

Book Review

Situating language learning strategy use: Present issues and future trends

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Despite recently going through a sort of a crisis brought about by critical remarks made by eminent scholars (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005) about the *raison d'être* of the whole research area, the field of language learning/learner strategies (LLSs) is still very much alive and kicking. This is manifested by constant publication of meta-analyses (e.g., Plonsky, 2011), numerous journal articles, including state-of-the-art pieces (e.g., Pawlak, 2019), special issues of journals (e.g., Pawlak & Oxford, 2018) and books (e.g., Oxford, 2017), and the organization of a conference series (Situating Strategy Use [SSU]), all devoted exclusively to LLSs. The book under review here, *Situating Language Learning Strategy Use: Present Issues and Future Trends*, edited by Zoe Gavriilidou and Lydia Mitits, includes chapters originating in the talks delivered at the Second International Conference on SSU (Komotini, Greece, September 2017).

As is the case with post-conference publications, the authors of the chapters are an international "motley crew" of more experienced scholars who are easily recognizable for their contribution to LLS research, and less experienced

researchers. However, branding them all humorously as a motley crew (Greek dominated, though, which reflects the affiliations of the editors and the venue of the conference), an expression usually used to refer to bands of pirates, is not meant in a negative way; quite to the contrary, it highlights the fact that they represent diverse research contexts, in particular various places in Europe, North America and Asia, which is undoubtedly a strength of the book.

The book opens with a foreword by Peter Gu, in which he sketches a research agenda for the contemporary LLS field and expresses the conviction that many of the chapters in the book contribute to it. What follows is a preface by one of the editors, Zoe Gavriilidou, in which she presents the book's focus and goals. These are further explained in an introduction authored by both editors, where they also comment on the structure of the volume. The overarching aim of the publication is gathering the most recent research and ideas concerning LLSs, locating research gaps, and staking out new research territories. The book thus aims to provide research directions by suggesting useful theoretical and methodological solutions, and also to show how research can inform strategy instruction (SI) and learner autonomy. Let me say right at this point that in my opinion the book is largely successful in meeting these general objectives, which I will try to highlight in some of the comments on particular chapters, with some caveats included later on.

The book is divided into four parts and 15 chapters. Part 1, entitled "Language Learning Strategies: Where Do We Go from Here?" includes two chapters by eminent LLS scholars which are more theoretical and conceptual. Part 2, "New Pathways to Language Learning Strategy Research," includes five chapters related to strategy use and assessment in relation to speaking (Chapter 3) and vocabulary (Chapters 4-7). Part 3, "Language Learning Strategies in Context," comprises four chapters concerning strategy use in different country- (Chapter 8), task- (Chapter 9), target language- (Chapter 10) and educational institution-specific (Chapter 11) contexts. Part 4, entitled "Aspects of Language Learning Strategy Instruction," includes four chapters dealing with SI in connection with a wide range of linguistic and pedagogic matters, that is, the peculiarities of Modern Greek morphology (Chapter 12), the promotion of learner autonomy (Chapter 13), and the use of new technologies (Chapters 14-15).

In Chapter 1, "Language Learner Strategies: A Call for Fine-tuned Strategy Categorization," Andrew Cohen uses a somewhat personal account of his own grappling with learning strategies when learning Chinese to highlight the need to frequently update strategy characterizations necessitated by the ongoing changes in how students learn and use languages. Cohen also stresses the caution and precision required in strategy definition and characterization by showing that what seems to be a single strategy may flexibly realize a number of completely different strategic functions at different points in time.

Rebecca Oxford's contribution is Chapter 2, entitled "Consciously Keeping Watch: Self-regulation and Learning Strategies." It is yet another effort to reconcile LLSs with self-regulation. Thus, it seems to be an outgrowth of the harsh criticism by Dörnyei (2005) and some other authors of LLS research. Although strategy researchers seem now to have survived and recovered from the "crisis" following the criticism, and the LLS field is perhaps even stronger now because of its lively and constructive reaction to it, "responses" to the crisis are still common. It is in this vein that Oxford shows the compatibility between and mutual complementation of LLSs on the one hand, and the theory of consciousness and several theories of self-regulation on the other: Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Feuerstein's instrumental enrichment program, and self-regulation as researched in educational psychology and social cognition. The exploration of the links between the research areas is a theoretical innovation that the book promises.

