Learners' Stories

Difference and Diversity In Language Learning

EDITED BY
PHIL BENSON & DAVID NUNAN

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Learners' Stories: Difference and Diversity in Language Learning

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Phil Benson
David Nunan

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1 Introduction

Phil Benson and David Nunan

As this is a book about learners' stories, we will begin by telling the story of its origins. Several years ago, we began a research project based on interviews in which we asked university students in Hong Kong to tell us about their lifelong experiences of learning English. Many schools and universities in Hong Kong teach through the medium of English and the students that we interviewed had all begun learning English at an early age. Our aim was, therefore, simply to find out what the long-term experience of learning English 'was like' for these students. What stages did their learning pass through? What exactly did they think 'English' and 'learning English' involved at these different stages? And how did they view their experiences of second language learning within the context of their broader experiences of education and social life?

When we began the project, however, we found few points of reference for such a study in the literature on second language learning. In truth, we had only the vaguest idea of how our study connected to previous and current research. But as it progressed, we became aware that others were working along similar lines and that many were, like ourselves, working things out as they went along. For this reason, we decided to issue a call for a collection of papers that would explore the potential of research based on first-person accounts of the long-term process of learning a second language. The response took us somewhat by surprise in terms of both the number of proposals and the variety of issues and research methods involved. As we sifted through the proposals, however, we began to see the possibilities of a volume that would explore the potential of this type of research for the investigation of issues of difference and diversity in second language learning.

The significance of the '(auto)biographical' approach in the wider context of second language learning research is discussed in detail in Chapter 2. For the moment, let us note that most of the research into learner difference and diversity to date has been concerned with one overriding question. Why do individuals who presumably possess similar cognitive capacities for second language learning achieve such varied degrees of proficiency? Answers to this question have focused on the psychological and social factors involved in second language learning and, for this reason, these factors have mainly been considered from

the perspective of their varied contributions to proficiency outcomes. In addition, the majority of studies have been based on experimental and survey methods aimed at isolating and scaling factors of difference and statistically correlating them with measures of proficiency.

The contributors to this volume, however, adopt a rather different perspective. In particular, they are not exclusively concerned with variable proficiency outcomes (important as this may be). Instead, they are concerned with the description of difference and diversity in a more holistic sense. In examining particular psychological and social factors, they are especially concerned with their development over time, with the relationship of these developments to the learners' broader life circumstances and goals, and with the ways in which they are influenced by the learners' active involvement in the learning process. They are, in other words, mainly interested in the question of how learners become diverse as a consequence of their long-term engagement with second languages. And it is because they wish to broaden the questions that we ask about difference and diversity that they are especially interested in learners' stories of their experiences.

The structure of this volume reflects the conventional distinction between psychological and social factors in second language learning. There is, however, a tendency to view each of these factors as being integrated with the others. Chapter 2 provides the reader with an overview of approaches to research on learner difference and diversity, with a particular emphasis on the contrast between (auto)biographical approaches and more conventional approaches in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Chapters 3 to 7 then focus on five important psychological factors – motivation, affect, age, learning strategies and identity – while Chapters 8 to 10 focus on social factors through discussion of three settings for learning – the classroom, distance learning and self-instruction.

The (auto)biographical approach to research naturally lends itself to the production of case studies of individual learning experiences. Central to these case studies are the individual learners' 'stories' of their experiences, which can be collected, analysed and represented in various ways. One important division in the (auto)biographical approach concerns the relationship between researcher(s) and the subject(s). In some studies, the researcher and subject are one person, who analyses her or his own experiences 'autobiographically'. In others, the researcher(s) analyses autobiographical data provided by others. In this case, the research is perhaps best described as 'biographical'. All of the chapters in this volume fall into the second category, although the role of the subjects varies considerably (and in one chapter the 'subject' is in fact a co-author). This volume, also, differs from another, increasingly popular form of publication in which learners' stories of their language learning

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are simply reproduced without analysis or comment. The different ways in which the contributors wrestle with the complex task of representing learners' stories as research is, therefore, part of the interest of this volume. Other aspects of variation include the methods of data collection (including interview, dialogue and written stories), the length of the period of learning covered, the number of subjects and the degree to which the subjects' voices are present in the final report. This variation is again part of the interest of this volume. There are, as yet, no rules for (auto)biographical research and perhaps there never will be.

The aim of this volume is not, then, to provide the reader with a comprehensive account of the role of difference and diversity in second language learning. It is, rather, to demonstrate the contribution that (auto)biography, or the analysis of learners' stories of their experiences, can make in this area. Some readers will, we feel, initially be sceptical of this contribution for reasons well rehearsed in the literature: first-person accounts of experiences tend to be 'subjective', learners lack awareness of the processes involved in their learning and their memories are apt to be unreliable. After reading this volume, however, more sceptical readers may well find that the potential drawbacks of (auto)biographical research are amply compensated by the ways in which researchers can use the stories that comprise their data to cast light on dimensions of difference and diversity that would otherwise remain concealed.

