

Book Review

Complexity perspectives on researching language learner and teacher psychology

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One thing that immediately struck me when I sat down to write this piece was the realization that this is yet another review of a book devoted to the application of complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) to second and foreign language (L2) education. On the one hand, this might appear a little strange since I am certainly not an ardent believer in this theory and while I do recognize some of its merits, I have not used it as a theoretical framework in any of the studies I have conducted so far. On the other hand, though, the reason why I am attracted to publications on this topic could be that I am still waiting for someone to convince me that it is indeed the “silver bullet” that will not only help us disentangle the intricacies of L2 learning and teaching but also offer pedagogically sound insights that will contribute to more effective instruction. In fact, I finished my previous review of a recent book dealing with CDST-driven research methods in applied linguistics with the following comment: “I hope that Phil Hiver and Ali Al-Hoorie will continue their efforts to show the utility of CDST and perhaps one day they will also write a book about how adopting complexity theory can actually

translate into more effective instruction in the language classroom” (Pawlak, 2020a, p. 394). As fate would have it, a different tandem of scholars has decided to confront this formidable challenge. Richard J. Samson and Richard S. Pinner state in the introduction to their edited volume: “We united under the motto *complexity should be made simple* [emphasis in original]. Our aim was to make complexity paradigms and research more accessible to people like ourselves, that is, practicing language teachers who also engage in research” (p. 6). When going over the successive chapters included in this edited collection, I was constantly asking myself if the authors were succeeding in accomplishing this undoubtedly ambitious goal, and it is this vital issue that the review focuses on. Given the nature of the book and limitations of space, I am not going to describe in detail, let alone evaluate, each of the chapters. Rather, the comments are meant to refer to the entire publication, even though they might be illustrated by examples taken from specific papers.

The volume consists of sixteen chapters that have not been divided into separate sections, but they have been ordered in such a way that similar themes are grouped together. The first chapter serves as an introduction in which the authors present their respective journeys into complexity, spell out their rationale for putting the book together, and briefly comment on the contributions it includes. In the second chapter, Peter D. MacIntyre, Sarah Mercer, and Tammy Gregersen present the benefits of applying CDST to research into language learning psychology, offer examples of relevant studies, but also acknowledge the challenges involved in conducting such research and provide a handful of valuable recommendations in this respect. The following fourteen chapters focus on specific instances of empirical investigations grounded in CDST which have addressed a wide range of areas and used sometimes diverse methodologies. Specifically, the following issues are touched on: emotions and emotion regulation strategies (Sampson; Oxford and Gkonou), willingness to communicate (Yashima), silence in the language classroom (Smith and King), motivation (Falout; Consoli), L2 listening (Simpson and Rose), the application of the trajectory equifinality approach in exploring learners’ and teachers’ psychology (Aoyama and Yamamoto), class climate (Nitta and Nakata), directed motivational currents (DMCs; Muir), the use of autoethnography to gain insights into group dynamics (Pinner), teacher identity transformation seen from the perspective of Hermans’ (1996) theory of the dialogical self (Henry), and the use of micro-genetic and frame analysis in researching teacher cognition (Feryok). There are two common threads running thorough all of the chapters, albeit not foregrounded to the same extent in each of the contributions. One is the authors’ personal perspective on CDST and their engagement with it, as illustrated by samples of their own research and lessons learnt from it. The other is the focus

on demonstrating the pedagogical relevance of such research for everyday classroom learning and teaching of additional languages. In the last chapter, Ema Ushioda offers a commentary, superb as usual, on the prospects of making complexity research both doable and meaningful. The book closes with a glossary of key concepts related to CDST as such but also to the tools and approaches that the contributors used in their studies.

The editors should definitely be applauded for compiling this impressive collection of papers and for their sincere efforts to make CDST more understandable to researchers and practitioners alike. Thinking back to the question I posed at the beginning of this review, there is no doubt that they have succeeded in “making complexity simple” for those who wish to research different aspects of the psychology of L2 learning and teaching through the lens of CDST. For one thing, the chapters included in the book constitute excellent demonstrations of how complexity-driven research can be carried out in practice, highlighting the areas of learner and teacher psychology to which it can be applied as well as introducing tools and methodological approaches that can be employed for this purpose. While some lines of inquiry, such as motivation, willingness to communicate or self-concept have been investigated from this perspective for some time, some of the contributors successfully show how to apply it to new fields, such as silence in the classroom, classroom climate or language learning strategies. Equally importantly, some of the chapters are ground-breaking in that they introduce novel conceptual frameworks, data collection procedures and analytical tools by means of which complexity can be investigated. All of this is bound to provide an inspiration for researchers planning to apply CDST to multiple aspects of L2 learning and teaching. Yet another merit is that the chapters are written from a personal perspective, which enhances the credibility of the authors’ voices, and, on the whole, they are accessible and provide clear-cut guidelines as to how a specific empirical approach can be implemented. What I personally find appealing is the fact that the contributors do not always slavishly adhere to the tenets of CDST and some of them openly admit that this is just one of many potential paradigms that can inform classroom-oriented research. Smith and King, for example, make the following comment: “. . . we do not believe that the construct of complexity on its own can provide convincing holistic explanations of how language learners behave and how classroom environments work” (p. 88). I am not entirely sure that such flexibility concerning reliance on CDST is the message that the editors initially wanted to convey but, to my mind, this quality only enhances the value of this volume.

