
Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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Editorial

The various papers that make up this special issue of *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* have emerged from the first Psychology in Language Learning (PLL) conference, which took place in May 2014 at the University of Graz, Austria. We would like to open this special issue—the first of a series of two—by discussing that conference’s background, its focus, and its possible future in the hope that such a discussion will clarify our current aims and scope in this special issue. The original impetus for organising the conference came from a book that we, the editors of this special issue, were privileged to edit (Mercer, Ryan, & Williams, 2012). The rationale behind that book was to bring together different areas of language learning psychology within a single volume. The experience of working on the book in conjunction with so many distinguished scholars from around the world convinced us of the potential of an approach that emphasises the commonality between various strands of research that had previously been developing in isolation from each other. Many subareas of our field, such as motivation, autonomy, self, identity, strategy use, and beliefs, have existed as separate communities, with little exploration of the interplay and connections between these closely related areas. Our aim in organising the 2014 conference was to build on the momentum of the book by creating a shared space that would facilitate exchange, and providing opportunities to explore and expand upon how these different areas are interlinked. A secondary aim was to reinterpret the word *psychology* within the context of foreign language education. For so long, psychology has been closely associated with cognitive processes in second language acquisition and with psycholinguistics, but in our book, the conference, and in this special issue, we are seeking to specifically foreground social and educational psychology themes. Language learning is primarily a social and educational activity and we feel that these dimensions also need to be reflected in how we frame discussions of the psychology of learning a second or foreign language.

In the initial stages of organising the conference, we had anticipated a relatively small, but hopefully productive, gathering of like-minded people. However, once the call for papers went out, we were overwhelmed by both interest and proposals from all over the world. In the event, time and space limitations restricted us to a conference involving over 250 participants, who came from all continents except Antarctica. Of course, the success of the conference owed a considerable amount to the distinguished roster of plenary speakers, featuring Zoltán Dörnyei, Andrew Cohen, Peter MacIntyre, Ema Ushioda, Paula Kalaja and Jean-Marc Dewaele; the enthusiasm of this group of renowned scholars to contribute to and participate in our small conference was a further factor that persuaded us of its relevance and future viability. Indeed, we are pleased to announce that the conference will continue as a regular biennial event, with the second one already efficiently organised by a team in Finland and scheduled for summer 2016 (see: <https://www.jyu.fi/en/congress/pll2016>). We envision this and the following special issue of *SLLT* will serve as a bridge linking the two conferences, expanding upon issues emerging from the first, while preparing the ground for the second.

It goes without saying that the Graz conference did not emerge in a vacuum. It can be seen as part of a broader recent trend towards a growing awareness of the importance of psychology in understanding language learning and language learners. Evidence of this trend can be found in the edited volume we mentioned earlier or, going further back, in Zoltán Dörnyei's pioneering text, *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition* (2009). We would argue that we are currently witnessing the birth of a new, coherent sub-discipline within applied linguistics with a distinct and clear identity of its own. The immediate future appears exciting and, in this special issue, we hope to share some of our feelings of excitement by pointing towards key areas that we believe may shape a future research agenda.

Developments occurring elsewhere further support our case for an active, lively future for this field. 2015 will see the publication of two authored books dedicated to themes of language learner psychology, one coming from a theoretical perspective (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015) and another taking a more practical, pedagogic approach (Williams, Mercer, & Ryan, in press). Furthermore, two edited collections (Gkonou, Tatzl, & Mercer, 2015; Gregersen, MacIntyre, & Mercer, 2015) specifically connected to the Graz conference will also appear this year, addressing a range of issues in language learning psychology. Given such levels of current activity, we are confident that our expectation of an exciting, productive future is justified, and we hope that this special issue will simultaneously highlight and complement recent developments.

A key theme of the Graz conference was methodological innovation—just how do we go about researching something as complex and elusive as psychology in language learning? This motif strongly echoes throughout the selection of papers in this special issue. The first paper in the collection, by Jean-Marc Dewaele—a plenary speaker in Graz—and Taghreed Al-Saraj, represents a powerful call to stop and take stock of how the field has been developing in recent years. In their study of the foreign language anxiety of Arab learners of English, the authors, while remaining aware of calls for methodological innovation, remind us that we still have a lot to learn using established methods. They describe their approach as “sailing against the tide into familiar, charted waters,” and this metaphor offers a timely reminder of the need to avoid innovation simply for the sake of innovation and that we should not turn our backs on proven methods that bring results: A key element in research is choosing the most appropriate tools for the questions in hand, not the most fashionable. The next paper in the collection, Kata Csizér, Edit Kontra and Katalin Piniel’s study of the self-concept of Deaf language learners in Hungary, while still based in the quantitative tradition, is one that also moves out of that framework to include a qualitative dimension. What is particularly interesting about this paper is that it gives some indication of how the scope of inquiry into the psychology of language learners is expanding. It is fair to say that until recently that scope has been relatively narrow, including only language learners who fall into a convenient category that remains markedly monolingual and mainstream. The Hungarian research points to a field confident enough to step out of the security of that mainstream. Moving to the other side of the methodological spectrum, Liss Kerstin Sylvén takes an innovative approach to the investigation of the beliefs of language learners in Sweden. Instead of collecting data through familiar methods such as questionnaires or interviews, the study employs a multimedia ethnographic approach based on photos taken by learners to explore and illustrate their own views of an L1, Swedish, and a foreign language, English. The themes of methodological plurality and contextual sensitivity are further developed in Miri Baum’s fascinating investigation of the autobiographical language learning histories of two English teachers in Israel. Drawing on recent developments in personality psychology that position an ongoing internal narrative at the core of individual identity, the study offers a powerful and poignant account of two individuals’ “redemption” through language learning and how these feelings of redemption affect their approaches to teaching.

Moving away from discussions of methodology, the next two papers in this special issue offer valuable historical perspectives on how our field is evolving and where these developments may be taking us. First, Ana Maria Barcelos reviews how beliefs and emotions have been conceptualised and studied within

applied linguistics, and through this review she illustrates the need for future research to focus more on how these constructs influence and interact with the construction of individual identity. Next, Andrew Cohen—another plenary speaker at Graz—provides a highly practical and personal view of the evolution of dual language programs in the US. Andrew Cohen has done an enormous amount over the years to raise the profile of and interest in the psychological dimension of language learning and his contribution here builds on his experience of over forty years' involvement in dual language programmes offering insights which encourage dual language learners to take a proactive role in their own learning. He highlights in particular the need for learners to be agentic and strategically aware in order to make the most of the learning opportunities afforded in such settings.

The final paper in this collection is a review of the book *Social Dimensions of Autonomy in Language Learning* edited by Garold Murray. Given the complexity and situatedness of the approach taken in the book, it was felt to be particularly suitable for review in the context of the PLL conference and its overarching themes. The reviewer, Michelle Gilluly, concludes that the collection is extremely useful for both researchers and practitioners in reflecting on the emotional, spatial and political dimensions of autonomy.

Bringing the papers together for this special issue has been an exciting extension of the conference journey. We hope you find them useful and that they serve to prompt yet further discussion, research and debate. A final hope is that the debate stimulated by the various papers included here will carry us to the next stage of that journey—a second special issue of *SSLLT*—and that you, the reader, will be there to accompany us.

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