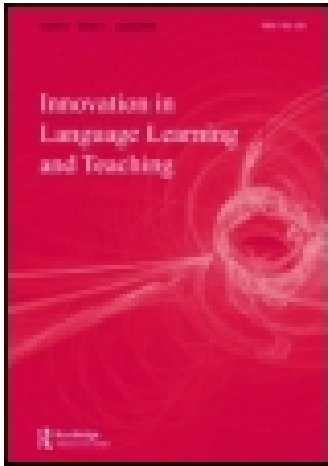


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rill20>

### Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning

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Published online: 27 Jun 2014.



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To cite this article: Umida Ashurova & Vick L. Ssali (2014): Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, DOI: [10.1080/17501229.2014.927191](https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2014.927191)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2014.927191>

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning**, edited by Garold Murray, Xuesong Gao and Terry Lamb, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2011, xiv + 266 pp., US\$ 49.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-84769-372-3

Autonomous (or independent) learning is still a hot area in current studies and research in language learning. More traditionally defined as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec 1981, 3), the concept of *autonomy* also stands out as the starting point for talking about self-access language learning and all other language learning and teaching settings outside the traditional classroom.

Autonomy in language learning is, however, not an isolated goal. It is rather the fruit of a learner’s self-perception and their learning goals (identity) and the drive to achieve those goals (motivation). *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning* explores the depths of the parts and the whole of these three intertwined concepts. The authors, as acknowledged by Diane Larsen-Freeman (blurbs), use qualitative research methods to explore the complex, contingent and dynamic nature of the three constructs and to look for relationships among them. Divided into three sections, the book includes a discussion of the various new concepts in autonomy and a collection of empirical research conducted on learners from around the world. The book begins with an overview in Chapter 1, ‘Exploring Links between Identity, Motivation and Autonomy’, by editors Gao and Lamb. Very succinct and easy to read, it will certainly make the reader want to finish the book.

Part One, ‘Emerging Theoretical Perspectives’, is composed of four chapters, which are devoted to the theorists’ side of the story, advancing theoretical perspectives that are key to the exploration of the links between motivation, identity and autonomy.

In Chapter 2, ‘Motivating Learners to Speak as Themselves’, Ushioda explores how the processes of engaging, constructing and negotiating identities are central to the analysis of motivation theory and practice. What the author underlines is that motivation research should look at learners as self-reflective agents who bring unique identities, personalities, histories, motives and intentions to their language learning contexts.

In Chapter 3, ‘Joining Forces for Synergy: Agency and Metacognition as Interrelated Theoretical Perspectives on Learner Autonomy’, Gao and Zhang analyse a data-set from a longitudinal inquiry into mainland Chinese undergraduates learning English in Hong Kong. They highlight the necessity of exploring the interrelationship between agency and metacognition. They conclude that the two are complimentary in revealing the process and goals of autonomous language learning.

We live in a world with ever-growing access to discourses, and it is important that language teachers always pay attention to how learners cope with innovation under the circumstances. In Chapter 4, ‘Emerging Selves, Language Learning and Motivation Through the Lens of Chaos’, Sade offers a new paradigm to look at the phenomenon of the fluid, dynamic, unstable and unpredictable nature of human relations resulting from the increasing interaction among individuals and even societies. The new paradigm

focuses on dynamism, as opposed to stability, as the only means by which individuals can assert themselves and achieve a sense of wholeness amid growing ‘fractalisation’.

In Chapter 5, ‘Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Second Language Acquisition from the Perspective of Complex Adaptive Systems’, Menezes presents an ‘emerging theory’ which shows that minimal differences in the influence of identity, motivation and autonomy on learners (among other factors) can cause very different results in acquisition outcomes. Menezes’ conclusions from empirical evidence ‘drawn from a corpus of English language learning histories (LLHs) written by Brazilian and Japanese learners’ should be a good guideline for teachers to understand their learners’ learning processes and what motivates them. These conclusions should also help them to understand that, as Sade also observes in this volume, ‘autonomy is entangled in an ever-evolving process of social belonging’ (55), especially where the learner engages in their valued enterprises. It is incumbent upon teachers, therefore, to bring to class their learners’ ‘imagined communities of practice’, especially those associated with pop culture (Murray 2008), in order to enable them to experience what Sade (53) calls ‘motivation as belonging.’ This is a welcome discussion and a move away from the top-down approach to motivation where teachers and innovators dominate the scene with dogmatic theories with little room for learners to discover what actually motivates them in the world and circumstances in which they engage into language learning.