Following the extended discussion of the two initial chapters, in order to examine the value of the whole book, it is useful to consider Gu's research agenda outlined in the foreword, which echoes earlier suggestions concerning what is ideally required of up-to-date LLS research (Pawlak, 2019; Pawlak & Oxford, 2018). It seems that such research should (a) go beyond mere establishment of strategy taxonomies and surface level exploratory research (explanatory and intervention research is required, including strategy and strategy-based instruction), (b) focus on learners' motivation for strategy use and its social construction, rather than treating strategy employment as just a skill, (c) contextualize strategy use in terms of specific tasks, and also skills and language subsystems, especially those which have received less research attention (e.g., grammar and speaking), (d) examine the contextual pressures and affordances mediating successful strategy application, also with respect to learning diverse languages, (e) develop strategy assessment, also for purposes other than research, (f) focus on the links between LLSs and other individual differences, especially learner autonomy, and (g) investigate the dynamics of strategic learning over different timescales. In what follows, I briefly introduce different chapters by assigning them to the above research agenda points. This way, I will reveal the actual realization of the research guidelines by the contributions to the volume, which is tantamount to meeting the purposes announced in the introduction.

(a)

In Chapter 13, "Promoting Learner Autonomy through Learning Strategy Instruction with College EFL Students," Nae-Dong Yang describes a project in which she offered differentiated metacognitive SI to Taiwanese college students, which influenced their autonomy and was reflected in learner beliefs. In Chapter 14, "Promoting Learners' Critical Thinking and Developing Reading Strategies

through Critical Video-gaming," Vasiliki-Agathi Theodoridou and Anna-Maria Hatzitheodorou test teaching reading strategies aimed at fostering critical reading with the help of commercial video games in a case study of a 13-year-old Greek learner of English. In Chapter 15, "Using Digital Supportive Feedback for the Strategic Training of Young EFL Learners," Anna-Theodora Veliki and Angeliki Psaltou-Joycey report an important quasi-experimental study in which they found that vocabulary learning SI among young English learners employing digital supportive material may be effective in terms of better strategy use and improved vocabulary performance.

(b)

In Chapter 1, Andrew Cohen calls for fine-grained strategy characterizations, also in terms of their elusive and dynamically changing functions, which will by necessity involve focusing on specific reasons for strategy use.

(c)

In Chapter 3, "Speaking Strategies and Speaking Ability in ESP Classrooms in a Higher Education Setting," Milevica Bojović focuses on the less frequently investigated speaking strategies and finds out that they are used more often by learners whose communicative ability is high. In Chapter 7, "Strategic Construal of Particle Verbs (PVs) in Croatian Secondary School Learners of English," Ana Petanjak Dedić and Renata Geld investigate specific strategies used by high-school learners of English when interpreting the meanings of phrasal verbs. Several types of "strategic construal of particle verbs" are distinguished, in the spirit of cognitive linguistics. In Chapter 9, "Task-Specific Strategy Use in Video-Mediated Integrated Writing: The Greek EAP Context," Iris Papadopoulou, Ifigeneia Machili and Zoe Kantaridou investigate strategy use in writing tasks integrated with videos. They found that tertiary learners use test-wiseness, output-composing and input-organizing strategies, with the last two predicting their academic English language proficiency.

(d)

In Chapter 8, "Situating Language Learning Strategy Use and Instruction: The Greek Context," Angeliki Psaltou-Joycey offers a comprehensive review of LLS research in Greece over several recent decades. Although this chapter could be linked to some other items on the research agenda (e.g., LLSs and individual differences, and SI), it connects the most closely with strategy use and strategy teaching contextualization. In Chapter 10, "Understanding Language Learning Strategies in Context: The Case of Russian Students Learning Greek as a Foreign Language," Zoe Gavriilidou, Irina Tresorukova and Antonios Mylonopoulos focus

on the use of LLSs in learning Greek by Russian students majoring in Greek studies in Russia. This study could also be linked to (f) as the authors not only explain their results obtained by an adapted version of Oxford's SILL with reference to the specific context of the study but also correlated them with several individual differences. In Chapter 11, "EFL Learning Strategies and Motivational Orientations of Multilingual Learners in Mainstream and Dual-immersion Schools," Lydia Mitits, Zoe Gavriilidou and Athina Vrettou investigate the differences between LLSs used by multilingual learners in mainstream and dual-immersion Greek schools.

