
THE LEARNER DEVELOPMENT JOURNAL

学習者ディベロップメント研究部会誌

ISSN: 2433-5401

<https://ldjournal.ld-sig.org>

The Learner Development Journal Issue 5: Engaging with the Multilingual Turn for Learner Development: Practices, Issues, Discourses, and Theorisations

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Title: Openness, Creativity, Collaboration and Narrativity Paving Our Road Towards Critical Multilingual Practices in the Classroom

Date of publication online: 2021

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Published by the Japan Association for Language Teaching
Learner Development Special Interest Group, Tokyo

<http://ld-sig.org/>

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The APA citation reference for this paper is:

Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2021). Openness, creativity, collaboration and narrativity paving our road towards critical multilingual practices in the classroom. In A. Barfield, O. Cusen, Y. Imamura, & R. Kelly (Eds.), *The Learner Development Journal Issue 5: Engaging with the Multilingual Turn for Learner Development: Practices, Issues, Discourses, and Theorisations* (pp. 181-184). Tokyo: The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Learner Development Special Interest Group.

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Openness, Creativity, Collaboration and Narrativity Paving Our Road Towards Critical Multilingual Practices in the Classroom

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When asked to provide this commentary for *Learner Development Journal (LDJ)* Issue 5, *Engaging with the Multilingual Turn for Learner Development: Practices, Issues, Discourses, and Theorisations*, I felt privileged and intrigued. The call focusing on narrative accounts and practice-related reviews matched with my interest and needs as a university language teacher educator and researcher in applied linguistics. To me, in promoting multilingual teacher education and multilingual languages education, we need ideas and support from other members of the teacher community. This is important especially since tackling new paradigms necessitates challenging our habitual agency that often conveniently matches with our experiences and our students' expectations (Conteh & Meier, 2014; Dewey, 1983; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014).

In her review, Gabriella Meier (2017) defines the multilingual turn as part of a critical movement in education, and calls for students and teachers to reflect together to tackle the challenges of translating it into mainstream practice. This issue of the LDJ on multilingualism provides exactly this: reflective narrative accounts and practice-related reflective reviews of seminal work in multilingualism research, which all have the potential to help us as teachers and researchers to better address this complex phenomenon. Therefore, in my commentary, instead of referring to the content of the individual contributions separately, I aim at a reflective analysis of the contributors' conceptualizations of multilingual practices in the classrooms. In what follows, I will raise four important issues that, to me, seem to pave the way towards more multilingual and critical language education, and are also valid for multilingualism research. These are collaboration, openness, ethical consideration and creativity. At the end of my commentary, I will also reflect on the role of narratives in developing multilingual practices around the world.

Critical Multilingual Practices Are Collaborative

The importance of community support and collaboration is the first issue I want to raise. The articles of this collection demonstrate this from many different perspectives. The narrative account from Vasumathi Badrinathan shows the reverse side of collaboration, that of teacher isolation, where teachers have little opportunities for questioning their practices and learning from others. It also demonstrates how difficult it is for an individual to bridge the gap between theory and practice without support from a similar minded community. On the other hand, positive examples of the power of collaboration are also abundantly available. These collaborative practices take various forms. In their narrative accounts, Isra Wongsarnpigoon &

Yuri Imamura reflect together on their experiences in developing multilingualism-supportive social learning spaces in their university, Oana Cusen recounts her discussions with colleagues about the contribution they can make as non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) in Japan, and Lorraine de Beaufort describes her experience of reconstructing a piece of her data again with some colleagues for LDJ5 to gain new perspectives to the experiences of her research participant. These narrative accounts demonstrate the power of teachers thinking together and the possibilities for change that this collaboration offers for individuals and communities. Also the practice-related reviews by Andy Barfield, Oana Cusen, Riitta Kelly, & Yuri Imamura and by Ellen Head & Chie Tsurii demonstrate how texts can be discussed and elaborated together with colleagues for deeper understanding. Even more powerful is the possibility to observe each other in action and get ideas for one's own practices like in the narrative account from Jussi Jussila & Riitta Kelly. In addition, collaboration is not only possible among peers, but developing multilingual practices should also benefit from collaboration with our students, who, as multilingual individuals, have a lot to share, and without whom we cannot really succeed as Andy Barfield's narrative account demonstrates. Researchers also need to build a genuine collaboration with their research participants to be able to understand individual experiences.

Critical Multilingual Practices Are Based on Openness

The articles that are part of this collection demonstrate the role of openness in challenging and renegotiating critical multilingual practices. Openness is important in sharing our experiences and giving the space for all participants to express their sometimes conflicting perspectives. Many of the authors in this issue are open in sharing their own personal experiences in relation to multilingualism. For example, Brennan Conaway in his practice-related review, and Oana, Vasumathi and Akiko in their narrative accounts share a lot of their personal experiences that can help others to identify with their reflections.