All these merits notwithstanding, I have two main reservations about the volume stemming from my own research into different aspects of L2 instruction and in particular the dynamic nature of individual difference factors, as well as a my hands-on experience as a long-time practitioner, first in secondary school and

then at the university level. In the first place, once again when reviewing a book on the applications of complexity theory, I cannot escape the impression that the editors and some of the chapter authors make it seem as if this was the only “correct” way of investigating second language acquisition (SLA). For example, such a stance is quite explicitly expressed in the introduction where the editors argue for the importance of grounding empirical investigations of L2 learning and teaching in complexity in the following way: “We feel that this is a crucial step, in order that our field can benefit and move forward, without falling back into reductionist, isolating, statistic-heavy and yet reality-evading research practices which do little to further our understanding of the vital psychological aspects to foreign language learning and teaching” (p. 8). For one thing, much of what we have so far learned about SLA comes from such large-scale studies and it would certainly be more prudent to see the macro- and micro-perspectives as two sides of the same coin rather than discarding the former altogether (see e.g., Pawlak, 2020b). In addition, it is hard to agree that only reliance on CDST and the related terminological apparatus can ensure ecological validity, result in the use of multiple sources of data, lead to the adoption of a mixed-methods approach, increase the frequency of longitudinal research projects or enhance relevance of research to everyday concerns of classroom teachers. As my colleagues and myself have shown in investigating motivation, willingness to communicate, anxiety or boredom, all of these goals can be quite successfully accomplished by studies that are not propelled by the complexity perspective and its conceptual framework (e.g., Kruk, 2019; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2017; Pawlak, 2012; Pawlak et al. 2020). By the same token, the person-in-context relational view of motivation proposed by Ushioda (2009) is not grounded in CDST because, as she explains in her final chapter, “. . . it seems important to keep the abstract theorizing and discourse to a minimum, and to focus instead on people, events, behaviors or phenomena of interest to us as practitioner-researchers” (p. 273). The point I am trying to make is simply that there are many different ways in which the complexity of the L2 classroom can be approached and CDST is certainly not the only option.

My second reservation concerns the belief voiced throughout the book that conducting research from the complexity perspective will, as if with a wave of a magic wand, make the results of this research somewhat by default relevant to everyday teaching and help translate them into guidelines for more effective L2 instruction. To quote the editors once again, “. . . by understanding complexity, we hope to empower practitioners and encourage them to share their rich understandings about the realities of classroom teaching and learning” (p. 8). I certainly wish this was so simple. However, several important questions immediately spring to mind. First, can we really expect that admitting that what transpires in the L2 classroom is highly complex will help us successfully deal with such complexities? Rather, teachers are fully aware of these intricacies and they would rather see

concrete recipes on how to confront them, even if such recipes were based on a highly simplified view of reality. Second, one is left to wonder whether practitioners can be realistically expected to engage in empirical investigations of their own classrooms, particularly CDST-rooted research, which requires gathering rich data and doing so at multiple points in time. After all, we should not allow ourselves to forget that the editors of the book are university teachers, scholars with doctoral degrees and extensive knowledge of the latest trends in SLA, which is an exception rather than the norm in the majority of contexts. Most teachers, especially those at lower educational levels, are expected to tackle so many challenges that they are unlikely to engage in extensive research, and even if they do so in order to gain an academic degree, they may be reluctant to adopt CDST, the tenets of which they might view as abstract and opaque. Ushioda in her sobering commentary also mentions some other problems, such as the foci of CDST research, the need to integrate the teaching and research processes, as well as ethical concerns. Yet another crucial difficulty that I would like to highlight here is related to time constraints. More specifically, collecting rich data in a longitudinal research study would inevitably take the precious time away from the act of teaching as such, which might be an unrealistic proposition in most contexts. With all of this in mind, while CDST has the potential of bringing us somewhat closer to making SLA research more pertinent to classroom practice, it cannot be expected in and of itself to bridge the existing gap between teachers and researchers (Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Much more is required of us as researchers or practitioner-researchers to achieve this goal.

The comments offered above are by no means intended as criticisms of the book as such, which I believe is an invaluable contribution to the field, but, rather, represent my ruminations as a researcher and a teacher on the application of complexity theory and its value for practitioners. Truth be told, I am convinced that the volume can indeed move CDST-based research forward and enhance the likelihood that this paradigm will inform everyday classroom pedagogy. I also think that in contrast to what Richard J. Sampson and Richard S. Pinner claim in the introduction, the volume is bound to appeal to a broad readership, ranging from researchers, to undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students, to classroom teachers. Even if things might in fact be much more complex than the editors would have it, they surely should be commended for making yet another step towards making complexity more accessible to researchers and regular L2 teachers.

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