EFL learners' identity construction, including power relationships between learners and their teachers, as well as learners' goals, practices, agency, and differences are discussed.

In addition, the five factors that learners may encounter in their identity construction are briefly explained. First, the asymmetric power relationship between teachers and students compel students to camouflage their emotions and actual feelings, which may result in detrimental effects on students' identity construction. Second, students may be skeptical about their self-perception and may resist confrontation on their identity conflicts if their levels of cognitive awareness are low. Next, classroom atmosphere of some institutions such as teacher-centered ones may affect learners' autonomy and make them either lose their sense of selves or opt for only listening to the teacher and not participating adequately. The fourth factor is related to agency, and "negative emotions and perfunctory attitudes, stemming from the strained relationship with the learning environment, may lead students to block the steps that exhibit agency" (Teng, 2019, p. 42). The last factor focuses on Norton's (2015) concept of investment. If learners have an imagined community in which they can adopt a new identity, they may invest in learning the target language more while employing a variety of strategies. Therefore, power relations, cognitive awareness, classroom atmosphere, agency, and investment constitute the aforementioned five main factors influencing learner identity in EFL.

In Chapter 2, *Teacher Autonomy: A Buzzword in Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, the author shifts the focus to teachers. Teng emphasizes the importance of supporting teacher autonomy in the classroom through three important ways while taking out-of-class learner autonomy into account as a consequence of rapidly changing educational settings. One way of supporting teacher autonomy is by action research, which is useful for teachers to make a connection between theory and practice and to be involved in professional development to increase their autonomy. Second, teachers' reflecting on their professional practices helps them to appraise their opinions about their teaching and assess the benefits and disadvantages of their current practices. This method could be briefly described as a critical reflection, and teachers' autonomy develops as they find out new opportunities as a result of reflection. The last method focuses on teacher collaboration. Teachers feel empowered as they take charge of their own development and as they make choices about classroom practices. This empowerment is an outcome of their collaboration with other teachers and a result of their creativity, professionalism, and exchange of lesson ideas. This chapter also discusses how to make teachers aware of classroom strategies they can use to boost student autonomy.

Then the author delves into teachers' struggles in maintaining a professional identity while constructing autonomy in and out of classroom in Chapter 4, *Teacher Identity in Foreign Language Education: From the Perspective of Teacher Autonomy, Communities of Practice, and Affordances.* The interrelatedness among teacher identity, teacher autonomy, and affordances is explained as context-dependent, complex, and dynamic. Therefore, Teng emphasizes the importance of supporting teacher identity within specific contexts and communities of practice for a better teaching and learning community. Chapter 6, *Interrelationship of (Teacher) Autonomy, (Teacher) Agency, and (Teacher) Identity in Foreign Language Education,* is another chapter focusing on teachers. Teng connects the notions of teacher autonomy, identity, and agency. He claims that teachers face challenges when their performance is evaluated, which in turn may harm their autonomy, professional identity, and agentic behaviors. Nonetheless, a strong professional identity protects against such threats. This chapter provides a practical guide for teachers to boost their autonomy and agency via reference to empirical studies examining interrelationships between autonomy, agency, and identity. In this regard, teacher agency helps the development of teacher autonomy first. When teachers act upon reflecting in their teaching, their autonomy develops more, which leads them to form renewed teacher identities. Teng (2019) states, "teachers' adaptive preferences and internalized oppression in autonomy may also affect teacher agency, resulting in the (re)construction of professional identities" (p. 87).

The only chapter in which learner and teacher agencies are discussed together, Chapter 5, *The Complexities of Learner Agency and Teacher Agency in Foreign Language Education*, starts with the definition of learner and teacher agency and explains the complexities of these two conceptualizations of agency. Learner agency is conceptualized as a complex dynamic system that includes language learners' beliefs, motivation, self-regulation, affect, and perseverance. These complexities interact with each other in unpredictable ways and to different extents, and this situation places the learners in a non-linear journey of language learning. On the other hand, teacher agency emerges from the interplay between teachers' efforts, accessible resources, institutional systems (e.g., teacher-centered institutions vs. learner

centered ones), and contextual factors. Teachers act as agents in reflecting on their teaching and in "protecting students from unhelpful or harmful practices" (Teng, 2019, p. 72).

Finally, the author proceeds with multiple case studies in Chapters 7 and 8. Specifically, Chapter 7, *To Be or not to Be an 'Old English Lecturer': A Social Identity Theory Perspective*, reports a multiple case study examining the identity construction experiences of English lecturers at higher education institutions in China using Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1981). The main components of this theory are cognitive, evaluative, and emotional components. Cognitive components refer to teachers' awareness of group membership, while the evaluative component refers to the evaluation of belonging to this group with its advantages and disadvantages. The last component is related to the emotions teachers go through in evaluating this group membership. In this study, through SIT, the researcher investigated how teachers define themselves in group membership. Also, personal, institutional, and social factors affecting teachers' identity development were also examined. It was found that Chinese teachers of English were struggling to establish teacher identities while feeling the pressure of publishing to obtain tenures. It is emphasized that EFL lecturers may modify and reconstruct their identity across and within their groups or communities.

Chapter 8, *How EFL Students Learn English: From the Perspective of Identity Continuity and Identity Change*, reports on a qualitative study in which three students negotiate and reconstruct their identities while learning EFL. The data were collected through autobiographical accounts, semi-structured interviews, observations, and informal interactions with the participants. The findings indicated that these three students continued to reconstruct their identities, which the author calls "identity continuity and change" (Teng, 2019, p. 111). This study provides implications for teaching EFL, and valuable insights on understanding identity as a critical-social-psychological variable in language learning and use. For instance, if teachers can understand learners' imagined identities within their imagined communities, they can identify student needs to create a need-based curriculum. Another implication teachers may make use of was focusing on the issues students encounter in adapting to a society or a group to help the learners and provide strategies to them.

The book considers autonomy, agency, and identity from both teachers' and learners' perspectives, discussing the complexities and intersections of these socially-constructed concepts in EFL teaching and learning, which is a notable strength of the book in comparison to other books in the field. In terms of organization and layout, the book provides well-defined introduction sections and then delves into the main topics in each chapter. To make the issues clear, ample graphic organizers, charts, and lists are provided along with their explanations. These characteristics help the reader to visualize and engage in the main concepts and points. However, adding several self-reflection questions to each chapter would contribute to reader engagement more. In addition, while Chapters 1-6 address theory with reference to a wide variety of studies and end with author reflections, Chapters 7 and 8 do not have such sections. Instead, Chapters 7 and 8 report qualitative studies on the books' main concepts. Including self-inquiry questions to Chapters 1 to 6 would solidify readers' understanding of the theoretical knowledge. Regarding Chapters 7 and 8, the author could have added a "future research" section to each chapter, which could help researchers and graduate students use the book as a reference book for their own empirical undertakings.

Overall, each chapter provides links to the authors working on autonomy, agency, and identity, while explaining topics and providing implications for teaching EFL. In addition, each chapter has its own reference list, making it easy to use chapters separately as graduate-level EFL course materials, for instance. The book's review of autonomy, agency, and identity makes it an important resource, particularly for language and social psychology researchers, EFL teachers and practitioners, students, and professors teaching graduate-level courses.

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