(e)

In Chapter 4, "Vocabulary Learning Strategy Surveys in Second Language Acquisition: Design, Context and Content," Richard LaBontee compares three vocabulary strategy assessment instruments, examines the processes of their development (including validation and reliability), and uses the insights thus garnered to revise the Swedish Vocabulary Learning Strategy Survey. In Chapter 5, "Exploring EFL Learners' Paths through Vocabulary Learning Using Narrative Frames," Višnja Pavičić Takač and Sanja Marinov examine school-age learners of English's vocabulary learning strategies by means of narrative frames and show their utility for the purpose. The authors also contribute to the debate concerning the place of LLS research vis a vis self-regulation.

(f)

Even though I do not list any chapters here, several contributions do make reference to the relationship between LLSs and individual differences, even though it is not their main advantage because they do not investigate these differences in an innovative way.

(g)

No chapters fit this guideline.

In addition to numerous chapters being compatible with a state-of-the-art research agenda, the book has other strengths, too. First, many chapters include sound pedagogical implications grounded in the research reported, which may somehow with time trickle down to the teaching profession (e.g., the suggestion in Chapter 5 that vocabulary teaching and SI should address the whole learner-person, including their affect). Second, the research is varied in terms of its themes and contexts. Next, innovative teaching solutions concerning strategic learning are provided in some chapters (e.g., reading SI using video games). Also, the book offers some methodological diversity and even sophistication, a good example being the methodology of narrative frames (Chapter 5). Finally,

and on a more personal note, it is good that a bulk of the talks presented at a conference get published in one volume because conference participants can return to some presentation themes and also less formal exchanges which they have failed to remember or consider in detail.

There are also some weaker points concerning the book, which do not however significantly diminish its overall merit. One is the fact that some chapters do not make any significant contribution to the research agenda referred to earlier and bear only a weak relation to the theme of LLSs. In particular, in Chapter 6, "The Language of the Home in Learning L2 Vocabulary," Thomai Alexiou, Lydia Mitits and James Milton investigate the knowledge of the L1 and L2 vocabularies of minority L1-Turkish children in Greek schools, and they make reference to LLSs only as an afterthought in considering the possible ways of improving the children's vocabulary knowledge. This also applies to Chapter 12, "Morphological Segmentation in Strategy-based Instruction: Towards a Graded Morphological Syllabus of Modern Greek," where Maria Mitsiaki and Anna Anastassiadis-Symeonidis describe the procedure for syllabus creation with respect to the morphological intricacies of Modern Greek and only loosely refer to the possibility of applying aspects of the syllabus in SL.

In the preface, Zoe Gavriilidou states that another purpose of the book is helping teachers appreciate LLSs so that they encourage learners to use strategies and be more engaged. In addition, the volume aspires to offer ideas on how learners can autonomously approach learning situations. Yet teachers and, especially, learners are not specifically listed as the intended readership of the book, so these aims may be realized only indirectly via the conduit of researchers. This is a book primarily for the academic audience: researchers and university students, especially graduate ones. The editors also suggest that it might serve as a textbook. I take issue with this because edited volumes such as this one are rarely suited for this purpose because of their multiple, often not highly compatible perspectives; a student and a university instructor expect a more unified and by necessity simplified view of a research or practice area.

Some other limitations of the book concern publication and research standards, as well as topic coverage. First, the methodological and academic rigor in some of the contributions is slightly lesser than in articles published in top-tier journals, which is, however, understandable given a different peer review model used in the preparation of such publications. For example, there are cases where the methodologies are not meticulously described and the results are not thoroughly discussed with ample reference to previous research. Second, although the book's coverage is relatively wide, there are no references to some of the newest LLS research trends such as investigations informed by complex dynamic systems theory or other-regulated strategy use.

All in all, despite the limitations, taking into account the strengths of the book, that is its breadth of coverage of both theoretical and empirical aspects of the contemporary LLS research agenda, its engagement with some of the topical issues such as innovative SI, and its reference to a wide range of contexts, the book is a valuable addition to the LLS literature. The editors and authors should be lauded for their largely successful effort to offer a state-of-the-art volume which will be of use mostly to the research community and also students, especially graduate ones, interested in LLSs and their role in language learning and teaching.

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