Critical multilingual education cannot be about indoctrination, but about critical perspectives and practices that can be negotiated through open and democratic participation. The principle of democratic participation is particularly well demonstrated in the practice-related review by Alison Stewart where she recounts her experience of reading and discussing research on multilingualism with her students. Her review not only shows examples of good practices of dealing with these issues in a language classroom or teacher education, but her practices are also a good example of openness to student thinking, even when the teacher does not always share the students' views. Alison's practices, and the fact that her students feel free to express their differing opinions, show a genuine search for openness and trust in students' ability to think for themselves. Sometimes this might feel disappointing, since freedom always leads to unpredictable outcomes; However, I see it as the only possible way to go forward. Freedom of thought is also strongly visible in Isra's & Yuri's narrative account where student thinking is taken seriously and given a great value in enriching and challenging teachers' own thinking. In addition, we see the power of openness between colleagues in the narrative account by Riitta & Jussi, who share their sometimes difficult experiences of collaborative and multilingual teaching. In their case, open discussion about their doubts, and the ways to share work and collaborate with other teachers is a key to successful multilingual practices.

Critical Multilingual Practices Are Based on Careful Ethical Consideration and Creativity

The contributors also show the ways in which developing critical multilingual practices necessitates ethical consideration and sensitivity. At the heart of multilingualism is the need

for understanding each other's stories, and including multiple perspectives from research participants, students, or teachers (see the pieces by Akiko, Alison, Andy, Lorraine, and Vasumathi). In these texts, there are rich examples of how deeply multi(lingual) practices affect their identities and beliefs, and how deeply they are intertwined with other personal and social identities, as well as issues of power and injustice. Recognizing the importance of these experiences is the first step. In addition to this, we need a "concerted and methodical approach by educators to empower students and reimagine pedagogy," as Huw Davies points out in his practice-related review. In the search of new pedagogies, we need creativity.

The various contributors to this issue also show examples of such creativity in relation to at least one of the important puzzles of being a member of a multilingual working community and educational institute, namely the status and balance of multiple languages in multilingual institutional communication and teaching. The power positions visible in the "one-language-only" policy that Chie & Ellen, Andy, and Huw describe in relation to Japan as well as ideologies of the right kind of language use can seriously hamper multilingual practices of educational communities. The narrative account by Isra & Yuri shows how teachers can experiment together and find ways to tackle this issue through creating a place for multilingualism-supportive social learning spaces in their university. Similarly, Riitta & Jussi provide a deeply practical and fair solution to this question by describing the development of multilingual practices in their work community. As they show, teaching languages together without a distinction between concepts such as foreign language, or native language, provides an example of the power of ethical consideration and creativity that is practical, doable, and resource wise. To me, these pieces of writing really show a way to go forward.

Narrativity Paves the Way Towards Critical Multilingual Practices

Finally, I want to raise an issue that might easily be considered as self-evident in relation to the genres of writing in LDJ5, but I still want to highlight the power of narratives in developing the theory and practice of multilingualism. I perceive narratives, narrative research, and the process of narration as important resources in developing critical multilingual practices. The contributions in this journal are all based on narrative approaches and provide rich, human resources for other teachers and researchers who are seeking ways to address these questions in their teaching. These narratives bind the societal to the personal and have the possibility not only to inform us, but also to move us and thus bring about deep developmental processes (see Kalaja & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2019). As a personal example, the narrative account by Akiko about how multilingualism has, in her life and her research participant's, been connected to forming an identity as a woman touched me personally. In my own mind, although I am from a different cultural sphere, her account resonated strongly with my personal experience as a Finnish woman, raised by a mother who always highlighted the importance for a woman to experience the world and a father who considered a university degree and a steady government or municipal career the secure and desirable option for his three daughters. I realized Akiko's emotions were similar to mine when reading of her experiences as an exchange student in South Korea and comparing them to my exchange year in France. This insightful account helped me to discover my identity again in a more multifaceted way and understand my past from new perspectives. These kinds of learning experiences are also documented in many of the contributions to this issue, such as Melike Bulut Albaba's practice-related review of the book *Visualising Multilingual Lives: More Than Words*. I think this is what narratives can mean to us. When we listen to each other and share our stories, we create possibilities for emotionally and cognitively meaningful learning.

Conclusions

Meier writes in her 2017 paper that “the multilingual turn faces important challenges that hamper its translation into mainstream practice, namely popularly accepted monolingual norms and a lack of guidance for teachers” (Meier, 2017, p. 131). This is a basic dilemma that faces many of us trying to develop more sound educational practices for schools and teacher education. *Engaging with the Multilingual Turn for Learner Development: Practices, Issues, Discourses, and Theorisations*, however, is one significant step forward. It has the power to make us think about these issues and help us to bridge our own experiences with skilfully crafted narratives of multilingual human experience.

Author Bio

Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty is Senior Lecturer of Applied Linguistics at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She is responsible for the foreign language teacher education master’s programme in the Department of Language and Communication Studies. Her research interests focus on identity, agency and emotions in language learning and teaching and in developing better language teacher education. She is a co-author of the book *Beliefs, Agency and Identity in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and has published widely in international applied linguistics and educational journals.

Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty on soveltavan kielitieteen yliopistonlehtori Jyväskylän yliopistossa ja toimii kielten aineenopettajakoulutusohjelman vastuuhenkilönä Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitoksella. Ruohotie-Lyhtyn tutkimuksen kohteena on identiteetin, toimijuuden ja tunteiden merkitys kielen oppimisessa, opettamisessa ja kielten opettajien koulutuksen kehittämisessä. Hän on yksi teoksen *Beliefs, Agency and Identity in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching* (Palgrave, 2016) kirjoittajista ja on julkaissut tutkimustaan laajasti soveltavan kielitieteen ja kasvatustieteen kansainvälisissä lehdissä.

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