Book Review

Dynamics of a Social Language Learning Community: Beliefs, Membership and Identity (2020)

By Jo Mynard, Micael Burke, Daniel Hooper, Bethan Kushida, Phoebe Lyon, Ross Sampson and Philip Taw.

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The book’s authors are all (or were at the time of writing) researchers at the same small university in Japan. With seven names already listed on the cover, perhaps it would have been cumbersome to add the names of the many students whose voices are heard throughout the pages.

The cover photograph sums up the theme. A group of students sit around a table chatting in what looks like a university cafeteria. All except one seem to be Asian and the remaining one could be an English teacher or perhaps a native speaking student. A two-page glossary at the front of the book includes mainly explanations of sites around the university. Although the primary intended readership are language teachers, trainers and researchers plus graduate students are also listed as possible readers.

In Part 1, as well as the Introduction and an explanation of the book’s methodology, the authors explain what is meant by social learning spaces and education in Japan. That prepares us for Part 2’s six case studies, one per chapter. Although the person responsible for each chapter is listed as one of the book’s authors, each study also names the storyteller, starting with a direct quote from that learner. Thus Chapter 6’s long title reads “‘We see the same people, like, every day so I feel like yeah it’s kind of like a community, Yellow Sofa community kind of thing’: Sina’s story”. Her words couldn’t illustrate more clearly the fact that she has been learning beyond the textbook.

Part 3 is back to theory. In Chapter 11 identity is explored and in Chapter 12 it is communities of practice. Individual differences come under the spotlight in the thirteenth chapter. Here the authors give considerable detail, as illustrated in a Table analysing results from each student and in Figure 13.1 Kaede’s “core beliefs and nested factors” (p. 147). Finally Part 4, written by four of the authors, summarises the findings and suggests some “implications
and practical interventions” (p. 66).

If there is to be another edition of this book, my suggestion would be to enlarge some of the tables. In some cases the inclusion of many details has come at the expense of legibility. Apart from that mini-complaint this book does well what it has set out to do. Giving voices to learners who have been part of social language learning communities makes the topics readable and lively.

Author Bio

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