

Learners' Stories: Difference and Diversity in Language Learning

Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521614146

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First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface 9/11pt Sabon *System* QuarkXPress™

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84938-8 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84938-1 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-61414-6 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-61414-7 paperback

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Contents

List of contributors	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
1. Introduction	1
<i>Phil Benson and David Nunan</i>	
2. (Auto)biography and learner diversity	4
<i>Phil Benson</i>	
3. Affect in lifelong learning: Exploring L2 motivation as a dynamic process	22
<i>Amel Shoaib and Zoltán Dörnyei</i>	
4. Emotion processes in second language acquisition	42
<i>Sufumi So with Rocío Domínguez</i>	
5. Is there language acquisition after 40? Older learners speak up	56
<i>Lois Bellingham</i>	
6. An Arabic-speaking English learner's path to autonomy through reading	69
<i>Diane Malcolm</i>	
7. Learners' constructions of identities and imagined communities	83
<i>Tim Murphey, Chen Jin and Chen Li-Chi</i>	
8. 'It's just rules . . . that's all it is at this stage . . .'	101
<i>Sara Cotterall</i>	
9. Accommodation zone: Two learners' struggles to cope with a distance learning English course	119
<i>Solasa Sataporn and Martin Lamb</i>	

Contents

10. Learning a second language with broadcast materials at home: Japanese students' long-term experiences	134
<i>Tae Umino</i>	
11. Conclusion	150
<i>David Nunan and Phil Benson</i>	
References	157
Index	173

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?

Long's second question is, however, clearly *secondary* to the first, because, as he argues in a later paper, the focus on cognition in SLA research is not an arbitrary choice. On the contrary, it is determined by 'the very nature of the SLA beast' (Long 1997, p. 319):

Most SLA researchers view the object of inquiry as in large part an internal, mental process: *the acquisition of new (linguistic) knowledge*. And I would say, with good reason. SLA is a process that (often) takes place in a social setting, of course, but then so do most internal processes . . . and that neither obviates the need for theories of those processes, nor shifts the goal of inquiry to a theory of the settings. (ibid., italics in original)

This reduction of the SLA 'object of inquiry' to its cognitive essences is significant because it legitimizes the attempt to produce a universally applicable account of second language learning in the face of evidence of diversity. In particular, it reduces the theoretical problems posed by learner diversity to manageable proportions. Since the second language learning *process* is invariable almost by definition, learner diversity can have few implications for it. It may, however, have implications for the *linguistic outcomes* of this process, which clearly vary from individual to individual. Moreover, if diversity is not a property of the internal mental processes involved in second language learning, it can only be a property of something external to them. For SLA researchers, therefore, diversity becomes a property of the *contexts* in which the learning process occurs.

The SLA perspective on learner diversity

Several recent critiques of SLA research have referred to a tendency to treat variability in second language learning as secondary to its universal characteristics. Larsen-Freeman (2001, p. 12), for example, points out that, 'while the learner has not been ignored in second language acquisition (SLA) research, more attention has been paid to characterizing an acquisition process that is common to all learners'. Although SLA researchers recognize that success in second language learning is variable, she argues, it has been 'left to the research on individual learner factors to explain this differential success' (ibid.). As Larsen-Freeman's review of research shows, however, these factors have nevertheless been the subject of a considerable body of work. An emphasis on the secondary status of this work may therefore lead us to overlook the particular ways in which the concept of difference (the established term in SLA research) has been constructed.

The SLA approach to the question of difference dates back to Schumann (1978a, 1978b), who aimed to make sense of the various

factors involved in second language learning through his ‘pidginization hypothesis’ (later known as the ‘acculturation model’). Schumann (1978b) began with a taxonomy of factors of variability identified in the research to date but immediately noted that, although such taxonomies were valuable, ‘it is necessary to determine which factor or set of factors are more important in that they *cause* second-language acquisition to occur’ (ibid., p. 27, italics in original). He then hypothesized that factors of social and psychological distance from speakers of the target language were likely to be among the most important causal factors and, indeed, that ‘the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree that he acculturates’ in a social and psychological sense (ibid., p. 28).

