

Language Learner Strategies

Andrew D. Cohen and Ernesto Macaro, Eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2007. Pp. viii + 336.

Language Learner Strategies, an edited volume born from a series of meetings at the International Association of Applied Linguistics Congress in the early 2000s, provides a comprehensive overview into the past, present, and proposed future of the field of language learner strategies (LLS). Principally written for language or education researchers, this book is concerned with the strategies learners employ in the process of second language (L2) acquisition and performance in the second or foreign language classroom. The editors, Andrew D. Cohen and Ernesto Macaro, propose that the volume serve as a coherent auto-critique and theoretical synthesis of LLS research to date, with the goal of improving opportunities for all language learners through further research into LLS.

The volume is divided into two sections: part 1, “Issues, Theories, and Frameworks;” and part 2, “Reviewing Thirty Years of Empirical LLS Research.” A review of each chapter is provided, along with background information on the purpose of each volume section. In Part 1 of the book, the seven chapters focus on the theoretical frameworks and methodological tools of LLS. In chapter 1, “Claims and Critiques,” Grenfell and Macaro outline the theoretical trajectory of LLS research, highlighting the inception of the field in the 1970s and detailing its shifting theoretical perspectives over time. The authors acknowledge that definitions and terminology are problematic in LLS research, largely due to changing theoretical perspectives of the processes of language learning. Specifically, they suggest that the difficulty of operationalizing language learner strategies is indicative of the way second language acquisition (SLA) research has developed over the last several decades. Nevertheless, there is some broad consensus among LLS researchers. First, a strategy is a construct that can be defined as some form of activity that is used as a response to problems when and where they arise (i.e., within discourse, within the social context, inside the head of the learner, or all three). Second, the authors also note that language learner strategies (1) are associated with successful learning, (2) can be explicitly taught, (3) are accessible to learners, and (4) are documentable by researchers.

In chapter 2, “Coming to Terms with Language Learner Strategies: Surveying the Experts,” Cohen investigates the varied definitions and terminological uses of the strategies discussed in chapter 1 by surveying LLS researchers around the world. The survey Cohen designed and administered explored the terminology, definition, and description of the construct of learner strategies, as well as the theoretical underpinnings of LLS (e.g., educational, cognitive, and cross-cultural psychology; information-processing theory; sociocultural, and social constructivist theory). The survey results revealed that there is neither complete consensus among experts on the many facets that constitute a strategy nor on other important concepts such as attention and level of consciousness in language learning. This is not surprising considering there are similar debates among researchers in SLA over what levels of attention and consciousness are needed for learning to transpire (see Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999, for a brief review).

In chapter 3, “Bridging the Gap Between Psychological and Sociocultural Perspectives on L2 Learner Strategies,” Oxford and Schramm highlight the different contributions of these

theoretical perspectives on L2 learner strategies, calling for an ongoing dialogue between the two frameworks. Rather than deem them irreconcilable, Oxford and Schramm align with other perspective-integration appeals that have been made in language studies (e.g., Block, 2003; Bronson & Watson-Gegeo, 2008; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Kramsch, 2002; Lantolf, 2000). However, unlike the majority of researchers who have argued for this integration to occur, the authors of this chapter originate from the psychological perspective rather than the sociocultural one. This is evidenced in their descriptions of the psychological and sociocultural frameworks and how they frame themselves within the two. The authors first point out the ontological and epistemological distinctions between each perspective, including the orientations, units of analysis, and methodological procedures associated with each. They then urge LLS researchers to consider the compatibility of these paradigms through ongoing dialogue on areas of mutual interest (e.g., self-regulation, motivation, aptitude, and aspects of activity).

In chapter 4, “Applying Strategies to Contexts: The Role of Individual, Situational, and Group Differences,” Takeuchi, Griffiths, and Coyle extend the push for perspective-integration by reviewing studies that utilize context as a unit of analysis. This emphasizes the effect of individual learner variables on strategy use (e.g., age, gender, motivation, culture, proficiency level), as well as how learning situations (e.g., English as a Second Language vs. English as a Foreign Language classrooms) can change the types of strategies used. The attention to context addresses the sociocultural nature of learner strategies, which expands on the strict psycholinguistic perspectives in which language learning is considered a purely mental process. Still, it is noteworthy that the authors regard the language-learning context as a predisposed condition that exists in advance of language use. This is contrary to hermeneutic approaches to SLA research that view context as emergent, dynamic, and residing in the moment-to-moment interactions that are negotiated between individuals. This is important to note since the ways in which context is defined explicitly or implicitly by one’s research ultimately define the ways in which data are collected and interpreted (Young, 1999). With that said, Takeuchi, Griffiths, and Coyle also review a study that posits the classroom setting as a learning community, regarding it as a macro-factor that also impacts strategy use. Not surprisingly, the authors of the chapter conclude that while these facets of context are complex, both individual and situational variables should be addressed when applying strategies to diverse contexts.