2 (Auto)biography and learner diversity

Phil Benson

The term '(auto)biography' is used in this chapter to refer to a broad approach to research that focuses on the analysis and description of social phenomena as they are experienced within the context of individual lives.[1] This approach has been widely discussed and used in the field of education, mainly as a method of exploring teachers' lives (see Casanave and Schecter 1997, and Johnson and Golombek 2002, for examples from the field of second language teacher education). The aim of this volume is to explore the potential contribution of this approach to the field of second language learning and, in particular, to the investigation of issues of learner difference and diversity. In this chapter, I will attempt to put this aim into a wider context by reviewing both the development of research on difference and diversity and the emergence of (auto)biography as an approach to second language learning research.

Before embarking on this review, however, I need to explain the sense in which I am using the terms 'difference' and 'diversity'. In a general sense, both terms can be said to refer to the same thing: the fact that people learn second languages in a variety of settings, in a variety of ways and with varied outcomes. This fact was first systematically incorporated into theories of second language learning by second language acquisition (SLA) research – a field in which 'difference' is now an established term. But 'difference' has also acquired a more specific meaning in SLA research. For SLA researchers, learners differ from each other in many ways, but most significantly in regard to the linguistic outcomes of their learning. (Auto)biographical researchers, on the other hand, tend to be concerned with both the linguistic and the non-linguistic outcomes of learning, and with the ways in which learners become different from each other in the course of the learning process. The implications of this contrast will become clearer as this chapter develops. But for the moment, I want to note that the term 'diversity' will be used here to refer to the more holistic sense in which learners differ from each other, and in preference to the term 'difference', which has become associated with a more or less exclusive focus on the variable linguistic outcomes of second language learning.

Learner diversity in historical context

Writing of 'the tapestry of diversity in our classrooms', Murray (1996, p. 434) points to a facet of second language learning that is now at the forefront of our consciousness as teachers and researchers. The learners that we meet in our professional lives can no longer be treated as a homogeneous body. Diversity is perhaps most apparent in classrooms where the learners come from varied sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. We have also come to recognize, however, that even learners with similar backgrounds vary in terms of the psychological predispositions and learning experiences that they bring to the classroom. We recognize, in other words, that learners are individuals and that their individuality may have significant consequences for their learning. But it is only relatively recently that the fact of learner diversity has come to our attention and, in order to understand its significance fully, we need to go back to a point where we were apparently unable to see learners at all.

The invisible learner

An interest in learner diversity presupposes an interest in learners. The history of our field, however, shows that for much of the twentieth century researchers were far more interested in problems of teaching than they were in problems of learning. The linguists Henry Sweet and Otto Jespersen are, for example, considered to be among the 'founding fathers' of the field of second language learning research. Catford (1998, p. 467), moreover, tells us that, when he began his career in the late 1930s, their books on language teaching (Sweet 1899; Jespersen 1904) were 'among the best guides that a beginning teacher had'. Guides to good language teaching are, of course, still popular in the twenty-first century and many of them incorporate the sound advice offered by Sweet and Jespersen. Like other early authors, however, Sweet and Jespersen differ in their approach to the genre from their modern counterparts in one crucial respect. They seldom mention the learners. Indeed, it is largely the invisibility of the ubiquitous learner of present-day guides to language teaching that gives their books an 'historical' character.

One explanation for the invisibility of the learner in early research lies in its more or less exclusive concern with the application of linguistic theories that viewed language from the perspective of form and structure. These theories had considerable implications for the ways in which language learning material should be organized and presented to learners, for example, but said little about the ways in which languages were actually learned. In the late 1950s, psychology also became influential, but

initially only the form of theories that viewed language learning as a behavioural response to input stimuli. Again, behaviourism offered little scope for the exploration of the learner's role in the process of second language learning. Our present-day interest in language learners is, therefore, both historically specific and relatively recent in origin. It arose, moreover, during a period in the second half of the twentieth century when diversity in the contexts and settings for second language teaching and learning was beginning to make learners far more visible than they had been in the past. We might argue, in other words, that although an interest in learner diversity presupposes an interest in learners, this interest in learners could arise only as a consequence of learner diversity itself.

The rise of learner-focused research

By the late 1970s, 'learner-centredness' had emerged as a key concept in second language teaching based on a now largely unquestioned understanding that learners' *varied* responses to teaching are as important a factor in language learning, if not more so, than the teaching itself. In this sense, the idea of learner-centredness was a humanistic reaction to behaviourist theories that assigned little importance to the variability of learners' responses to input. The rise of learner-focused research, however, began much earlier than this, in the late 1950s, with studies on attitudes and motivation (Spolsky 2000). And in this sense, it can be viewed as an intellectual development arising from the growing influence of social psychology on second language teaching research. We might add to this that the linguistic theory on which second language teaching research could draw was also changing, in particular through the emergence of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, which treated language less as an abstract construct of structures and forms and more as a dynamic product of psychological and social life.

