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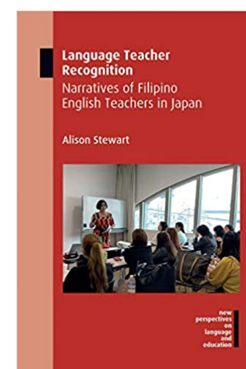
Language Teacher Recognition: Narratives of Filipino English Teachers in Japan.

New Perspectives on Language and Education Series. Alison Stewart.

Multilingual Matters, 2020. E-book (pdf, EPUB). 168 pages.



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It's not often that the word "unputdownable" is heard in relation to an academic book, but this book had me engrossed from the moment I picked it up. It contains narratives by nine Filipino teachers working in Japan, telling the stories of their teaching lives, and one by Alison Stewart herself. These ten stories are told in the first person, in the words of the teachers themselves, with only some 'cleaning up' by the author to make the transcripts more easily readable, and are in a sense the heart of the book, in that they speak to the reader directly both about shared experiences (being teachers of English in Japan, living in a country not their own, and so on), and about experiences that may not be familiar to many (being a minority within a minority—Filipino teachers within a European-Australian-North American dominated profession). There are stories of people already established in their home country, as teachers or otherwise; people who come into teaching by chance, after coming to Japan; stories of hard work and success, of struggle to find acceptance, of challenging and overcoming prejudice and stereotypes. What really makes this volume so intriguing, though, is the way in which Stewart eloquently weaves around these narratives her argument about the nature of identity, and in particular the centrality of the concept of *recognition* to any understanding of identity.

Stewart argues that recognition is the key to any identity theory. In essence, recognition consists in "submitting to the power" (p. 31), or accepting the right to recognition, of the person being recognised; while *mis-recognition*, or lack of recognition, is at the root of the identity politics that we see in societies around the world today. If our sense of identity is essential for our self-respect and our sense of being in the world, it is through the struggle for recognition, which "is the basis of human subjectivity and agency" (p. 27) that individuals strive to claim different identities for themselves. There are many examples of this struggle, in the narratives. Aurora, the founder of Filipino English Teachers of Japan (FETJ), notes that in the early days, "we [felt] that we didn't have the right to speak out," (p. 81) and Lori, worries that the mothers of her students will not approve of her. Stewart locates the key elements of this concept of recognition in the twin emotions of *prejudice* (particularly as it is experienced by those who are its object) and *pride*. In doing so, she places herself in opposition to the post-structuralist position which dominates applied linguistics, and especially identity studies. Her argument is that post-structuralism, with its focus on the ubiquity of the ideological systems that form all social frameworks, sees the individual as always 'subjected' to one ideology or another. A person can choose the identity they will enact, but only from ideological frameworks already in existence in the social realm. Recognition theory, on the other hand, allows for the "affective or psychic nature of identity" (p. 57). This taking account of the role of affect in identity (the self-affirming emotion of pride, and the sense of hurt that comes from

feeling prejudice coming from others) means that people are constantly mutually co-constructing each other, negotiating each others' identities, making change possible through the actions of individual people taking charge of their lives, rather than only through the large scale political action that, Stewart says, is implied by a post-structural perspective.

This is the central theme of the book, and is developed step by step by the author, in between the narratives. As Stewart points out at the outset, this is not a book to dip into, but needs to be read in order, from beginning to end.

As readers of *Learning Learning* will know, native-speakerism, the ideology (and prejudice) that English can only be taught by native speakers of English, and only those who conform to a narrow stereotype (inner circle speakers of English), is especially strong in Japan. Filipino teachers of English, despite being 'native English speaking teachers' (Stewart discusses the problems with this term), have traditionally been excluded from EFL roles in Japan. Only in recent years have they begun to be accepted, and then for the most part in the informal language school sector where pay is low and job conditions insecure, rather than in formal public school settings. These first small steps have been largely made possible by the activities of a teacher's association, FETJ, and in the first story Aurora describes how she came to found this organization in 2000. After realising that many Filipino teachers were inhibited from taking an active part in other teaching associations, she started study groups in her home at weekends. Her story, and the next two, Lori's and Elma's, illustrate something of the variety of the backgrounds that led each of them to teaching English in Japan. What they have in common, though, is that each of them faced significant prejudice, and hardship, while conversely, each talks about the pride they feel in overcoming that prejudice through hard work and achievement. From these accounts, Stewart pivots to discuss the notions of *investment*, about which she has reservations, in that it reduces human value to market terms, and *desire*, another powerful emotion which Stewart maintains takes us back to recognition theory as a way of theorizing about identity. The concept of investment was first used by Bonny Norton Pierce (1995) in her study of women immigrants in Canada. Despite a wide-ranging and detailed critique of the use of the term, Stewart concludes the discussion by acknowledging the ground they share: that denial of access to participation, and the desire for recognition are the keys to understanding identity, and why it is so important.

