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Space, Place and Autonomy in Language Learning by Garold Murray and Terry Lamb

Reviewed by Sara Cotterall, Faculty of Graduate Research, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Over the years, I have come to appreciate the publication of each new Garold Murray book for obliging me to engage with innovative ideas in the field. Murray's most recent collaboration with Terry Lamb is no exception. In this collection, the editors have trained their gaze on space and place – phenomena so very ordinary and ubiquitous that many of us may never have reflected on the role they play in learning. Each of the book's 15 chapters explores, in very different ways, the processes by which spaces are transformed into places for language learning or teaching. According to Carter, Donald and Squires (1993, ix) – “place is a space to which meaning is ascribed”. Think of your favourite café, the spot in your home you go to when you want to read, or the area in the yoga room where you like to place your mat. According to Murray and Lamb, autonomy is a key element in the process of transforming a space into a place.

How, you ask, does this relate to language learning? Initially, language learning was almost exclusively associated with classrooms. Once researchers recognised that different classroom environments impacted learning differently, context came to be accepted as an important variable in language learning. Next, researchers started to explore language learning settings other than the classroom, exploring self-access centres, distance language learning and study abroad experiences. But this book challenges such classifications and poses the broader question – what role do space and place play in language learning?

Several of the book's chapters were originally presented at a Symposium on Space, Place and Autonomy in Language Learning convened by Murray and Lamb at the 2014 AILA Congress in Brisbane, Australia. Encouraged by the strong interest in their theme, the editors sent out a second call for papers following the Symposium and were reportedly inundated with submissions. Clearly space and place as an object of research in language learning is an idea that has come of age.

To call the collection eclectic would be an understatement. The chapters are organised under four headings – Urban spaces, Teacher education spaces, Classroom spaces and beyond

and Institutional spaces – but not all of them appear to belong where they have been allocated. For instance, while Naoko, the language learner at the centre of Beverly-Anne Carter’s chapter, was enrolled in a teacher education course when she produced her language learning history, her narrative says much more about the role of space and place in her language learning trajectory than in her life as a teacher. On reflection, however, any attempt to categorise these contributions is likely to be challenging since the boundaries between places are fluid and, at times, irrelevant in learners’ learning.

Given the scope of the collection, the editors’ introductory chapter is a useful starting point. They suggest that a focus on space and place directs us into metaphorical, geographical, physical and virtual spaces, each with particular affordances. Chapters in the first section explore urban spaces from diverse perspectives including the plurilingual nature of contemporary cities (Lamb and Vodicka), the role of emotion in transforming physical and virtual spaces into language learning opportunities (White and Bown), the identification and construction of foreign language learning spaces in contemporary Hong Kong (Chik) and the exploitation of linguistic landscapes as a potential learning/teaching resource (Wilton and Ludwig). However, it is Balçikanlı’s chapter which resonates most with me, as he explores the way that a café in Istanbul is transformed into a place where Turkish learners gather to use and learn English. His chapter begins by referencing a conference paper by Xuesong (Andy) Gao which reported on the language learning taking place in an “English Corner” – a phenomenon familiar to any English teacher who has spent time in China. In both cases the researchers explore the magic which enabled native speakers of Turkish and Chinese respectively to turn an unremarkable local space into a place that afforded them the motivation and discipline to interact with each other in English.

The three chapters in the section on Teacher Education have little in common. Whereas Kuure examines the multiple “attention spaces” her learners need to manage while designing a learning project for children, Carter highlights Naoko’s navigation of space and place in her lifelong learning of English, including her efforts to re-claim her identity as a Japanese speaker on returning to Japan. Jimenez Raya and Vieira’s chapter explores the metaphorical space inhabited by the language teachers they worked with as they reflected on pedagogical possibilities in their teaching. The participants were encouraged to adopt case methodology as

they explored the “interspace between reality and ideals” in their professional practice and considered the feasibility of effecting change in their teaching routines and procedures.

The fourth section – entitled Classroom spaces and beyond – includes one of the saddest chapters I have ever read. da Silva Reis’ account of a language class in a juvenile detention centre in Brazil illustrates how the meanings ascribed to a place by external authorities can constrain learners’ ability to express their autonomy. In a much more conventional setting, Kocatepe reports on the way a group of Emirati learners in the UAE use humour to appropriate the discursive classroom space and make their voices heard. The chapter by Hafner and Miller, however, invites us to leave the classroom beyond and explore the virtual spaces participants in their English for Science course constructed as they worked on their learning projects. I particularly enjoyed reading about the learners’ strategy of repeatedly rehearsing the scripts for their video voiceovers – a thoroughly authentic and useful language task.

The concluding section, which focuses on Institutional spaces, opens with a chapter by Hobbs and Dofs, who remind the reader of the importance of adhering to sound pedagogical and ethical principles when making decisions about institutional learning spaces. Murray, Fujishima and Uzuka’s chapter provides an institutional counterpoint to Balçıkanlı’s chapter, focusing on the practices that encourage or inhibit learners’ entry to social learning spaces. The second chapter in this section, by Magno e Silva, provides an inspiring account of what can happen when learners are encouraged to explore the idea that classrooms are not the only place where language learning might occur. Her chapter investigates how nested systems – the students, the Autonomous Learning Support Base (BA3) and the TEFL programme in which the learners were enrolled – interact in ways that result in expanding “the students’ learning geography”. One of the four transformative projects she describes involved a visiting English Teaching Assistant establishing a gospel choir run with the support of the BA3. The choir members met weekly to rehearse, learned about gospel singing and its history and role in African American culture and eventually performed at three different venues. Benefits reported by the learners included enhancing their awareness of cultural values and their appreciation of the rhythm of language, as well as becoming more comfortable speaking English.

Until I reached the last chapter of the book, I was struggling to see what united the different contributions. However, in their Conclusion Murray and Lamb adopt the lens of complexity thinking to argue that place is an actor and a dynamic force in any learning context

which has the power to provoke total restructuring of any learning system. They argue that complex systems theory offers a useful theorisation of the way that space and place operate in language learning. There is much to like about this conceptualisation. It is open-ended, multiple and dynamic. It can therefore account for similar behaviours resulting in very different outcomes, as in White and Bown's account of Russian learner Natalia's negative language learning experience in the metro and positive experience in the park. In Natalia's language learning system, the different reactions of her two native Russian interlocutors provoked different emotional reactions on her part.

This book includes something for everyone. It offers accounts of and reflections on research, as well as suggestions for practice. As such, it will appeal to classroom language teachers, language teacher educators, teacher trainees, self-access centre advisers and managers, distance language teachers and language researchers. After reading this book, I have decided to re-read Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's (2008) book – *Complex systems and applied linguistics* – to gain a richer understanding of this conceptualisation. It has also made me reflect on the role of space and place in my weekly writing sessions with PhD candidates. During the last couple of weeks, I've produced several drafts of this review while sitting in the university café alongside other members of the Shut Up and Write group. Since January, we have established certain ways of interacting with each other, welcoming new members and occupying and appropriating this part of the larger public space. In fact, by gathering around the same table each week and supporting each other's efforts to write, we have ascribed this part of the café with our meanings, transforming it from a space to our place.

This review originally appeared in the newsletter of the IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG *Independence*, 74, 2018.

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Notes on the Reviewer

Sara Cotterall is a former convenor of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning (1986-2002) who has taught at universities in Asia, Australasia, Europe and

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