White, Schramm, and Chamot present a review of approaches and qualitative methodologies used to investigate students’ overt and covert strategy use in chapter 5, “Research Methods in Strategy Research: Re-examining the Toolbox.” They begin by identifying the various dilemmas in LLS research, which include the unobservable and shifting nature of strategy use dependent on contextual variables. In LLS research, verbal reports, or learner accounts of the language learning process, have become major methodological tools to access learners’ strategy use. Specifically, the authors provide a critical analysis of the issues surrounding the elicitation and transcription of think-alouds (i.e., simultaneous verbalization of thoughts during a specific task), which they suggest is possibly the most complex self-reporting method used in LLS research. They also address the contextual turn in LLS that pushes for investigations to recognize and document the situated experience of the learner, concluding with a recommendation to include action research approaches in future studies that would include qualitative methods of data gathering.

In chapter 6, “L2 Grammar Strategies: The Second Cinderella and Beyond,” Oxford and Lee posit that grammar strategies, like listening strategies in second language research, have not been given the same level of attention as other strategies (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and vocabulary) by researchers in LLS. According to the authors, L2 grammar strategies are the “second Cinderella of strategies” because beliefs about the role of grammar instruction vary: Should it be explicit or implicit? Deductive or inductive? Should the focus be on meaning, forms, or form? The authors suggest that grammar strategies are in need of a theoretical frame informed by empirical research and theoretical discussions, and, in the chapter, they suggest a framework with which to begin investigations. Additionally, Oxford and Lee write that grammar strategies research offers second language studies in general and LLS researchers in particular the opportunity to engage in collaborative research and productive debate on the topic.

Chapter 7, “Intervening in the Use of Strategies,” discusses a current pedagogical practice surrounding LLS, known as strategy-based instruction (SBI). Rubin, Chamot, Harris, and Anderson address the nature and purpose of SBI by providing a general summary of the research, guidelines for a research agenda, and the implications of SBI for teacher education. While SBI may function differently at various educational levels (e.g., elementary, secondary, university, etc.), the authors posit that common pedagogical principles exist in strategy intervention. They write that SBI should connect to problems that learners are working to solve, lead to immediate and recognizable success, and provide sufficient scaffolding for self-assessment. Additionally, the variance in development time for learners to manage their own learning must be recognized, and instruction must be individualized to foster the learning process. This chapter also explores the extent to which teachers successfully effectuate learner strategy instruction, naming teaching style, teacher beliefs, and curriculum constraints as factors that can impact implementation. The authors conclude that there is consensus that teachers need extensive knowledge of SLA processes and effective techniques that support language learning in order to put SBI into successful practice.

Part 2 of the volume comprises chapters that discuss studies of LLS in a variety of language domains (i.e., listening, reading, oral, writing, and vocabulary), drawing on empirical research conducted in the last 30 years. Each chapter in this half of the volume targets one of the language domains to provide a comprehensive overview of the research available in LLS. In chapter 8, “A Review of Listening Strategies: Focus on Sources of Knowledge and on Success,” Macaro, Graham, and Vanderplank report on the data surrounding cognitive and metacognitive strategies available to listeners. The authors conclude that listening strategy research is still in its infancy; yet the role of listening in language learning and instruction has been given increased attention due to the shift towards interaction-based acquisition. Of the research that is available, most studies on listening strategies focus on whether listeners can be distinguished by level of success in acquiring an L2 based on their strategy use. However, findings are difficult to compare across studies due to such theoretical and methodological problems as variance in methods used to compare learners and the variance in age and proficiency of the learners. The authors conclude the chapter with a call for more intervention studies that could provide direction in how to differentiate strategy instruction for different kinds of learners.

In chapter 9, “A Review of Reading Strategies: Focus on the Impact of First Language,” Erler and Finkbeiner pinpoint three focus areas that were found across LLS studies targeting

reading strategies: (1) strategy types and their relationship with reading proficiency, (2) first and second language reading strategies involving both linguistic and non-linguistic factors, and (3) reading strategy instruction. Due to the wide range in populations, languages, and texts targeted in these studies, as well as the variety of methods employed, however, findings could not be compared. Additionally, as mentioned in the foreword of the book, LLS is a multidimensional and elusive moving target when it comes to terminology and definition. To mitigate this theoretical issue for L2 reading strategies, the authors of this chapter theorize that L2 reading takes place on “levels.” In other words, researchers have identified and linked strategy-types to levels of learner proficiency, as well as recognized that a single reader may employ many types of strategies during an L2 reading task. Finally, the authors suggest that multilayered and multidimensional research would lead to a better understanding of the reading strategies language learners employ, which could be extended to LLS research on a more general level.

