

Conclusion:
The future of research into language learning strategies

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Abstract

In this concluding paper to the special issue (SI) we seek to achieve three main goals. First, based on the papers it included in the SI, other recent publications as well as our own ideas, we point to the future directions of research into language learning strategies. Second, we comment upon the methodological issues that such research inevitably has to face, stressing in particular the need to combine a macro-and micro-perspective. Third, we emphasize the pedagogical orientation of such empirical investigations and make a plea for intensive efforts on the part of specialists to find ways in which the findings of LLS research can in fact inform classroom pedagogy.

Keywords: language learning strategies; future research directions; research methodology; classroom pedagogy

This special issue of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* has brought together thirteen papers by specialists in language learning strategies (LLS) from different parts of the globe. From the very outset, it was our intention

to cover all the main areas of research into LLS, both these that have long been established and these that have only begun to gain prominence, thus taking stock of what the field has been able to accomplish, navigating uncharted waters, and setting the course for future empirical investigations. Initially, though, we mainly set our sights on the use of LLS with respect to all the major skills and subsystems, that is listening, reading, speaking writing, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and pragmatics. With time, however, we recognized that there was a pressing need to focus on a number of other crucial issues, such as the use of strategies for learning culture in a second or foreign language (L2), differences in strategic learning between the additional languages people might be studying (e.g., L2, L3, etc.), the employment of LLS in technology-mediated language learning, the link among strategies, self-directed learning, self-regulation and autonomy, but also methodological concerns, in particular reliance on various data collection tools, such as the SILL (Oxford, 1990). As a result, the special issue has kept growing to become a respectable volume in its own right, a publication which surely complements and extends the state-of-the-art overviews of the field that have appeared over the last decade or so (e.g., Amerstorfer & Oxford, 2018; Cohen, 2012, 2014; Cohen & Griffiths, 2015; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Grenfell & Harris, 2017; Griffiths, 2013, 2018; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Oxford, 2011, 2017; Oxford & Amerstorfer, 2018; Pawlak, 2011).

While all of the contributions have understandably made an effort to establish links with the past in providing a more or less extensive synthesis of existing research, all of them have also highlighted the directions in which subsequent empirical investigations can profitably be taken. It is such suggestions, innovative ideas gleaned from other sources, as well as the co-editors' own proposals and ruminations that offer a basis for reflection on the future of research into language learning strategies, both with respect to its foci and methodology. When it comes to the former and as this special issue has demonstrated, one clear way to take the field forward is to investigate LLS in regard specific domains in which they may be employed rather than in a more generalized fashion. In other words, we are perhaps more likely to obtain valuable insights into different facets of strategies if we focus specifically upon target language (TL) subsystems or skills, culture or affect than if we only seek to probe into strategic learning in a more general manner. This is because, when asking general questions, concerning, for example, planning the learning process, studying specific target language features, or collaborating with others, we are likely to get rather general, often routinized answers. As a result, we are bound to overlook the fact that such strategic devices may be applied differently depending on whether the focus is on grammar, reading or pragmatics, not least because each of these domains is bound to pose challenges of unique kind for L2 learners. Another important

consideration is that some areas have been evidently relegated to the back seat, with the effect that we still know little about LLS used for learning grammar, pronunciation, translation, or culture, but also speaking which has mainly been considered in terms of primarily reactive communication strategies. Obviously, such a shift of focus is by no means tantamount to losing sight of the bigger picture and there is certainly merit to establishing overall profiles of strategy use for particular learners or groups of learners. One could even argue that this should ultimately be the goal of LLS research because, after all, language constitutes a unified whole, this is how it is used in specific cultural circumstances, and this is how it should be learned.