Part Two, ‘Independent Learning Settings’, is a collection of four empirical studies on language learners and teachers in independent learning settings. They seek to understand the cognitive processes that drive both the learners and their facilitators in self-access centres (SACs) and distance learning contexts, and they serve to underline the importance of discerning the identities and self-perceptions of these two important players in the said settings.

Chapter 6, ‘Imagination, Metacognition and the L2 Self in a Self-Access Learning Environment’, looks at the potential of L2 pedagogies that foster the development and realisation of the learners’ ideal L2 selves. Murray examines the role imagination plays in determining the language learners’ approaches, attitudes and aspirations as they strive towards the realization of their ‘ideal L2 self’, i.e., when they will be fully integrated and participating in their ‘imagined target language communities’ (79). Murray gives a thorough description of his Japanese students’ experiences in a self-directed learning course, and he illustrates how imagination mediated both the setting of their possible future selves and the identification of the intermediate steps and actions they needed to take to avoid disappointment. Readers will find ample supplementary material to augment their understanding of Murray’s inquiry into the role of imagination; for it draws mainly from scholars such as Higgins (1987), whose notions of the ‘ideal self’ and the ‘ought-to-self’ were elaborated further by Dörnyei (2005, 2009) in his model, the ‘L2 Motivational Self System’, which is referred to often throughout the book. Its recurrence may perhaps be an indication that it is central to the theme of *Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning*.

In Chapter 7, ‘Identity, Motivation and Plurilingualism’, Castillo Zaragoza discusses the relationship between multilingualism and learners in SACs. Castillo Zaragoza claims that while all the available literature on SACs assumes learners are learning only one language, they are actually ‘using multilingual SACs to engage in plurilingual learning projects’ (91). She examines the value which learners link to either the classroom or the SAC or both as learning spaces, depending on their interests, objectives, obligations, hopes and desires regarding the language in question. Castillo Zaragoza examines her Mexican learner’s descriptions of their visions of their future selves, and she shows how

these influence their decisions to learn sometimes as many as five languages at the same time. She thus raises a valid criticism of the available research literature on SACs, which appears to presuppose that learners are learning only one language. She concludes that learners are often highly motivated, and they may make decisions about their learning based on not just monolingual but plurilingual future selves and engage in plurilingual learning simultaneously.

In Chapter 8, 'Why am I Doing This? Maintaining Motivation in Distance Language Learning', Murphy explores self-motivation from the perspective of distance language learners. She observes that although advances in technology have certainly made distance language learning much easier, 'distance learners still have to schedule and pace their own learning' (108). There is an implicit pointer to the value and relevance of the individual distance learners' senses of agency, and Murphy argues that maintaining motivation depends largely on the personal goal orientation of each learner. But what keeps them going under the circumstances? What is the role of autonomy, competence and relatedness? More specifically, how does the distance learner's vision of their ideal L2 self influence their motivation, and what is the role of other 'competing or complimentary learner identities' (119) in a distance-learning context? Murphy's eloquent analysis of the 'other' learner identities will be of particular interest to distance learners and their facilitators.

In Chapter 9, 'Beliefs, Identity and Motivation in Implementing Autonomy: The Teacher's Perspective', Reinders and Lazarou put an appropriate close to Part Two by shifting attention from the learners to the teachers in independent learning settings. They underline the importance of understanding teacher practice in this context, and they give a powerful description of teacher beliefs from wide-ranging research on teachers of 46 SACs in five countries. Reinders and Lazarou show us the role teacher beliefs play in nurturing learner autonomy in self-access learning, the identity conflicts between teacher beliefs and actual learner behaviour, and the identity conflicts between teacher beliefs and institutional constraints.

Part Three looks at learners and teachers in independent learning settings with an emphasis on their particular cultural contexts. Readers will benefit greatly from these chapters, since cultural differences among societies are of paramount importance to the understanding, implementation and sustenance of any innovation in language learning and teaching.

In Chapter 10, 'Identity, Motivation and Autonomy: A Tale of Two Cities', Chik and Bredback report on the interesting approach they took encouraging learners from two culturally different contexts to share their LLHs through course wikis. Two far-reaching revelations stand out from this experiment. The first is that the participating learners were on a constant journey reflecting on what prompted them to choose English as a language they wanted to learn and what methods best suited their own social circumstances and yielded desirable results. Of interest is the sense of retreat (evident among both Hong Kong and German students) from 'normative expectations put forth by the institutions' which 'may be at odds with the objective sense structures realized by the students' (155). The other revelation is that even coming from two completely different cultural contexts, the learners found common ground in their use of English language popular culture. Through video games, TV dramas and movies, the learners were transforming an entertainment culture they were passionate about into a learning resource. This leads Chik and Bredback's study to an issue of paramount importance, the ever-increasing challenge to language teachers to exploit the newest communication gadgets learners are using.