Chapter 4 introduces Sampaguita, who, aside from telling the story of her teaching life, describes a major change brought about in FETJ. Sampaguita's story leads to a discussion of how groups form, change and maintain identities, and how that impacts on individual teachers' identities. This happens through recognition mechanisms such as the award of achievement certificates and the provision of opportunities for professional development and management roles within the group. The theme is continued in the stories of three younger teachers, Anna Marie, Shin and Katrina. All three discuss their increasing pride in themselves as teachers in terms of the recognition they receive at FETJ, not least as a result of the confidence invested in them by being able to take organizing roles there. The strong emotions which color all these teachers' accounts leads Stewart to a consideration of the notion of value, not in an economic sense, but as a moral sensibility which motivates the teachers to try to improve their skills, and to support the community of their fellow Filipino teachers. At the same time it is seen in the work of FETJ, with its dual mission to support teachers and to foster teaching excellence.

The two final stories come from university teachers, Renata and Carmela, whose experiences of teaching are quite different from the earlier narrators, and who were not members of FETJ. Their accounts provide a welcome balance, reminding the reader that not all Filipino teachers in Japan have the same experiences. While the earlier narrators all felt that their identity as Filipinos was central to their teaching identity, Renata and Carmela identify themselves as teachers first, with confidence in themselves as professionals. They also provide a somewhat more critical view of aspects of FETJ, which adds to the richness of the overall picture. Not being members of the group, and perhaps because they choose to identify as teachers or researchers first, rather than as Filipinos, they feel themselves to be outsiders, and the group as overly parochial. Despite this, both of them are in general positive about the benefits FETJ have brought to the Filipino community. This section is a useful reminder of the complexity of the issue, and supports Stewart's thesis that identity is rooted in emotion, and fluid, rather than enforced by ideological structures. Renata and Carmela are labelled as Filipino teachers, but the identity they claim is different.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in giving some thought to what it means to be, and to feel oneself to be, a teacher. Identity politics is of course a highly contested area just now, arousing strong feelings among many. Stewart offers a refreshingly new way of thinking about identity, through her critique of poststructural explanations, and through the concept of recognition, "the precondition for ontological security and social justice" (p. 235). Not only is there a comprehensive and scholarly review of a host of topics related to these questions, but the book also provides a thoughtful discussion of the methodological issues involved in this kind of study: the representation of interview data so that the voices of the participants themselves are heard, the political choices involved in selecting and 'cleaning up' that data, the inevitable influence of the researcher on what the interviewees say, and how they say it. The thought that stuck most in my mind, as I turned the last page, was Stewart's statement of her core belief that "the world exists independently of the way we think about it" (p. 59), but that the way we think about our identity is also rooted in reality, and is deeply felt. An account based on recognition theory allows her to treat emotions as central to the issue of identity, and to make the persuasive claim that the pursuit of social justice depends not only on the location of economic power, important as that is, but also on the agency of teachers insisting on earning and receiving the recognition that is their due.

Reference

Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, *29*(1), 9-31

If you would like to review this book for the 2021 Autumn issue of *Learning Learning*, please contact the LL editorial team at <lleditorialteam@gmail.com>. Many thanks.

Whose Autonomy? Voice and Agency in Language Learning

Edited by Adelia Peña Clavel & Katherine Thornton

(Independent Learning Association) [**Free ebook PDF** | **ePub** | **Mobi for Kindle**]

Publication date: 2020

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The 2018 Independent Learning Association Conference was held at Konan Women's University, Kobe, Japan, in September 2018 and brought together autonomy researchers from around the world under the theme *Whose Autonomy? Voice and Agency in Language Learning.* This collection of papers includes a variety of voices, from both classroom and non-classroom contexts, including from learners themselves.

The first part of this collection of articles contains papers that explore the development of autonomy of students in the classroom. The second part consists of projects which focus on learners' opportunities to use English outside the classroom and showcases multiple instances of learners exercising their agency in an interesting variety of contexts. The third section focuses on how advisors and teachers exercise agency in teacher education contexts. The fourth section includes a number of collaborative reflections on the conference. Finally, the fifth part includes seven student papers from the *Learners About Learning* student conference, organised by JALT Learner Development SIG Kansai Group, and held within the main conference.