There are also other issues that are likely to figure prominently on the agenda of research into LLS in the near future. One of them is the use of strategies in different additional languages that learners might be learning consecutively or simultaneously, both in general and in regard to specific domains. Although there is some research in this area, it has mainly focused on showing that multilinguals are more frequent strategy users than bilinguals or monolinguals and it has not really shed light on how learning different languages can in fact shape LLS use as a result of their specificity, status or utility. This gap must without doubt be addressed as shedding light on these issues can in fact inform actual teaching rather than merely providing proof that the knowledge of multiple languages can give a boost to strategic learning. Another challenge for researchers is to investigate strategies as they are used in specific learning tasks or the different phases of these tasks rather than only trying to uncover general patterns in a population or to collect responses to hypothetical situations. After all, it is one thing to uncover the dominant trends of grammar learning strategy use by English majors with the help of a specifically designed questionnaire and quite another to determine the strategies actually employed in a focused communication task (cf. Ellis, 2003) or a controlled exercise. By the same token, while there is surely value in assessment of affective or emotion regulation strategies through narratives or scenarios (e.g., Gkonou, 2018), new and possibly more illuminating observations could perhaps be obtained through tapping into these emotions in real situations that may transpire in the classroom (e.g., doing a role play, taking a quiz, being engaged in a pair-work activity).

Yet another potentially fruitful line of inquiry is the investigation of the dynamic nature of strategy use, thereby following in the footsteps of specialists who have undertaken this challenge in regard to other individual difference (ID) factors, such as motivation (e.g., Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015) or willingness to communicate (e.g., MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011; Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Bielak, 2016). On the one hand, it would be interesting to determine how strategy use changes over time, both in terms of its intensity, the predominant

patterns of strategies that students draw upon, and the functions that strategic devices perform. On the other hand, as superbly demonstrated by Cohen and Wang (2018), it is enlightening to investigate changes in the application of strategies during the performance of specific language learning tasks, thus shedding light on the multiplicity of functions strategic devices can perform as well as rapid, moment-by-moment changes in these functions over the course of an activity. The examination of the dynamic nature of LLS can of course be done quantitatively (i.e., by means of inventories) or qualitatively (e.g. through interviews), but the most valuable insights will likely come from mixed-methods studies. Such research also lends itself to harnessing of innovative techniques that have been applied to other ID variables, such as retrodictive qualitative modeling, where present-day patterns of strategy use are explained in terms of prior learning trajectories (see Dörnyei, 2014) or the idiodynamic method (see MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011), which might allow a window on fluctuations in strategy use on a second-by-second basis (see more ideas on methodological issues toward the end of this article). However, a word of caution appears to be in order at this point. While the dynamism of LLS surely can be approached from the perspective of complex dynamic systems or CDS (see e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007; see especially linkages between LLS and CDS in Oxford, 2017, 2018), it need not and, in fact, should not be the only theoretical stance which can be applied to probing into such phenomena. Upon reflection, the lack of dogmatism that has characterized the field of LLS research over the past decades may be one of its main strengths and the reason why it has proven to be so robust and vibrant despite all critiques that have been leveled against it (see e.g., Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Future research into LLS should also continue to look into the plethora of factors that may impinge upon different aspects of strategy use but also, even more importantly, examine the link between this use and attainment. An important caveat is that this agenda should be considerably expanded to include contextual issues, look into well-known concepts from new perspectives and, ultimately, illuminate the intricate connections between the application of LLS and the notion of self-regulation. On the most general level, there are variables that have barely been taken into account in studies of LLS, such as willingness to communicate, working memory, or enjoyment as a manifestation of positive emotions. The same applies to complex relationships between bundles of factors (e.g., learning styles, motivation, aptitude, emotions), LLS use, as well as achievement, which in itself can be operationalized in a variety of ways (e.g., examination scores, course grades, self-assessment). On closer inspection, however, it becomes obvious that some apparently well-known constructs have been subject to reconceptualization and are now frequently viewed as multidimensional, good cases in point being motivation, currently investigated in the

