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Visually Tapping into the Lives of Learners: Review of Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer's (2019)
Visualising Multilingual Lives: More Than Words

Reviewed by

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This practice-related review sets out to review *Visualising Multilingual Lives: More Than Words,* an edited book comprising empirical research papers which employ visual narratives in exploring multilingual lives. In this review, I adopt a practice-based stance by putting together my learning gains from the book and my personal encounters with multilingualism as a language education researcher, a language teacher, a teacher educator, a multilingual, and a parent to an emerging multilingual.

この実践的書評は，ビジュアル・ナラティブを用いて多言語生活を探求した実証的な研究論文から成る編集本Visualising Multilingual Lives: More Than Words の論評を目的とする。言語教育研究者，言語教師，教師教育者，多言語，そして新たに生まれた多言語の子を持つ親として，この本から得た学びと，多言語主義との個人的な出会いをまとめ，自身の実践に基づいた見地から述べる。

Bu uygulama temelli kitap kritigi, çokdilli yaşamları keşfetmede görsel öykülemeler kullanan deneysel araştırma çalışmaları içeren "Visualising multilingual lives: More than words" adlı kitabın kritiğini yapmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu incelemede uygulamaya dayalı bir duruş benimsiyor ve incelemeyi, kitaptan öğrendiklerimi, bir dil eğitimi araştırmacısı, bir dil öğretmeni, bir öğretmen eğitmeni, bir çokdilli ve çokdilli yetiştiren bir ebeveyn olarak çokdillilikle kendi kişisel karşılaşmalarımı bir araya getirerek değerlendiriyorum.

Keywords

I was very keen to get my hands on this book as soon as it was published. I was particularly interested in knowing more on how the editors and the authors imagined "multilingual lives" and how they employed "visual narratives" to navigate and understand multilingual lives. Multilingualism is often conceptualised as a linguistic, social or political entity instead of being contextualised as a lived experience, and visual methods are not commonly adopted in exploring multilingualism. Hence, the title of the book promised an innovative anthology and this proved to be so as I read it through.

The editors, Paula Kalaja and Silvia Melo–Pfeifer, describe the book as aimed at MA students, pre–service and in–service teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. I engage with multilingualism at professional, social and personal levels in my life as a language education researcher, language teacher, teacher educator, multilingual, and a parent to an emerging multilingual. Hence my reading of the book was informed by all my encounters

with multilingualism and also my experiences as both a producer and consumer of empirical research, and the book offered so much to learn. I would like to, therefore, organise my review in such a way as to reflect on what I learnt from this anthology. First, I will briefly present a rather clinical overview of the overall structure of the book. Then I will move on to a more detailed discussion of my learning gains, and finalise with my concluding comments.

The book consists of 15 chapters, thirteen of which are reports of original empirical research using visual narratives as research tools to explore multilingualism as experienced by individuals. The chapters are grouped into three main parts based on the contexts in which participants' experiences of multilingualism are tapped into. These are, respectively, the multilingual self, the multilingual learner, and the multilingual teacher education, each of which consists of four to five chapters. Part One, *The Multilingual Self,* is a collection of research studies investigating individuals' experience of being multilingual in formal and informal contexts at different stages of life and it consists of four chapters. The five chapters in Part Two, *The Multilingual Learner*, explore the experiences of foreign language learners in different contexts with a particular focus on the interaction of this undertaking with their identity construction. Part Three, *The Multilingual Teacher Education*, focuses on the identity construction of student teachers as multilinguals in professional teacher training contexts and consists of four chapters. The editors conclude the book with an analytical summary chapter which not only provides a comprehensive review of the research studies presented in the collection, but also offers insightful suggestions for taking research of this kind forward with a clear research agenda.

My key takeaways from the anthology can be grouped in three major themes: the potential of conceptualizing multilingualism within multilingual lives, the notion of visual narratives, and methodological strengths and weaknesses of visual narratives as reported by the authors and editors. I will now expand on these themes respectively.

Conceptualizing Multilingualism Within Multilingual Lives

The editors set out the anthology subscribing to the "multilingual turn" which they define as a counter paradigm to the traditional understanding of multilingualism where native speakerism is taken as the norm of language competence. They argue that multilinguals have a different set of language skills, such as translanguaging, which make them fundamentally different to monolinguals in the way they use languages. This makes any comparison between the two groups invalid. Their interest is, thus, not on multilinguals' language competence or development, but on how they operate as multilinguals in life, because multilinguals can acquire these language skills regardless of their proficiencies in their individual languages.

