

Book Review

The “Bigger Story”: Reflections on Language Teacher Identity Research

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Reflections on language teacher identity research. G. Barkhuizen (Ed.). New York, NY: Routledge, 2017. pp. v + 278.

Gary Barkhuizen is a recognized powerhouse in the field of narrative inquiry research, having focused much of his life as a qualitative researcher using narrative to explore various aspects related to language teachers and learners, with a special interest in language teacher identity (LTI). He has written numerous books and articles about his own research spanning several countries, including South Africa, the United States, New Zealand, and China. In this book, Barkhuizen has enlisted 41 other highly qualified researchers in applied linguistics and TESOL from a broad range of perspectives to add their voices in reflecting on LTI research. In acknowledging the importance of Barkhuizen’s recent book, De Costa and Norton (2017) note there is “a burgeoning body of LTI work” (p. 6). This book provides the reader with a comprehensive anthology of both the current status and future of LTI research.

Barkhuizen is known for his invention of narrative frames in the field of narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008), and he utilizes a similar idea in this book with what he calls “guided reflections within a common chapter structure” (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 2). In describing this book just prior to its release, Barkhuizen said he “asked all the authors to look to the future and see what they think about teacher identity and research in the future, and to then list specific topics having to do with teacher identity, language teacher identity, and ways in which we can research those topics” (Wilson, 2017, p. 5). Every chapter, therefore, ends with each author’s suggestions for future research in the area of LTI.

The mark of a good language teacher is when students learn without realizing it, and Barkhuizen’s intent with this book echoes that sentiment. Utilizing what he calls “*LTI unplugged*” (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 2), he has made reading this book enjoyable and personable by calling on the participant authors to write chapters which are “narrative in nature,” and which utilize “a limited number of references, to decrease the murkiness even further” (Ibid.). In reflecting on LTI research, the participant authors discuss a number of topics related to language teachers such as motivation, teacher beliefs, and teacher socialization, in multiple contexts, including Canada, Australia, Spain, Japan, China, and Finland, to name a few. The chapters are purposefully not grouped “in any particular way, thus allowing the reader to dip into the book at any place that grabs their attention—it may be the author, or the title, or the subject area covered” (Ibid., p. 11).

In keeping with Barkhuizen’s interest in narrative inquiry, as mentioned, the chapters are “narrative in nature”. As Barkhuizen explains, the purpose of narrative as it relates to

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language teachers is to look at “different things... You start looking at how narrative can maybe make connections with them. Narrative sometimes can be quite focused, and that’s good because you get a real in-depth knowledge of the particular topic that you’re looking at, but it’s also good to look at broader connections.... the bigger story” (Wilson, 2017, pp. 5-6). By bringing the participant authors together in this book, Barkhuizen provides the reader with a view of the bigger story of language teachers and their identity formation.

For anyone interested in LTI research, a student looking for thesis ideas, or someone who might just wish to reflect on their own identity as a language teacher by understanding other language teachers’ experiences, this book is an interesting and captivating read.

References

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