What needs to be explained, therefore, is the origin of a shift in perspective that has led to an ever more intense focus on the learner in second language research. From an intellectual perspective, we might argue that it was the consequence of a number of currents entering the field at around the same period of time. We might also consider, however, the implications of Wenden's (2002, p. 32) comment that the rise of learner-centredness 'grew out of the recognition that language learners are diverse'. Over the past 40 years or so, the expansion of institutionalized education systems, the rise in the number of individuals migrating or travelling overseas and the development of communication technologies (aspects of the phenomenon we now call 'globalization') have led to

an exponential growth in the number of people studying second languages around the world. As the 'client-base' for second language education has expanded, the contexts in which individuals learn second languages have naturally become more diverse. From this perspective, it might be argued that the 'recognition of diversity' to which Wenden refers was, in fact, a recognition of an essentially new reality within second language education as a global enterprise.

It is likely, of course, that many of the aspects of learner diversity that we are now very much aware of have always existed. But it is also likely that this diversity did not simply escape the notice of researchers. The population of learners with which early-twentieth-century researchers were concerned was, in a social sense at least, far less diverse than the population that present-day researchers have to account for. We may, therefore, speculate that they failed to 'see' the learner largely because diversity was, in fact, far less visible in their classrooms than it is today. If this is the case, we have good reason to view our present-day focus on the learner as a complex and indirect intellectual response to changes in second language education that are driven primarily by a rapidly growing diversity among and within the populations of learners that second language teaching serves.

The rise of SLA research

The emergence of SLA as a field of research that focuses on theories of second language *learning* has been one of the major outcomes of the rise of learner-focused research. This theoretical focus on learning implies a concern with learner diversity, but in order to understand the nature of this concern we must first understand the problem that the fact of learner diversity poses to second language learning theory. Rampton (1991, p. 241) argues that the major objective of SLA research has been 'to provide an account of second language learning which may then become available for fairly enduring and widespread reference by teachers and educationalists'. In order to have this widespread reference, such an account must either explicitly justify its application to all learners or explain the implications of learner diversity systematically. The SLA account of second language learning cannot, in other words, simply ignore learner diversity in the way that earlier accounts did. In response to this problem, SLA researchers largely adopted what we might call a 'two-pronged' strategy. In brief, the problem of diversity was first removed from SLA theory through the assumption of a 'universal' second language learning *process*. It then reappeared in the form of a set of *contextual* variables that might explain the different linguistic outcomes of this universal process for different groups or individuals.

The search for SLA universals

The term 'second language learning process' is now so entrenched in the literature that it often appears to be little more than a synonym for 'second language learning' itself. It is worth recalling, however, that this term was first borrowed from the psychological literature in the early 1960s (see, for example, Rivers [1964], who was among the first to use the word 'process' in the context of second language learning). For many SLA researchers, moreover, it implies the hypothesis of a cognitive 'processing' device that transforms language input into language output. The second language learning process is, thus, often seen as an exclusively cognitive process that is both unique to language acquisition and shared by all human beings. This hypothesis has its roots in the rejection of behaviourist assumptions about second language learning and in interest in the Chomskyan conception of language as an innate property of the human mind. But it can also be seen as a theoretical response to the problems posed by the fact of learner diversity.

As Breen (2001, p. 2) argues, 'a concern for what is common among learners necessarily identifies as crucial those contributions that all learners share as human beings; contributions that exemplify their inherent biological and psychological capacities'. The need for a universal account of second language learning leads, in other words, first to an assumption that all second language learners *must* have something in common and, second, to the isolation of cognitive processing of language input as the domain within which common factors are most likely to be found. Evidence of variability in learning capacities leads the further isolation of a 'language acquisition device' within cognitive processing that is assumed to be invariable because human beings appear to share a more or less equal capacity to acquire their first languages. In a somewhat circular movement, therefore, cognitive processing comes to the forefront of accounts of the SLA account of second language learning precisely because of the need for 'enduring and widespread reference' (Rampton 1991).

The problem of learner diversity cannot simply be written off, however, because the evidence suggests that the capacity to acquire second languages is far less equally distributed than the capacity to acquire first languages. According to Long (1990, p. 661), therefore, SLA theory must answer *two* major questions:

> Which aspects of SLA are universal (presumably as a result of all learners possessing common cognitive abilities and constraints), and which aspects vary systematically as a function, for example, of age, aptitude, and attention, or of the kind of input different learners encounter?

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