The relationship of Schumann’s acculturation model to the hypothesis of a universal language acquisition device was not explicitly stated and remains problematic. In describing acquisition as ‘a by-product of acculturation’, Schumann (1978b, p. 46) seems to imply that second language learning is a social and psychological (and thus inherently variable) process. But as Larsen-Freeman (1983, p. 7) described Schumann’s model, it had ‘no cognitive element in it’ because Schumann believed that ‘given social and psychological integration, an individual endowed with normal brain faculty will acquire a second language’. Whether Schumann, in fact, believed this or not is a moot point. With hindsight, however, we can see how his attempt to model causality in SLA set an agenda for research in the field of ‘individual differences’ that has largely been concerned with the influence of contextual factors on ‘differential success’ (Larsen-Freeman 2001).

This emphasis on the articulation of relationships between contextual factors and the linguistic outcomes of second language learning is illustrated by Ellis’s (1994, p. 197) formulation of the problem of learner difference:

Learners differ enormously in how quickly they learn an L2, in the type of proficiency they acquire (for example, conversational ability as opposed to literacy in the L2) and the ultimate level of proficiency they reach. In part these differences can be explained by reference to psychological factors such as language aptitude, learning style and personality . . . but in part they are socially determined.

As Ellis’s review of research shows, psychological factors such as language aptitude, learning style, age, motivation, strategy use and learner beliefs, and social factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, cultural background and settings for learning have all been extensively investigated (see also Skehan 1989, 1991; Gardner 1997; Larsen-Freeman 2001; Dörnyei and Skehan 2003; Siegel 2003; Barkhuizen 2004; Ellis 2004).

The notion of 'context' tends to be ill-defined in the literature. The psychological research, for example, tends to identify context with social and situational setting alone. But non-linguistic psychological processes also tend to be treated as contextual to processes specifically directed at linguistic input. The emphasis on the correlation of both social and non-linguistic psychological factors with linguistic outcomes is also clear.

Within both branches of the research there has also been a strong emphasis on the use of quantitative experimental and survey methods to isolate and scale psychological and sociological 'variables' and correlate them with linguistic outcomes (most often measured in terms of proficiency level or gain). The use of the quantitative methods, it could be argued, offers the possibility of an account of the role of learner diversity in terms of the systematic and regular influence of contextual variables on the outcomes of an essentially invariable cognitive process. The fragmentation of the research, however, means that in practice this remains a distant goal. Ellis (1994, p. 524), for example, concluded his review of the research on factors of difference with the comment that it 'has told us little about the relative strength of different learner factors or how they interrelate'. He also reiterated Skehan's (1991, p. 524) call for 'naturalistic' studies that 'can shed light on the individuality of single learners and can also show the dynamic nature of the interaction between the malleable aspects of individual difference (for example, anxiety and motivation) and learners' learning experiences'. More recently, Larsen-Freeman (2001, p. 24) concluded her review of research in a similar fashion with a call for 'more holistic research that links integrated individual difference research from emic and etic perspectives to the processes, mechanisms and conditions of learning within different contexts over time'.

In the light of these calls for a more 'naturalistic' or 'holistic' approach to research, it is worth noting that Schumann's acculturation model was largely based on empirical evidence derived from case studies based on first-person accounts of second language learning. The comments in this section, however, raise the question of what the objectives of such case studies should be. Although SLA research tells us a good deal about the factors that 'make up' learner diversity, its treatment of these factors as 'contextual' has generated certain blind spots in the research. As Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 308) point out, SLA research tends to view context only as a 'modifier' of the internal activity involved in language learning. And because the factors involved in learner diversity are removed to the domain of context in SLA research, they too are viewed primarily as modifiers of cognitive processing that are ultimately channelled through the linguistic input that learners receive. As a result, little attention is paid to the ways in which these factors *develop* over time or as a

consequence of individual experiences of language learning, and even less attention has been paid to the sense in which they might be considered as outcomes of the second language learning process in their own right.