This separation they make between language development and operating as multilinguals made perfect sense to me based on my own language learning background. I learnt English as a foreign language at school from an early age in Turkey and became an English language teacher with first class honours, but it was only when I moved to England for a postgraduate degree that I realised how unprepared I was to use English in daily life. While I was doing very well in my academic studies, I was struggling with tasks such as ordering food on the phone and negotiating a bill with power suppliers. I was surprised at how this slipped through all the internationally recognised standardised proficiency tests that I had passed with high grades. This was my personal multilingual turn, as I only started to recognise myself as a multilingual when I started developing skills to use English in daily life. Since then, English has become my primary language both at work and at home and I have become more confident using English than my mother tongue on many occasions. I realised that terms such as language development and language proficiency fall short in explaining these shifts I went through in my language experience. This anthology addresses that gap.

Moreover, the editors and the authors focus on multilingualism as subjectively experienced by individuals. In the *Introduction,* the editors show particular interest in individuals' "positive and negative emotions, attitudes, beliefs, visions and identities" (Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019, p. 1) regarding multilingualism. For me, such a shift in conceptualizing multilingualism has direct implications for teaching, learning, and assessing languages. Individuals' experiences with languages, as portrayed in the book, demonstrate that there are so many implicit aspects of people's connections with languages to which language education literature has been oblivious to. For instance, in Chapter 7, *Looking at Language through a Camera Lens*, Liss Kerstin Sylvén compares and contrasts two language learners' beliefs about English and Swedish. There are two student participants: One is a student who comes from a multilingual family background learning English through content and language integrated programme and the other one comes from a monolingual background and learns English as a foreign language. The researcher asks the students to take a number of photos every day during one week illustrating their first (Swedish) and second (English) languages. Through the thematic analysis of the photos and the interviews with the students Sylvén finds that while the former student perceives language as something to be used, the latter perceives it as something to be learnt. The findings suggest that the learners' repertoires of language experiences have an impact on their beliefs about languages. Such information is certainly of great importance to any language teacher who aims to collect data on their learners' language histories and needs prior to organising pedagogical objectives. In this particular research project, the researcher asked the students to take photos illustrating these two languages followed by a one to one discussion of those with the teacher. This could be easily adopted as a classroom activity by interested teacher-researchers. Indeed, the vast majority of visual data collection tools used in the anthology could easily be adopted in classroom research. I will go in further detail on the visual methods in the next section.

The Notion of Visual Narratives

As well as exploring multilingual lives, another common aspect of the research reports presented in the anthology is that they all adopt some kind of visual method(s) for gathering data. The editors choose the term "visual narratives" to describe the specific methodology they adopted. They define visual narratives as "visual materials produced by individuals" (Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019, p. 276) and argue that visual methods enable capturing the complex nature of psychological aspects of language experience through multisemioticity when words alone fall short. They also suggest that this methodology is a good fit for their intentions to capture the subjectivity experienced by individuals through the stories told via these visual narratives.

Visual data has not been very popular in the field of language education until recently and the most common visual data have been drawings produced by participants. Although drawings are still the most common data across the chapters in the anthology, there are some other innovative visual tools adopted by some researchers. For instance, Sylvén (2019) in Chapter 7, as mentioned above, and Umino and Benson (2019) in Chapter 10, *Study Abroad in Pictures: Photographs as Data in Life-story Research*, asked their participants to take photos representing their connections with their languages. Ibrahim (2019) in Chapter 3, *Children's Multimodal Visual Narratives as Possible Sites of Identity Performance*, asked her young multilingual participants to bring objects (either a physical object, or drawings/descriptions of an object) representing their different languages to the interview. She treated those symbolic artefacts as an additional tool to questionnaires, children's writings and drawings. I found the visual narrative chosen by Paiva and Gomes Junior (2019) in Chapter 9, *Multimodal Language Learning Histories: Images Telling Stories*, quite innovative: They asked their participants to produce

multimodal language learning histories including sounds and images using a selection of digital tools. On the other hand, Pérez-Peitx et al. (2019) in Chapter 13, *Awareness of Plurilingual Competence in Teacher Education*, allowed more flexibility to their participants and asked them to produce visual narratives through either drawing or collage or photos.

Throughout the chapters, it becomes obvious that some visual data generation tools are more demanding than the others on the participants in terms of the time, means and skills they require; and some tools could be more appropriate for certain ages, language proficiencies, digital literacy levels and skills. However, they all seem to offer more interesting types of involvement in research for the participants in comparison to conventional methods such as interviews and surveys. These tools also seem to offer opportunities to capture and reflect on the dynamic process of interactions among multilinguals' multiple languages in daily life and in language classrooms. Hence, the majority of these tools could also be adopted as classroom tasks or projects by teachers to co-investigate their learners' experiences with languages.