field of L2 research within the framework of the L2 motivational self-system (cf. Dörnyei, 2009), or aptitude, which is often equated with different components of working memory (cf. Wen, 2016). Moreover, in line with what has been said about the need to look into LLS in task performance, research into diverse influences on the use of strategies and the ways in which such use translates into learning outcomes would become more revealing if it were complemented by a situated, context-sensitive and dynamic dimension. This is because even the most advanced statistical procedures are unlikely to unravel the intricate fabric of mutual, constantly changing relationships between strategy use, individual learner characteristics, contextual factors and attainment, measured in terms of actual attainment of communicative goals in interactions during communicative tasks. Most importantly, however, more research is needed that would empirically show how adequate use of strategies, at whatever scale they are explored, feeds into and propels learners' agency, autonomy and the overall process of self-regulation (Oxford, 2017), taking into account people's behaviors, emotions and motivations. While there is certainly no logical reason why, as Dörnyei (2005) urged, the concept of strategies should be discarded and replaced with the notion of self-regulation, the links between the two constructs should clearly be emphasized (see Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). This is because it is difficult to see how any kind of learning, including L2 learning, could be successfully managed, or self-regulated, without adept application of strategies.

What we should always keep in mind as LLS researchers is that although empirical inquiry in this area can contribute to building theories of L2 acquisition, which is evidenced, for example, by the fact that Selinker (1972) included the strategies for learning and communication among the processes of L2 acquisition, the bulk of the research that is being done has a strong pedagogical orientation. To put it differently, there would be little point in conducting for their own sake exacting, technically sophisticated, empirical investigations of LLS (such as the numerous studies referred to in this special issue), without a glimmer of hope that their findings would inform teaching at least to some extent. To our mind, the results of these empirical investigations should culminate in well-designed programs for strategic intervention in different areas, such that would be feasible and implementable, rather than merely reflecting the wishful thinking of their creators, in most cases researchers. Although Plonsky (2011) demonstrated in his excellent meta-analysis that language strategy instruction (LSI) is moderately effective, he also pointed to a number of moderating variables that should be taken into account. As is the case with any kind of pedagogic intervention, such as different options in teaching grammar (cf. Loewen, 2014; Nassaji, 2017), the effectiveness of LSI is mediated by its length, intensity, context in which it is undertaken, the types of strategies that are taught, the way in which it is conducted, as well as a host of ID factors. There is little doubt that future research should tease

out the role of such variables, thus potentially enhancing the efficacy of instruction in LLS. Another critical issue is that it is one thing to show that some kind of training leads to more frequent use of certain categories of LLS and quite another to provide evidence that this increase is accompanied by tangible gains in the mastery of the TL, irrespective of how these gains are defined. Without such solid proof of efficacy, it will be exceedingly difficult to convince policy makers, teacher trainers, coursebook writers, publishers, or, first and foremost, teachers to devote scant classroom time to embarking upon comprehensive strategic interventions.

The last issue that deserves attention in respect to foci of future research are the contexts in which LLS are explored. For one thing, we believe that it is of paramount importance to strike a balance between the broader contexts in which strategy studies are conducted (e.g., foreign vs. second), the different educational levels and types of programs within these contexts (e.g., diverse issues are likely to come to the fore for secondary school learners of English and students majoring in this language), ages (i.e., children vs. adults), but also different socioeconomic situations (e.g., opportunities for study abroad may shape the ways in which strategies are employed). We would also like to single out several specific settings in which empirical investigations of LLS should gain momentum in response to the ongoing changes in how second and foreign languages are taught and learned. One of them is content-based language instruction, whether it comes under the guise of immersion, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), or English-medium instruction (EMI), in which case pertinent studies are few and far between (e.g., Ruiz de Zarobe & Zenotz, 2018). The same holds true for the use of LLS in study abroad situations (e.g., Briggs, 2015), where research could become more robust, following the lines of inquiry outlined earlier in this paper. Finally, in view of the growing role of new technologies in L2 learning, be it in the form of Internet resources, special educational software, social media or computer-mediated communication (cf. Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2012), to name but a few, there is clearly an urgent need to investigate the use of LLS in such environments. Given the nature of interaction with new technologies, there are grounds to assume that patterns of strategy use in these situations might be considerably different from those in the classroom or in learners' own time when they practice the TL in more traditional ways (e.g., greater focus on social strategies can perhaps be expected). The same could obviously be said about factors mediating strategy use (e.g., greater enjoyment and reduced anxiety), LLS assessment (i.e., possibilities of precisely recording the strategies used), as well as LSI which can capitalize upon the opportunities that the use of new technologies accords (see e.g., Becker, Rodriguez, Estrada, & Davis, 2016; Zhou & Wei, this special issue).