Learners, such as in Japan, taking time off from their English as a foreign language (EFL) situations, to learn and use the target language in a country where it is spoken has become a popular practice over the years. In Chapter 11, 'Natural Talent, Natural Acquisition and Abroad: Learner Attributions of Agency in Language Learning', Ryan and Mercer examine how learner beliefs and images about learning languages abroad have an impact on both their classroom learning and their whole sense of agency. They agree that learning abroad is not only (in most cases) the quickest way to acquire a target language, but it is also autonomous, independent learning *par excellence*. However, they highlight the danger of letting the practice unconsciously relegate classroom language learning to second place. The chapter should make inspired reading for learners, teachers, administrators and parents who share this popular belief that time spent abroad is almost an automatic path to proficiency and language specialization. The authors propose that what they call the 'fixed language learning mind-set' (as opposed to the 'growth language learning mind-set') may render genuine, purposeful effort in the classroom-at-home redundant (166). They argue that it may also exercise a detrimental effect on a learner's individual agency, identity and motivation for language learning in their own country. The authors advise educators to promote 'a growth mind-set among their learners and help learners to feel agented about their learning in the classroom context' (172).

In Chapter 12, 'Future Selves, Motivation and Autonomy in Long-Term EFL Learning Trajectories', Lamb acknowledges the reality of future 'possible' identities and their influence on the motivation to engage in self-regulated language learning. He also describes the influence on some 'successful' language learners of what goes on in the 'now' of their learning experiences, e.g., their family, school and 'immediate contexts' (193). Lamb points to the challenge for the local teacher (and the occasional researcher as well) to create opportunities that stimulate not only language learning and use in the learners' specific contexts but also an examination of the links between these contexts and the individual future selves.

One particular culture that offers more challenges to language learners is EFL context. Japan is one such context, and the Arab Gulf region is another. Malcolm describes in Chapter 13, 'Failing to Achieve Autonomy in English for Medical Purposes', how a successful L2 learning outcome in such a situation, irrespective of the kind and quantity of motivation, is hampered by both limited prior exposure to the language and opportunities for sustained practice. Her investigation of medical students required to study academic content at a university in the Gulf reveals that initial failure in this 'sink or swim' atmosphere ultimately becomes their motivation. Their response to academic failure develops into responsibility for language learning, even among learners 'who may not initially seem very promising examples of autonomous learning' (200). Malcolm calls on teachers to realise that 'failure may not mark the end of the road for some students, but rather act as a spur that sets them on a path to becoming more autonomous and successful learners' (210).

As for the teacher's perspective on learner motivation in EFL situations, in Chapter 14, 'Crucial but Neglected: English as a Foreign Language Teachers' Perspectives on Learner Motivation', Cowie and Sakui wonder why most studies on motivation attempt to answer why learners are motivated to learn while very few investigate how and to what extent learners can be motivated to learn, in the classroom. Their inquiry into the perceptions of experienced EFL teachers in Japan reveals that both their understanding of motivation and the motivational strategies they employ are based less on the theories of motivation researchers and more on their experiences in their teaching contexts.

In Chapter 15, ‘A Dynamic Account of Autonomy, Agency and Identity in (T) EFL Learning’, Huang appropriately sums up the correlation among the three terms that have been central to the discourse in the book: identity, motivation and autonomy. More importantly, the chapter attempts to support the complex relationship between these three constructs with empirical evidence from the context of teaching EFL. By following the learning process of students at a Chinese teacher-education university in their social and institutional context, Huang examines the relevance of ‘purpose’ in creating more individualized, more self-initiated and more self-directed learners (242). His observation of learners’ identity shifting from ‘lost-at-sea’, aimless first-year students to more confident future teachers as a result of their interaction with their own students in the Teaching Practicum offers language teachers insight into the relevance of ‘practical social purpose’ in curriculum design and language teaching.

The last chapter, ‘Identity, Motivation and Autonomy: Stretching our Boundaries’, by the third editor, Murray, is both a synopsis of the book and a synthesis of how the many and varied themes ‘might advance theory development, inform practice and point to directions for future research’ (248).

Overall, ‘Identity, Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning’ must be commended as superbly effective in exploring and illuminating the link between these three important concepts. The book is by no means exhaustive, but it goes to great lengths to review many new theoretical perspectives. It also presents freshly collected research evidence from diverse contexts, and we recommend it to all teachers and researchers in EFL contexts where issues of motivation, self-identity and agency offer more challenges to learners. Without a doubt, language teachers and researchers in such contexts will be rewarded with a broader understanding of *why* learners are motivated to learn and *how* and *to what extent* they can be motivated by their teachers and facilitators.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2014.927191>