(Auto)biographical research

The emphasis on the search for cognitive universals in SLA research has been at the centre of a number of recent critiques (Pennycook 1990; Rampton 1991, 1997; Block 1996b, 2003; Lantolf 1996; Firth and Wagner 1997; Tarone 1997; Ellis 1999; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Breen 2001; Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001; Norton and Toohey 2001). These critiques have also argued, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, for a greater emphasis on qualitative research directed at the holistic description of second language learning experiences and for a greater emphasis on the social, affective and conceptual dimensions of the learning process. In the context of these critiques, Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 310) refer to a relatively recent literature concerned 'not only with studying individuals acting on L2 input and producing L2 output, but also with studying how L2 learners are situated in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts and how learners resist or accept the positions those contexts offer them'.

In the following sections I will review two major strands within this literature. The first strand can be described as 'autobiographical' in the sense that it involves first-person analysis of experiences of second language learning by those who directly experience them. The second can be described as 'biographical' in the sense that it involves third-person analysis of the experiences of others.

Autobiographical research

Autobiographical research first appeared in the second language learning literature in the form of 'introspective diary studies' – a mode of research in which diaries or journals recorded over relatively long periods of time are analysed from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Schumann and Schumann 1977; Rivers 1979; Bailey 1980, 1983; Schumann 1980; Schmidt and Frota 1986; Jones 1994; Campbell 1996; Leung 2002). As Nunan (1992, p. 115) points out, this mode of research was initially seen as a means of gaining 'insights into the mental processes underlying observable behaviour'. It is now recognized, however, that the strength of diary studies lies more in the fact that researchers are able 'to tap into affective factors, language learning

strategies, and the learners' own perception' (Bailey and Nunan 1996, p. 197). Similarly, an emphasis on the close analysis of linguistic data in earlier studies (e.g., Schmidt and Frota 1986) has given way to a much greater emphasis on the social and psychological dimensions of language learning (e.g., Campbell 1996).

Although the number of published studies remains relatively small, introspective diary study has become an established research method informed by principles designed to increase reliability and validity (Bailey 1983, 1991; Bailey and Ochsner 1983). Paramount among these principles is an insistence that the data should be recorded concurrently with the learning. Adherence to this principle, however, usually means that researchers must decide to collect the data in advance and complete the data collection within a relatively short period of time. For this reason, published studies tend to cover periods of a year or less in which the researchers study a second language for the purposes of the research, or at least in the knowledge that research will be one of the outcomes.

In the light of this limitation, attention has shifted in recent years to recollection as a means of exploring longer-term experiences of language learning in more 'authentic' settings. Particular interest has been shown in language learning 'memoirs' from beyond the SLA literature, written both by second language researchers and others (e.g., Wierzbicka 1985; Hoffman 1989; Kaplan 1993; Lvovich 1997; Ogulnick 1998). From a conventional point of view, memoirs are something less than 'research'. Kaplan (1994), however, comments that she viewed writing her own memoir as an alternative to the research methods she had encountered in her reading of the SLA literature. Cameron (2000, p. 91) also argues that memoirs are worth studying because they particularly demonstrate 'the strength of feelings stirred up by language learning':

They make clear, for instance, that the acquisition of a new language raises questions of subjectivity and desire: the problems confronted by the learner are not just technical or mechanical ('how do I say X in this language?'), but involve complex issues of identity ('who am I when I speak this language?', or alternatively 'can I be "me" when I speak this language?')

Nevertheless memoirs retain a somewhat equivocal status as research and they have entered the SLA literature mainly as a source of data for third-person analysis in work on questions of identity in the memoirs of immigrants to North America (Morrow 1997; Pavlenko 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; and Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001).

The most significant consequence of this interest in language learning memoirs, however, has been the emergence of autobiographical recollection within the second language teaching and learning literature itself.

