

# **Theorizing and Analyzing Agency in Second Language Learning**

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# **Theorizing and Analyzing Agency in Second Language Learning**

Interdisciplinary Approaches

Edited by

**Ping Deters, Xuesong (Andy) Gao,  
Elizabeth R. Miller and Gergana Vitanova**

**MULTILINGUAL MATTERS**

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*We dedicate this volume to Professor Leo van Lier,  
whose groundbreaking contribution to research on  
agency has inspired and greatly influenced our work.*

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UK: St Nicholas House, 31-34 High Street, Bristol BS1 2AW, UK.

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Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.

Website: [www.multilingual-matters.com](http://www.multilingual-matters.com)

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Blog: [www.channelviewpublications.wordpress.com](http://www.channelviewpublications.wordpress.com)

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# Contributors

## Editors' Biographies

**Ping Deters** is a Professor in the English Language Institute of Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. Her areas of interest include sociocultural perspectives on the role of identity in SLA, the acculturation and integration of immigrants and international students, comparative and international education, pre-service and in-service teacher development, and qualitative and narrative research. Deters has published in journals such as *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *TESL Canada Journal*, *Contact* and *Activities, Adaptation and Aging*. In addition, Deters has published a monograph, *Identity, Agency and the Acquisition of Professional Language and Culture* (2011) with Continuum.

**Xuesong (Andy) Gao** is an Associate Professor in the Division of English Language Education, Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong. His current research and teaching interests are in the areas of learner autonomy, sociolinguistics, vocabulary studies, language learning narratives and language teacher education. His major publications appear in journals including *Applied Linguistics*, *English Language Teaching Journal*, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *Language Teaching Research*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *System*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *TESOL Quarterly* and *World Englishes*. In addition, he has published one research monograph (*Strategic Language Learning*) and co-edited a volume on identity, motivation and autonomy with *Multilingual Matters*. He is a co-editor for *System: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics*.

**Elizabeth R. Miller** is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research uses fine-grained discourse analysis in exploring issues relating to identity, learner agency, power relations and language ideologies as they emerge in interactions involving adult immigrant learners of English. She has published in journals

such as *Applied Linguistics*, *Modern Language Journal*, *Linguistics and Education*, *Multilingua*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* and *Journal of Politeness Research* and is the author of *The Language of Adult Immigrants: Agency in the Making* (2014) with Multilingual Matters. In that book she adopts various kinds of discourse analytic approaches in exploring how immigrant small business owners position themselves as agentic figures in constructing narratives about their language-learning and work experiences.

**Gergana Vitanova** is currently an Associate Professor at University of Central Florida. Her research interests explore sociocultural issues of second language and focus on the interplay between second language learning, identity, gender and agency. She is particularly interested in Russian philosopher Bakhtin's dialogical theory and its application to the analysis of narrative discourse data. She has published in journals such as *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* and *Language and Dialogue*. She is also the author of the book *Authoring the Dialogical Self: Gender, Agency, and Language Practices* (2010) with John Benjamins and a co-editor of the volume *Dialogues with Bakhtin on Second and Foreign Language Learning: New Perspectives* with Lawrence Erlbaum (2005).

## Chapter Author Biographies

**Adnan Ajsic** is a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at Northern Arizona University. His research interests include language ideology, corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, English as a global lingua franca, language policy in post-colonial and post-communist societies and supranational institutions, family language policy, as well as pedagogical applications of corpora and individual differences in second language acquisition. His writing has appeared in *Language Policy*, *English for Specific Purposes* and the *Journal of Language and Politics*. Adnan is currently working on his dissertation, which investigates language ideologies and ethnonational identities in the Balkans.

**Mari Aro** currently works as a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä, in a Science Workshop project 'Agency and Linguaging: Perspectives on Learning-in-the-world', funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation. Aro's doctoral dissertation on Finnish children's beliefs of foreign language learning (Aro, 2009) discussed language learners' beliefs in the dialogical framework, using the concepts of voice and agency in its analysis. Her current research focuses on a follow-up study where she re-investigates the research participants of her former study, now young adults.