In chapter 10, “A Review of Oral Communication Strategies: Focus on Interactionist and Psycholinguistic Perspectives,” Nakatani and Goh explore the oral domain of LLS research by targeting both studies of (1) interaction and (2) the mental processes of the learner. Their goal is to better understand the body of research on learners’ speaking strategies, often termed communication strategies (CS). At the same time, however, they maintain that the studies focusing on speaking strategies could not be compared, principally due to the variance in definitions and descriptions of CS, and the non-standardized measurement of oral proficiency levels across the studies. While the focus of this chapter was experimental studies, the authors suggest triangulating data from these types of studies with ethnographic field notes from videos of students’ performance in order to provide further insights in strategy use. They also propose examining language studies through a more sociocultural lens, tapping into qualitative studies on discourse that might offer a deeper understanding of oral communication strategies.

Manchón, Roca de Larios, and Murphy noted an enhancement in the understanding of learner writing characteristics in LLS research in chapter 11, “A Review of Writing Strategies: Focus on Conceptualizations and Impact of First Language.” After reviewing relevant studies, the authors posit that L2 writers’ strategic behaviors involve: (1) implementation of a wide range of general and specific strategic actions in their attempt to learn to write and to express themselves in L2 writing, (2) dependence on variables that are both learner-internal (e.g., their L2 proficiency) and learner-external (e.g., cognitive demand on task type), and (3) mediation by the instruction received and modification of their strategic behaviors through strategy instruction. In addition, among the strategies used by L2 writers, the purposeful use of the L1 has been identified as a significant problem-solving resource that has been shown to help learners monitor the writing process.

In chapter 12, “A Review of Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Focus on Language Proficiency and Learner Voice,” Nyikos and Fan examine how learners perceive their use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). As in the previous chapters, the authors here found that it is difficult to compare study findings on vocabulary due to the variance in terminology. Moreover, as was found with reading, mastery of vocabulary is a multidimensional task. In this regard, key factors emerged that were reported to have an influence on VLS use, such as the proficiency level and gender of the learners. That given, the authors warn that successful language learners should not be pigeonholed by their invariable use of a certain set of VLS, as

varied combinations of strategies were found to enable different learners to be similarly successful. In terms of strategy use development, findings indicated that successful learners have a tendency to display greater metacognitive decision-making in choosing more appropriate strategies. Furthermore, key differences were documented in VLS use in L2 and foreign language (FL) classrooms, such as the ways in which learners reviewed key vocabulary.

While there was a general consensus on strategy use among the LLS researchers in Part 2 (e.g., successful language learners use different strategies and in different combinations, metacognitive strategy use particularly enhances language learning), variation in the quality and quantity of studies available on learner strategies remain a problem. This is largely due to the recurring dilemma stemming from the inconsistent definition of the construct of language learning strategy. While the authors all accepted this as a general issue in L2 studies more broadly, some of them specifically supported the view that LLS should be seen as both a multidimensional construct as a whole, as well as individually at the language domain level (e.g., vocabulary). Until a finer-grained definition of the construct of LLS is attained, this area of research may become stagnant as an area of investigation.

Even though it is transparent that researchers are the primary target audience of this volume, language teachers and curriculum developers may find the comprehensive review of strategies across the language and literacy domains in Part 2 of the book useful. For example, the overview in chapter 7 may be highly informative for practitioners, particularly because an underlying pedagogical approach to strategy-based instruction is shared. Although the authors largely draw on psycho- and sociolinguistics, many of the chapters manage to weave in a sociocultural approach through their discussions of LLS. While this inclusion is commendable, a chapter with a more in-depth connection to a particular realm of sociocultural theory, namely an analysis of the sociopolitical context surrounding language learning across the globe, would have been welcome. Addressing education and language policies that impact (1) opportunities and constraints on language learning in the L2 classroom, (2) the overall changes in pedagogical trends in LLS, and (3) the availability of quality programs for diverse ESL and EFL populations are just a few of the topics that could be included. An updated volume addressing the aforementioned issues, with updates on the reworking of the LLS construct, is much anticipated.

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