Oxford and Green (1996), for example, have argued for the value of 'learning histories' as a source of data for discussion and reflection in the classroom (see also Aoki 2002; Horwitz *et al.* 1997, 2004), while others have viewed them as examples from which teachers and learners can acquire knowledge of the processes involved in successful learning. The aim of Belcher and Connor's (2001, p. 2) collection of individually and collaboratively produced language-learning autobiographies, for example, was mainly to help 'others to understand better how advanced second-language literacy can be achieved' (see also Stevick 1989; Murphey 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Ogulnick 2000). Recollection was also proposed as a research technique by Cohen and Scott (1996) and Oxford *et al.* (1996). At that time, however, they were unable to cite any published examples of its use. Autobiographical recollection has, however, recently been used by He (2002) to investigate learning strategies. It has also been used in research on second language literacy (Shen 1989; Bell 1995, 1997; Connor 1999), motivation (Lim 2002), autonomy and self-directed learning (Brown 2002; Benson, Chik and Lim 2003; Walker 2004), bilingual parenting (Fries 1998; Kouritzin 2000a), and the experiences of non-native speakers as learners and teachers (Lin *et al.* 2002; Sakui 2002). In these studies, the drawback of 'inevitable memory deterioration between the language learning experience and the research study' (Cohen and Scott 1996, p. 102) tends to be counterbalanced by the researchers' intimate knowledge of the contexts of their own learning and by the insights that are gained from a longer-term view of the learning process.

Biographical research

One of the chief limitations of autobiographical research lies in the fact that the researcher-subject must be able to write a publishable account of her or his own learning experiences. Biographical research thus opens up the possibility of exploring, albeit indirectly, the experiences of a much wider range of learners. As in the case of autobiographical research, in the following review I will make a broad distinction between studies based on concurrent data and studies based on recollection.

Biographical research in the field of second language learning can be traced back to a series of longitudinal case studies related to Schumann's (1978a, 1978b) pidginization hypothesis, or acculturation model (e.g., Cazden *et al.* 1975; Shapira 1978; Kessler and Idar 1979; Schmidt 1983). Although these studies were largely structured around the analysis of linguistic performance data, they differed from other case studies published at around the same time in the significant use they made of information about the subjects' life experiences. For example, in Schmidt's (1983)

three-year study of Wes – a Japanese artist who had acquired English with little formal instruction – the main source of data consisted of 21 hours of audio-taped speech. The analysis of this audio data is organized in terms of categories of grammatical, discourse and sociolinguistic competence, but Schmidt's (1983, p. 145) 'extensive but irregular field notes' also play a significant explanatory role throughout.

In more recent case studies – often described by their authors as 'ethnographic' – biographical data play a more prominent role, influencing both the degree of emphasis on linguistic developments and the structure of the published work (e.g., Gillette 1994; Polanyi 1995; McKay and Wong 1996; Lam 2000; Norton 2000, 2001; Toohey 2000; Deutsch-Dwyer 2001; Chen 2002; Newcombe 2002). Among these, Deutsch-Dwyer's (2001) study of the morphosyntactic development in the English of Karol – a Polish immigrant to the USA who had also acquired English with little formal instruction – is closest in conception to Schmidt's (1983) study of Wes. But the fact that Deutsch-Dwyer explains linguistic developments in Karol's English through the story of his immigration to the USA and his relationship with a female partner marks a significant difference between the two papers.

In other studies, linguistic developments are more broadly sketched out and sometimes constitute little more than a statement of the problem to be explored. Gillette (1994), for example, used proficiency assessments to identify three 'effective' and three 'ineffective' learners, but the bulk of her study is concerned with the exploration of relationships between life goals and strategy use based on ethnographic and biographical data. Similarly, Polanyi's (1995) study, based on narratives written by American study-abroad students in Russia, seeks to explain differences between male and female assessed proficiency gains, but the main focus of the paper falls upon an analysis of the gendered nature of the study-abroad experience for many female students.

In some recent studies, non-linguistic outcomes are the major focus of attention. Swain and Miccoli's (1994) study of an adult Japanese learner's participation in a course on collaborative learning, for example, is mainly concerned with the learner's affective development during the course, while Allen's (1996) study of an adult Libyan learner is concerned with the evolution of his beliefs about language learning during an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. Block's (1996a; 1998) case studies of language learning classrooms focus upon the learners' interpretations and evaluations of classroom events and processes rather than developments in their language proficiency. The language-based longitudinal case study of the late 1970s has thus evolved gradually into a more 'ethnographic' form, in which the description of language learning experiences and their non-linguistic outcomes plays an increasingly important role.

