



A systematic review of language learner strategy research in the face of self-regulation



Heath Rose^{*}, Jessica G. Briggs, Jill A. Boggs, Lia Sergio, Natalia Ivanova-Slavianskaia

University of Oxford, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Language learner strategy research has been dogged by criticisms in recent decades culminating in calls for the field to be replaced with the construct of self-regulation. This paper aims to evaluate how the field has responded to such critique, and to investigate how self-regulation has impacted strategy research in recent years. The study utilizes a systematic review methodology to examine key studies conducted and published from 2010 to 2016 to reveal current trends, and to elucidate best research practices. After initially searching more than 1000 research papers, 46 of the most field-aware studies were selected for data extraction, of which 24 were included in a final systematic map for analysis. Results show strategy research is highly reliant on quantitative measures of data collection, but also reveal a number of context-situated qualitative methods which have produced valuable results. An in-depth review of the 15 most relevant studies revealed a number of innovations that have considerably advanced language learning strategy research in recent years. In a field awash with studies that are anchored to past methodologies, this paper showcases state-of-the-art work in the field, with an aim to inform future research.

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1. Introduction

Interest into strategies used for language learning has a long history, although many scholars (e.g. Griffiths, 2015) mark the beginning of SLA-oriented research with Rubin's (1975) seminal work on the good language learner. By the early 1980s the first taxonomy of strategies emerged, which encompassed learners' thoughts, actions, and social behaviors (Rubin, 1981). Although this taxonomy has been described as a list rather than a framework (Dörnyei, 2005), it was nevertheless one of the first attempts to organize strategies. This early work was followed by O'Malley et al.'s (1985) taxonomy of strategies, which borrowed heavily from cognitive theory, and focused predominantly on the cognitive and metacognitive strategies learners used to process novel information about a new language. By the late 1980s, however, these alignments with cognitive research were overshadowed by the work of Rebecca Oxford, and her development of the multi-faceted Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990)—an easy-to-use inventory of strategies that could be used by teachers and researchers to examine learners' use of strategies. Oxford's work saw the beginning of a boom in strategy research.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: heath.rose@education.ox.ac.uk (H. Rose), jess.briggs@education.ox.ac.uk (J.G. Briggs), jill.boggs@education.ox.ac.uk (J.A. Boggs), bernice.sergio@education.ox.ac.uk (L. Sergio), n.ivanova-slavyanskaya@spbu.ru (N. Ivanova-Slavianskaia).

At the time, a number of researchers (e.g. Hadwin & Winne, 1996; Skehan, 1989) voiced some concerns over the direction strategy research had taken—much research assumed the methods of measurement were sound, even though the statistical work of confirming the underlying structure of strategies had not been fully carried out. This caused some researchers to question the validity and rigor of some strategy research of this era. An unfortunate casualty of this era was that much robust language learner strategy research was lost in a sea awash with less rigorous practitioner-based studies. By the mid-2000s the field had reached a watershed moment. Insiders in the field such as Macaro (2006) pointed to a number of unresolved issues in language learner strategy conceptualizations, despite 30 years of research. Skehan, who had been hesitant about the direction of the field as early as the late 1980s (e.g. Skehan, 1989), started to re-voice his concerns in the early 2000s (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003). By 2005, Dörnyei (2005) ramped up criticism, and suggested that the whole field be replaced with the notion of self-regulation—a concept he and his colleagues later illustrated in an oft-cited study of self-regulated vocabulary learning (Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006).

Dörnyei (2005, p. 191) defines self-regulation as the following:

Self-regulation refers to the degree to which individuals are active participants in their own learning; it is a more dynamic concept than learning strategy, highlighting the learners' own "strategic efforts to manage their own achievement through specific beliefs and processes" (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997, p. 105). The notion of self-regulation of academic learning is a multidimensional construct, including cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, behavioral, and environmental processes that learners can apply to enhance academic achievement.

On the one hand, self-regulation has a long tradition in psychology in general, extending to educational psychology, thus there is merit in claims that it offers a somewhat stable perspective within which to explore strategic behavior. On the other hand, self-regulation is an 'outsider' construct which was not theoretically developed to specifically explore second language acquisition. Thus, some see it as poor substitute for learner strategy research, which emerged as a home-grown applied linguistics construct to explore the nuanced peculiarities of language learning.

Since this time, the field of language learner strategies has been in a state of flux. Some strategy research has embraced self-regulation (Mizumoto, 2012; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2012; Ranalli, 2012), whereas other research has argued that self-regulation, while a valid construct, is perhaps better viewed as an addition (Gao, 2007; Grenfell & Macaro, 2007; Gu, 2012). Weinstein, Acee, and Jung (2011, p. 47) support this complementary relationship in describing self-regulation as "both the glue and the engine that helps students manage their strategic learning". As such, some researchers have integrated notions of self-regulation into existing paradigms of strategies (Oxford, 2011). Others have carried on with the status quo (Grenfell & Harris, 2017).

Against this historical backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the current state of language learner strategy research. Rather than enter into 'replacement debates', which have been covered in prior articles (e.g. Tseng et al., 2006; Gao, 2007; Rose, 2012), this paper aims to probe how the field of strategy research has responded to the introduction of self-regulation as an alternative paradigm of investigation. In exploring this topic, we hope to gain a richer understanding of whether, and how, the field has changed in the 12 years since Dörnyei's (2005) landmark critique.

2. Understanding the criticisms

Language learner strategies have been defined as the "[t]houghts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very outset of learning to the most advanced levels of target language performance" (Cohen, 2011, p. 7). A more recent definition proffered by Griffiths (2015, p. 426) is "actions chosen by learners (either deliberately or automatically) for the purposes of learning or regulating the learning of language". While these appear to be rather innocuous definitions, there has been extensive debate over what these actions are, and how researchers can measure them effectively. To understand the current state-of-the-art in language learner strategy research, we must first comprehend the criticism the field has had to contend with.

A major problem with learner strategies has been definitional fuzziness. Macaro (2006, p. 325), during the watershed moment of strategy research, summarizes conceptualization issues as points of contention between researchers about whether strategies: manifest inside or outside a learner's mind; consist of knowledge, intention, action, or all three; should be organized into frameworks, hierarchies, or clusters; are used across all learning situations, tasks, and contexts; are integral or additive to language processing. Macaro's intention in his critique was not to condemn previous research (in fact he is a staunch defender of strategy research), but to highlight conceptual problems that had evaded researchers over thirty years of research.

Perhaps then, there was truth in Dörnyei and Skehan's (2003) early critique that language learner strategies remained "rather inconsistent and elusive" (p. 608), and that the term had "been used in far too broad a sense, including a number of different things that do not necessarily belong together" (p. 610). Indeed, as early as the 1990s, Ellis (1994) had described definitions of learner strategies as "ad hoc and atheoretical" (p. 533), which had caused the field to fail to incorporate them into a model of psycholinguistic processing (Ellis, 1997). Tseng et al. (2006) note that while there is a strong sense that the strategies learners use to study language are important, there remains no coherent agreement on the defining criteria for them. This paradox underpins Dörnyei's (2005) assertion that while the construct of language learner strategies was clearly useful for researchers, it was not effective for conducting in-depth analyses in terms of what they were, and how they could be measured.

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