**Sangeeta Bagga-Gupta** is full Professor of Education at the Center for Feminist Social Studies, Örebro University, Sweden. Her transdisciplinary



research encompasses traditionally separate fields like literacies, monolingualism, multimodality, learning and identities (gender, functional disabilities, ethnicity). Using multiscale ethnography across time and space, she studies everyday life, policy and sociohistorical dimensions of social practices both inside and outside institutional environments, primarily from anthropological and postcolonial approaches. She has published articles and chapters in different academic domains including Communication Studies, Deaf Studies and Educational Sciences over the past few decades. Her books include *Literacies and Deaf Education* (2004), *Alternative Voices. (Re)searching Language, Culture and Diversity . . .* (co-edited, 2013) and *Literacy-praktiker i och utanför skolan* (co-edited, Swedish: Literacy-practices inside and outside school, 2013). She has since 2008 headed the Swedish Research Council-funded multidisciplinary National Research School LIMCUL (Literacies, Multilingualism and Cultural Practices in Present Day Society).

**David Block** is ICREA (Institutió Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats) Research Professor in Sociolinguistics at the University of Lleida (Spain). His main interests are the impact of political economic, sociological, anthropological and geographical phenomena on multimodal practices of all kinds (including social movements, multiculturalism, bi/multilingualism and the acquisition and use of languages). In his more recent work he has focused specifically on neoliberalism as the dominant ideology in contemporary societies and social class as a key dimension of identity, all of which is reflected in his two most recent books: *Neoliberalism and Applied Linguistics* (2012; co-authored with John Gray and Marnie Holborow) and *Social Class and Applied Linguistics* (Routledge, 2014). He is editor of the Routledge book series *Language, Society and Political Economy*.

**Anna De Fina** is Associate Professor of Italian Language and Linguistics in the Italian Department at Georgetown University. Her interests and publications focus on discourse and migration, identity and narrative. She has authored numerous articles in internationally renowned journals and edited special issues on these topics. Her books include *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse* (2003, John Benjamins) and the co-edited volumes *Dislocations, Relocations, Narratives of Migration* (2005, St Jerome Publishing, with M. Baynham), *Discourse and Identity* (2006, Cambridge University Press, 2006, with Deborah Schiffrin and Michael Bamberg) and *Selves and Identities in Narrative and Discourse* (2007, John Benjamins, with Michael Bamberg and Deborah Schiffrin). Her latest publication is the volume *Analyzing Narratives* (2011, Cambridge University Press, co-authored with Alexandra Georgakopoulou).

**Liam Doherty** is a PhD student in Modern Language Education at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include World Chineses,

diversity and multilingualism in Chinese as a second/foreign/heritage language education, digital literacy and Chinese learner identity. Topics of his recent research include narrative language socialization through popular television dramas and the digitally mediated agency of Mandarin learners using social media and mobile platforms to aid in their literacy development. He previously completed an MA thesis at the University of Toronto on changing contexts and practices in international Chinese language education.

**Patricia (Patsy) Duff** is a Professor of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, where she coordinates graduate programs in TESL and Modern Language Education and is Co-Director of the Centre for Research in Chinese Language and Literacy Education. Her books and guest-edited issues of journals include the following titles: *Language Socialization* (Vol. 8, *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, with N. Hornberger), *Inference and Generalizability in Applied Linguistics* (with M. Chalhoub-Deville and C. Chapelle), *Case Study Research in Applied Linguistics, Languages and Work* (with N. Labrie), *Indigenous, Minority, and Heritage Language Education in Canada* (with D. Li), *Issues in Chinese Language Education and Teacher Development* (with P. Lester) and, most recently, *Learning Chinese: Linguistic, Sociocultural, and Narrative Perspectives* (with five co-authors). She has published journal articles and book chapters on these and related topics as well.