Biography properly speaking, however, has been the province of ‘life history’ research, which is usually based, in the context of second language learning, on recollective data collected either through interviews or in the form of written essays. Evans’ (1988) book-length study of the experiences of university-level foreign language students and teachers in the UK appears to be the earliest example of life history interviewing in the field of second language learning. The aims of Evans’ study – to ‘understand the experience of a group and articulate it’ (ibid., p. 1) – were relatively open-ended and the editors of this book adopted a similarly open-ended approach in research into the lifelong language learning experiences of university-level learners of English in Hong Kong (Benson and Nunan 2004). The objective in each case was to paint a contextually rich picture of the experience of learning, which took account of both the commonalities of the setting and the specificities of individual experiences of it.

Other life history studies have focused on specific questions concerned with affect and cognition (Oxford 1996), motivational development (Spolsky 2000), language loss among Asian-American immigrants (Hinton 2001), access to ESL classes for immigrant women in Canada (Kouritzin 2000c), language policy in China (Lam 2002) and multilingual identities of Asian learners of English (Kanno 2000, 2003; Benson, Chik and Lim 2003; Block 2002). Life histories, typically collected in the form of short essays, have also been used as a source of data for more abstract theoretical work (Schumann 1997; Tse 2000; Carter 2002). In Schumann’s recent work, for example, ‘linguistic autobiographies’ written by his students form part of a data set (which also includes published introspective diary studies and language memoirs) supporting an explanation of variable success in second language learning in terms of ‘preferences and aversions acquired in the lifetime of the individual’ (1997, p. 36).

The rise of (auto)biographical research?

In this brief literature review I have extracted a relatively small number of studies from the many thousands that have been published in the field of second language learning over the past 25 years or so and brought them together under the heading of ‘(auto)biographical research’. In doing so, I am attempting to establish what Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997, p. 29) call a ‘synthesized coherence’ by claiming that these studies constitute a coherent body of work in spite of the fact that they are in many ways unrelated to each other. What is it, then, that ties these studies together and differentiates them from others, and what is it about them that justifies the use of the term ‘(auto)biographical’?

Reviews of the contents of the major journals in our field suggest that, although qualitative research remains a minority interest, it is nevertheless gaining ground (Lazaraton 2000; Gao, Li and Lu 2001). To describe the studies reviewed here as 'qualitative' would therefore be one way of separating them from the majority and, especially, from the bulk of studies in the SLA research tradition discussed earlier. Qualitative inquiry, however, covers a variety of approaches and the scope of the studies reviewed here can be further narrowed down by contrasting them with (a) qualitative studies of learning activities (such as think aloud studies of learners working on tasks of various kinds) and (b) qualitative studies of learning situations (such as observational studies or classroom ethnographies). In contrast to these types, the studies I am concerned with here are (a) based upon first-person accounts of relatively long-term processes of learning and (b) focused on learners and their experiences rather than the learning activities or situations in which they participate. Many of these studies are case studies of individual learners or, more narrowly, studies of the sense that is made of learning experiences as learners participate in a variety of activities and situations over relatively long periods of time.

A second way of identifying this body of work, however, would be to point to its connections to parallel work concerned with narratives of experience in other fields. As Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998, p. 3) show, narrative-based studies have flourished since the mid-1980s in a variety of fields, including psychology, gender studies, education, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, law and history. The influence of this work has, moreover, been such that some researchers have written of a 'biographical turn' in the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000; Roberts 2002), while the title of one book goes so far as to suggest that we are now living in a 'biographical age' (Goodley *et al.* 2004). According to Roberts (2002, p. 1), biographical research 'seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future'. This would also be an apt description of the research I have reviewed and, although it would probably be overstating the case to claim that second language learning research is also on the verge of an (auto)biographical 'turn', it is worth noting that several of the more recent studies make explicit reference to biographical research in the social sciences and that discussions of narrative and life history methods have begun to appear in the literature (Kouritzin 2000b; Bell 2002; Pavlenko 2002).