Now that the foci of future empirical investigations of language learning strategies have been delineated, a few comments are in order on methodological

issues, some of which have been signaled throughout this paper. In our view, perhaps the most important thing is adept integration of a macro- and micro-perspective in the study of LLS (cf. Pawlak, 2013). This means that there is still undeniable value in large-scale studies, involving the use of carefully designed questionnaires administered to hundreds of respondents and the application of advanced statistical procedures to gauge the relationships between variables. On the other hand, there is a need to complement such research with contextualized studies in which data are collected from participants as they are engaged in the performance of different types of learning tasks. In both cases, however, there is room for a skillful combination of quantitative and qualitative methods as well as the employment of various data collection tools. In the case of the macro-perspective, it is of particular significance to design valid and reliable research instruments that allow insights into patterns of strategy use in large samples, as exemplified by the papers on strategies for learning vocabulary and grammar (Gu and Pawlak, respectively) in this special issue. When it comes to the micro-perspective, the inclusion of small or sometimes very small numbers of participants has to be compensated for by the collection of rich data and the employment of sometimes quite ingenious tools in order to capture the dynamic nature of LLS. Irrespective of the perspective that is employed in a particular study, strategy research can also avail itself of a number of innovative approaches and techniques, some of which have been referred to above. These include, among others, retrodictive qualitative modeling (Dörnyei, 2014), the idiodynamic method (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011), the employment of narratives (e.g., Gkonou, 2018), reliance on scenario-based assessment of LLS (e.g., Gkonou & Oxford, 2016), or the application of decision-tree methods (cf. Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2018). One can only hope that these novel approaches will help shine a light on all the potential avenues of empirical inquiry that have been highlighted earlier in this paper.

On a more general note, it should also be mentioned at this juncture that real statistical changes might soon be coming to LLS research. For instance, as noted by Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2018), more modern statistical procedures will eventually replace nonparametric procedures (see also Larson-Hall & Herrington, 2010; Plonsky, Egbert, & LaFlair, 2015). In addition, Novella (2015) points out that at least one research journal, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, now bans the use of any significance testing due to criticism of the null hypothesis and the “magical” p -value. Most research journals have (as yet) not banned significance testing, though we do not know what we can expect in the coming years. Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2018) also provide a summary of a number of innovative statistical procedures that could be valuable for future LLS research. Those procedures are now widely known and used among professional statisticians.

While multiple approaches can be adopted in the study of language learning strategies, all the research endeavors can be called into question if specialists

fail to prove the relevance of LLS to L2 pedagogy, an issue that has already been emphasized in the present paper. In other words, whatever aspect of LLS we choose to investigate and whichever data collection tools we employ, no matter how innovative they might seem, the yardstick for appraising the empirical evidence we generate will be the degree to which it translates into everyday L2 instruction. This, however, has been a major challenge for many years and although certain elements of strategy instruction are included in coursebooks, neither is it done in a principled manner nor are teachers eager to dedicate scarce classroom time to such pedagogic interventions. This state of affairs could be attributed to the fact that researchers have set somewhat unrealistic goals and focused upon issues that are not of immediate concern to practitioners. Most importantly perhaps, they have failed to illuminate how different types of strategies can contribute to L2 learning by producing measurable gains, whether with respect to overall TL mastery, specific skills, subsystems, or other elements of language use. While this situation is unfortunate, it mirrors the woes of other areas of L2 acquisition research where empirically-driven guidelines rarely make their way into classrooms. However, particularly in the case of strategies, efforts at bridging the gap between theory, research and practice are of paramount importance to justify the existence of the field as such. We hope that this special issue will not only encourage researchers to explore new lines of inquiry into LLS but also inspire them to seek ways in which the findings of their studies will feed into everyday L2 teaching in a variety of instructional contexts.

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