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Strategic Language Learning: The Roles of Agency and Context		
Author:	Xuesong (Andy) Gao (2010)	
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Teaching Reading to English Language Learners

Insights from Linguistics

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Second language acquisition (SLA) research that is influenced by sociocultural theory (SCT) is a relatively new trend, which some consider to have officially started with Frawley and Lantolf’s (1985) study on second language discourse (Lantolf and Beckett, 2009). Since then, applied linguists interested in language acquisition have begun to situate their investigations within SCT (see, e.g., van Lier, 1996; Lantolf, 1997; Nassaji and Swain, 2000; Swain, 2001) and to consider the theoretical implications of the influence of SCT in language learning research (see, e.g., Johnson, 2006). In keeping with this socially situated line of SLA research, Gao’s work *Strategic Language Learning: The Roles of Agency and Context* (2010) is a longitudinal ethnographic study that explores the language learning experiences of five mainland Chinese students attending an English medium university in Hong Kong. Of particular interest to Gao is the English language learning strategies these students develop, both in China and during their subsequent study in Hong Kong. By conducting interviews and observations, Gao draws conclusions about the strategies participants employ to become members of the academic community and to foster their own language development in English, with a consideration of the extent to which these choices are mediated by their environment.

The book has seven chapters, two appendices with interview guides, and numerous tables and figures. The first three chapters are successful in orienting the reader to Gao’s work; they

provide an introduction and overview of the book (Chapter 1) a discussion of an SCT perspective on strategic language learning (Chapter 2), and a general description of the social and political factors that have motivated mainland Chinese students to attend English medium universities outside their home country (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 describes Gao's use of semi-structured interviews with participants just after their arrival in Hong Kong; the purpose of these interviews is to describe participants' English language learning strategy use on the Chinese mainland and to determine why they adopted these unique strategies. Similarly, Chapter 5 presents the results of further interviews and observations with students after more time had passed. The purpose of these conversations was to explore the new language learning experiences students had and the strategies they developed, and to compare these to findings from Chapter 4. Findings from a longitudinal follow-up study with selected participants follow in Chapter 6, and Chapter 7 synthesizes the overall themes of the inquiry and suggests further research.

Overall, Chapters 4 through 6 are successful in providing thick description of the rich and varied experiences of these learners. An additional strength of these chapters is the insight they provide into how environmental factors (for example, family pressure, institutional resources, and peer interactions) mediate the learners' development of strategies (such as rote memorization of vocabulary items, or the conscious effort to interact socially with competent L2 speakers). The transparent organization of this book and its logical structure serve to first provide the reader with necessary background information, and then to draw out qualitative themes in the participants' strategy use in a way that is solidly supported by Gao's ethnographic research methods.

Gao's book is a part of the Second Language Acquisition Series published by Multilingual Matters. The series editor notes that the volumes in this series should offer readers both discussion of empirical work and reflection on theoretical implications, and *Strategic Language Learning* certainly fulfills these objectives. The description of the series further states that it is intended for an upper level undergraduate or graduate readership who are conducting research in second language acquisition, or for teachers and researchers in general who are interested in second language acquisition. It seems, though, that an undergraduate audience might need additional instructional support for the material in this book to be accessible to them. Because the theoretical perspective is complicated, graduate researchers or faculty members may find this material more approachable than a novice audience would. Gao's careful consideration of how SCT is relevant to his work is undoubtedly a strength of his study. However, the depth of this aspect of the book might make it more appropriate for an advanced audience.

Strategic Language Learning has numerous strengths in its theoretical framing, its methodology, and its data reporting. In the second chapter, Gao is skillful at synthesizing research in and criticisms of language learning strategy use that are relevant to a socio-culturally situated investigation. Rather than simply present a summary of previous studies, Gao provides thoughtful discussion of past work, and considers how it was motivated by a sociocultural perspective as well as what might be done to continue this line of research. In addition, the longitudinal nature of Gao's study renders his findings particularly strong. Applied linguists such as Duff (2008) have encouraged longitudinal qualitative inquiry into

language development because this approach often yields findings that are multidimensional and that take into account the participants' context. Gao's study, by following five focal participants for two years and by using an ethnographic method to investigate their context, achieves this goal. In addition to working within a qualitative research paradigm, however, Gao provides the reader with numerous quantifications of his findings in attractive tables and figures throughout the book. This transparent data reporting lends methodological rigor to his interpretations of the participants' language learning experiences.

As previously mentioned, there may be a slight mismatch of content and intended audience. Throughout the monograph, there are terms and concepts specific to qualitative inquiry and to SCT that might be difficult for an undergraduate audience to interpret. However, this book's many strengths, including its careful theoretical orientation, its rigorous methodology, and its accessible data reporting make it very suitable for a more advanced readership. Studies like this one will continue to promulgate a deeper understanding of how second language learners interact with their surroundings to develop language-learning strategies based on their unique context. Such data is invaluable for teachers and researchers interested in second language acquisition.

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