The term '(auto)biographical research' would seem to apply most appropriately, then, to recent studies in which there is an explicit attempt to collect and analyse learners' stories of learning experiences using methods and frameworks developed in the social sciences. When we look

at earlier work such as the introspective diary studies and case studies of the late 1970s, however, we see very similar goals and methods at work. This suggests that the roots of current interest in (auto)biography as a research tool are partly indigenous and certainly deeper than they appear at first sight. It also points to a possible underlying shift in focus within the field from 'the learner' as an abstract, or universalized, construct to actual learners and their historically and contextually situated experiences of learning.

(Auto)biography and learner diversity

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the shift from language-focused to learner-focused research could perhaps be explained by the growing visibility of learner diversity as a factor in late-twentieth-century language education. For what reason, then, could we now be on the verge of a further shift in focus to the learner as an individual? One possible reason could be that SLA research has so far significantly failed to explain the consequences of learner diversity for the learning process. In the remainder of this chapter, however, I want to look more closely at the origins of the 'biographical turn' in the social sciences and, in particular, at the possibility that diversity in second language learning has taken on an essentially new character that cannot readily be explained in terms of the influence of contextual variables on the linguistic outcomes of the learning process.

Some evidence for this 'new' character of learner diversity can be found in Rustin's (2000) discussion of the relationship between the biographical turn and the changing nature of the social processes that social scientists investigate. Drawing on the work of Giddens (1991) and other contemporary social theorists on 'individualization' as a characteristic process of late modern society, Rustin (2000, p. 33) contrasts the situation of modernity, in which individual identities were largely determined by 'social scripts', and the situation of late modernity, in which 'contemporary societies throw more and more responsibility on to individuals to choose their own identities'. In contemporary society, he argues:

Social structures – classes, extended families, occupational communities, long-term employment within a firm – which formerly provided strong frames of identity, grow weaker. Simultaneously, society exposes individuals to bombardments of information, alternative versions of how life might be lived, and requires of individuals that they construct an 'authentic' version of themselves, making use of the numerous identity-prompts which consumer-society makes available.

In the context of these changes, he suggests, 'the time seems right for a fresh methodological turn towards the study of individuals, a turn to biography' (ibid., p. 34).

Extending this argument to the field of second language learning research, we might argue that 'individualization' is the reverse side of the coin of 'globalization' and the breakdown of language-based cultural frames of reference for identity that accompanies greater global mobility for individuals. There are clear parallels between the assumption that diversity in second language learning is contextually determined and the assumption that individual identities are determined by relatively fixed sociocultural locations. More importantly, we can perhaps see how second language learning is implicated in processes of 'individualization' on a global scale. Second language learning can be seen both as a contributory factor to global mobility and the breakdown of 'first language' identities and as part of the process by which individuals construct new linguistic identities for themselves – see, for example, Benson, Chik and Lim (2003) and Block (2002) on the multilingual identities of Asian learners of English. In a world in which the boundaries between socio-cultural contexts are increasingly blurred, learner diversity indeed appears to take on a new character, in which the construction of new, and often highly individualized, multilingual identities *through* second language learning plays a crucial role.

In the context of these changes, the reduction of the object of inquiry of SLA research to the mental processes that produce linguistic knowledge (Long 1997, p. 319) appears to be especially problematic. Kasper (1997, p. 309), for example, defends this reduction as a *necessary* abstraction from 'the complex multiple identities of real people' and states that she is comfortable with an essentially cognitivist definition of the language learning process, 'because in the final analysis, learning or acquiring anything is about establishing new knowledge structures and making that knowledge available for effective and efficient use' (ibid., p. 310). This statement, however, conceals the extent to which 'the complex multiple identities of real people' may be a significant non-linguistic outcome of language learning. SLA research does, of course, take account of factors of identity in the explanation of the variable outcomes of learning, but by treating them as contextual factors it misses important opportunities to investigate the interaction of the linguistic and non-linguistic dimension of the second language learning process. As Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001, p. 145) suggest, 'learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning'. This implies a view of the learning process in which the contextual variables of SLA research are seen as both determinants and outcomes of the learning process. It is perhaps, however, only in the light of recent discussions