**Hannele Dufva** is a Professor of Language Learning and Education at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. With dialogism and the work of the Bakhtin Circle as her theoretical background, she has published numerous articles on applied linguistics and language learning and teaching and edited a number of books. Her research is focused on understanding the role of cognition in learning and using languages, and her current research particularly draws on the notions of distributed language and cognition.

**Chatwara Suwannamai Duran** is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Houston, where she teaches courses in linguistics and sociolinguistics. Originally from Bangkok Thailand, and having studied in both Europe and the USA, she has learned to appreciate and explore multilingualism in both local and global contexts. Her current research focuses on transnational families' lived experiences, multilingual repertoires and literacies that are complicated by migration, globalization and contested language ideologies in the sending and receiving nations.

**Próspero N. García** (PhD, University of Massachusetts, Amherst) is an Assistant Professor of Spanish Applied Linguistics at Rutgers University, Camden. His research interests lie in the fields of Spanish second language

acquisition and pedagogy, Vygotsky's theory of mind, second language evaluation and assessment, and technology-enhanced language learning. His most recent works explore the role of agency in the conceptualization of grammatical categories, and the implementation of concept-based teaching in the L2 Classroom.

**Christina Gkonou** (PhD, University of Essex, UK) teaches linguistics, psycholinguistics and methodology of TEFL to undergraduate students at the University of Essex. She also works as an EFL and EAP teacher at the same university. She holds a BA in English language and philology, and an MA in TEFL. Her main research interests lie in the area of individual differences and the psychology of language learning.

**Hayriye Kayi-Aydar** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Arkansas, where she teaches courses on ESL/ELL education. Her current research works with discourse, narrative and pedagogy, at the intersections of the second language acquisition, interactional sociolinguistics and social psychology. Her research interests focus on positional identities, positioning, power and learning opportunities in classroom settings.

**Man-Chiu Amay Lin** received her PhD from the applied linguistics program at Arizona State University and currently works as a community activist. Her research interest focuses on the language education of the ethnic minorities in Taiwan, including the Indigenous and immigrant populations, exploring the relationship among language, culture, identity and oppression in a globalizing world. Her dissertation takes a praxis-oriented stance and uses ethnographic, collaborative methods to re-construct the role of the Indigenous language (Truku) in one Truku village in eastern Taiwan.

**Carola Mick** works as an Assistant Professor (maître de conférences) at the department of Linguistics of the University Paris Descartes in France. She holds a PhD in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics of the department of romance languages (French, Spanish) of the University of Mannheim (Germany), and worked as a post-doc in the interdisciplinary research group LCMi (Language, Culture, Media, Identity) at the University of Luxembourg. She specializes in the critical analysis of discourses in the areas of migration and education, and is particularly interested in questions of the social, discursive construction of identity and learning in multilingual contexts.

**Theron Muller** is an Associate Professor at the University of Toyama, Japan. His publications include exploration of TBL and academic publishing. He is also lead editor on two book projects related to EFL, the recently published *Innovating EFL Teaching in Asia* (2012) and *Exploring EFL Fluency in*

*Asia* (Forthcoming, 2014), both with Palgrave Macmillan. Currently his research interests involve investigating the experiences of authors pursuing academic publication and improvement of journal review systems. He is active with *JALT Publications* and the *Asian ESP Journal* and part of the University of Birmingham English Language and Linguistics Open Distance Learning team.

**Peter W. Stanfield** (EdD) is Program Chair of Social and Behavioral Studies at the Higher Colleges of Technology in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. His career in the UK, Denmark and the Middle East spans primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate teaching within formal classroom settings as well as in community and outdoor places. His research interests center on place-based education and teacher development. He is a reviewer for the *International Journal of Bilingual and Multilingual Teachers of English* and has made contributions to pedagogic books on English language teaching research.