Connecting to my practices, I used visuals and artefacts for different purposes in my teaching experience. I remember that it worked particularly well when I asked my adult ESOL students to bring visuals and artefacts to introduce their home language and culture. This task offered so many opportunities for communication and bonding in the classroom. As a researcher I have not yet used visual tools as data but going through the examples of the visual narratives throughout the anthology helped me realise their potential and inspired me to learn more about visual methodologies. I found Rose (2016) to be a good follow-up. The more I read about this emerging field, the more I am convinced that visual narratives will open up new horizons not only for my own research but also for the postgraduate research being conducted under my supervision.

Methodological Strengths and Weaknesses of Visual Narratives

Across the chapters in this anthology of work, visual narratives come across as a versatile methodology to explore individuals' personal experiences with, and feelings about languages. They can be adapted to different ages, skills and backgrounds of participants and different research contexts. They also seem to have an empowering impact on the participants even when they are in a linguistically, socially or politically disadvantaged position to express themselves verbally such as young individuals or people who are not competent in the language used by the researcher(s). The participants take a proactive role in shaping their own stories instead of passively answering (or reacting to) the questions directed by researchers. The most striking example of this is displayed in Chapter 4, *Integration as Portrayed in Visual Narratives by Young Refugees in Germany*, by Melo-Pfeifer and Schmidt (2019) in which they investigate the integration of 12 young refugees in Germany. The participants' proficiency was quite low in the researchers' language; thus, they were asked to produce two drawings to illustrate their current self and future self in a year's time. The researchers then conducted a combination of content and visual semiotic analysis to interpret the young refugees' drawings. The researchers claim that they brought down the language barrier and avoided the mediation of translation in this way. However, it is important to note that making meanings solely based on the drawings might well result in misinterpretation of these drawings. The majority of researchers in the anthology complement visual narratives with verbal narratives and strictly recommend doing that for future research since interpretation of visual data could turn out to be biased. The notion of visual narratives strives for subjectivity, but it is the subjectivity of the participant in telling their own story, not necessarily the subjectivity of the researcher in interpreting their participants' stories. It is perhaps this complexity of the analysis that holds visual data back from being used more widely by

researchers. The key take-away for me here is that visual narratives would benefit from data triangulation.

There is not an established route for analysing visual narratives and it is entirely up to the researcher how to handle such data. Qualitative content analysis is the most popular option for the researchers in the anthology, but the descriptions of actual procedures of data analysis were often thin or completely missing. This may well make it difficult for other researchers who are interested in replicating their studies in other settings.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, the anthology offers a rich collection of studies tapping into multilingual lives through visual narratives. Conceptualizing and exploring multilingualism as multilingual lives has great potential in providing a new perspective in understanding the personal and emotional viewpoint of language users. Likewise, visual narratives seem to work fairly well as a methodology for this research agenda. The editors' proposed framework could be adopted in diverse research contexts, and would be particularly useful for exploratory practice in language classrooms.

On a personal note, this book has not only introduced me to the possibilities and potential of visual narratives in research into multilingualism, but also made me stop and think about my languages, their impact on my identity and life experience several times. For instance, when Italian–Australian Sophia in Chapter 2, *Becoming and Being Multilingual in Australia*, by Alice Chik, mentioned that she felt a sense of burden, shame, and guilt when she used Italian in Australia, I was reminded of my experiences of feeling uncomfortable using Turkish or Arabic in certain settings abroad. In the same chapter, Korean sojourner Jessica's voice resonated with me when she expressed her concerns about her children forgetting Korean. Visual narratives tap into a new wild world of often unspoken and unexplored emotions, visions and identities relating to languages and this makes the anthology intriguing and thought–provoking throughout.

Author Bio

My name is **Melike Bulut Albaba** and I am a lecturer in TESOL. I teach pre-service and in-service English language teachers and supervise postgraduate research. My main areas of expertise and research interests include language teacher cognition, teacher research, and educating multilinguals.

Ben **Melike Bulut Albaba**. Hizmet öncesi ve hizmet içi İngilizce öğretmenlerine ders veriyorum ve lisansüstü araştırmaları yönetiyorum. Ana uzmanlık alanlarım ve araştırma ilgi alanlarım arasında dil öğretmeni bilişi, öğretmen araştırması ve çok dillileri eğitmek yer almaktadır.

Review Process

This paper was blind peer-reviewed by members of *The Learner Development Journal* Review Network and Journal Steering Group. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind review.*)

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