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[Book review] Reconceptualising authenticity for English as a global language by R. S. Pinner

Journal Item

How to cite:

Hultgren, Anna Kristina (2019). [Book review] Reconceptualising authenticity for English as a global language by R. S. Pinner. BAAL News(114) pp. 22–23.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

https://www.baal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/BAAL-News_114_Winter2019.pdf

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Pinner, R. S. (2016). *Reconceptualising authenticity for English as a global language*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. ISBN number:978-1-78309-566-7. 199 pages.

Review

In a world where non-native users of English substantially outnumber native ones, Pinner argues, in this sophisticated yet accessible book, for the need to revisit and reconceptualize the notion of ‘authenticity’.

The *raison d'être* of the book is that ‘authenticity’, a long-standing and foundational concept in the field of language learning and teaching, has been seen largely as a linguistic trait and as a product of a target culture. As Pinner explains, traditional definitions have tended to oversimplify authenticity as a thing based on the origin of the teaching materials and the extent to which this has been produced by native speakers of so-called ‘natural language’. Instead, and as convincingly argued by Pinner, authenticity needs to be reconceptualized as a fluid and contextually contingent concept suited to the multiple ways in which English is used in today’s globalized world.

In Chapter 1, Pinner makes a case for the central role the concept of ‘authenticity’ has played in language learning and teaching, arguing for the timeliness of reconceptualizing it in relation to shifting societal conditions and reconfigurations of language learners and users. He states his aim of the book as being to ‘replace the “classic” definition with a reconceptualised version, which is more inclusive to other varieties of English” (p. 2).

Chapter 2 offers numerous sophisticated reflections on the existential, philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of authenticity. Pinner expounds what some of history’s great thinkers, including Rousseau, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Sartre, have had to say about authenticity and related concepts. Pinner suggests that one reason why existentialist philosophers might have struggled with the concept of authenticity is that, with some exceptions, they approached the Self from a stable and essentialized vantage point.

The role and status of English as a Global Language is the subject of Chapter 3. While Pinner recognizes and is appreciative of the many moves the field has seen away from simplistic native/non-native speaker dichotomies, he believes such moves have not gone far enough. He argues for the need to further challenge simplistic dichotomies, given the abundance of people and contexts that do not fit neatly into these. He offers the example of children brought up with different languages, raising the question of what it means for such speakers to communicate authentically.

The notion of authenticity itself and how it relates to language teaching and learning is not substantively engaged with until Chapter 4. This chapter offers a highly insightful and comprehensive account of the history and development of the concept of authenticity in the field, highlighting the many contradictions of extant definitions. This chapter will be particularly useful for readers seeking an overview of the development of the concept.

In Chapter 5, Pinner sets out to carve out his alternative conceptualization of authenticity, which is to convey it as a continuum. The authenticity continuum, which views authenticity as a dynamic process in multifaceted layers, signifies that ‘multiple cultures, multilingualism and diversity are given a more central place in the language classroom’ (p. 130). Authenticity

is approached as a complex dynamic construct that can only be understood by examining it from social, individual and contextual dimensions, in relation to actual people.

Recognizing that English is rarely a question of either or, Chapter 6 moves on to consider the notion of authenticity in bilingual education. As Pinner rightly points out, bilingual education, in whatever form, is becoming the norm in many contexts across the world. Discussing the examples of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction), Pinner suggests that authenticity is relevant not in the sense of peppering the teaching with texts from the target culture, but in terms of relating it to a sense of communicative purpose that goes beyond the immediate context of the classroom.

The role of new media, and its increasingly entrenched presence in contemporary life, is the topic of Chapter 7. Pinner explores how the increased exposure to and opportunities for communicative exchange that transcends national and linguistic borders has significant implications for authenticity.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 8, summarises the main points made in the book and reiterates the need for reconceptualizing authenticity. It finishes by outlining some useful steps towards a new research agenda.

This is a clever and horizon-expanding book with a lot to offer readers. It gives an insightful and comprehensive review of debates around authenticity in language teaching and learning while suggesting a new way forward that is less Anglocentric and less static. The book is written in a lively, engaging and in many places entertaining, way with ample examples to concretise at times complex lines of argument. While on the whole accessible to a broad audience, some of the more complex ideas in the book might be more easily followed by readers well-versed in the literature, whether post-graduate students or scholars working in the field.

Perhaps the only thing that nagged this particular reviewer was one assumption that appeared to remain unquestioned. This relates to the extent to which identity (and by implication authenticity) is relevant to speakers themselves? Is it always potentially relevant in all contexts, both inside and outside of the classroom? Certainly in EMI contexts, which Pinner briefly discusses in Chapter 6, English appears to be used mainly as a pragmatic tool and not as something that's necessarily relevant to neither identity nor authenticity. Notwithstanding this question remaining unanswered, this is an eminently written book, with an abundance of insightful reflections, to which it is impossible to do justice in this short review.

Reviewed by Dr. Anna Kristina Hultgren, The Open University.