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**Jennifer Bown**, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

**Mingyue (Michelle) Gu**, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

**Ruth Harmon**, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

**Peter Jing Huang**, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

**In Chull Jang**, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto (OISE/UT), Toronto, Canada

**Robert Kohls**, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto (OISE/UT), Toronto, Canada

**Joshua M. Paiz**, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

**Manka Vargese**, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

**Julia Menard-Warwick**, University of California, Davis, CA, USA

**Doris Warriner**, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

**Yongyan Zheng**, Fudan University, China

# 1 Introduction to Theorizing and Analyzing Agency in Second Language Learning: Interdisciplinary Approaches

Gergana Vitanova, Elizabeth R. Miller,  
Xuesong (Andy) Gao and Ping Deters

## Agency Situated Historically

This book showcases how language learner agency can be understood and researched from varying perspectives by providing, for the first time, a collection of diverse theoretical, analytic and pedagogical approaches in one volume. The concept of human agency has generated considerable interest across various disciplines – philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology – for some time, and this scholarly conversation regarding how to understand humans’ capacity to act shows no signs of abating soon. While the notions of *agency* and *the self* have always seemed inherently intertwined, *agency* has been far more difficult to define, although it has been viewed, understandably, as one of the many facets of the self. Thus, the idea of agency or our understanding of the nature of humans’ capacity for agency has been, to a large extent, determined by historically influential models that explain the nature of the self.

At least four different models of selfhood have emerged and influenced scholars’ perspectives regarding what constitutes both subjectivity and agency. The traditional understanding of self (for a summary, see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) is largely represented in myths and rituals, and these have helped humans understand the most significant events of their lives, such as birth and death. Body and spirit were viewed as two separate entities in this traditional model, and the spiritual reality was viewed as the higher one. The modernist conception of self was strongly influenced by

Enlightenment era perspectives, and it was marked by what Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010: 87) call ‘an unprecedented autonomy’ with its different forms of individualism. The self was seen not only as possessing an essential and unchanging core but also as independent and rational. Choice and action, which have come to be closely associated with agency, form an important component of this rational, individualistic self. For centuries, or at least ever since Aristotle, agency has also been associated with consciousness. Contemporary philosopher Korsgaard (2009), for example, illustrates the importance of self-awareness for agency in her statement:

The identity of a person, of an agent, is not the same as the identity of the human animal on whom the person normally supervenes. I believe that human beings differ from the other animals in an important way. We are self-conscious of the grounds on which we act, and therefore are in control of them . . . When you deliberately decide what sorts of effects you will bring about in the world, you are also deliberately deciding what sort of cause you will be. And that means you are deciding who you are. (Korsgaard, 2009: 19)

Deliberate, conscious choices and actions that are, at the same time, intrinsically moral underlie most Western perspectives on agency. Korsgaard’s excerpt also reflects that, for a long time, and in different disciplines, the relationship between *agency* and *identity* has been perceived as deeply entangled. Human actions and experience have occupied a central role as well.

When outlining the development of self as subject in psychology, Blasi and Glodis (1995: 416) point out that ‘[i]n every intentional action that we perform, in every experience that we undergo, we experience ourselves, *in the process of acting and experiencing*, as related to our actions and experiences’ (emphasis in original). Psychologists see the relationship between subjects, actions and experience as organic. Not all acts exemplify human agency, however. Agency requires not merely the ability to produce a change in the world, but also that acts should be knowingly, consciously undertaken by subjects. Thus, reflexivity has emerged as another significant component of agency (Kogler, 2012).

In contrast, in a movement that opposed modernism and came to be known as postmodernism, the self is viewed as decentralized and unstable. Perhaps most importantly in terms of agency, the self appears stripped of its personal autonomy. For instance, feminist poststructuralism (Weedon, 1997), which prefers the term *subjectivity* to *identity* and accentuates the discursive, languaged nature of selves, has been employed in applied linguistics exactly because of its focus on how discourses offer various positions for subjects. While there are different postmodern approaches, what characterizes them most broadly is an understanding of the self as constituted through language (Foucault, 1972; Lacan, 1977). Unlike the traditional or modern