



Title: The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition

Writer: Zoltán Dörnyei

Publisher: Oxford University Press, Oxford (2009)

Number of pages: 302 pp

Price: £33.50

ISBN: 978-0-19-442197-3

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Reviewing this recent work by Zoltán Dörnyei, *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*, has been simultaneously a challenge and a pleasure. This book is Zoltán Dörnyei's response to what he calls the 'paradigmatic earthquake' in applied linguistics and SL research.

This 'paradigmatic earthquake' has been caused by both "the influence of brain research in the disciplines of psycholinguistics, neuropsychology, neurobiology, cognitive science and neuroscience", as well as "the emergence of new cognitive approaches in SLA" (p. xi). In the convergence of linguistics and psychology, new terminology has emerged while at the same time intellectual/conceptual shifts are continuing to be made by scholars, shifts which Dörnyei believes herald a new identity for applied linguists. SLA researchers wanting to develop a dynamic approach to their work will find *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition* very useful. This is Dörnyei's main intention for the book, which is "to provide readers with enough background knowledge to be able to make use of this accumulating neuroscientific evidence" (p. 10) while also noting researchers today need to become 'skilled rangers' in these areas. It is certainly arguable whether second language teachers could benefit from reading this book in spite of the fact that Dörnyei's motivation in writing was to develop insights and instructional strategies to help improve efficiency of L2 learning. It could prove useful to teachers, however, as part of their ongoing professional development if teachers were willing and able to use "the accumulating neuroscientific evidence" to further develop their theoretical/teaching approach.

The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition is somewhat ground-breaking in that the content holds promise of bringing to a resolution the traditionally static and uneasy relationship between SLA research theory and pedagogy, between the divide on a focus on the acquisition/learning process and a focus on the learner. SLA was born when an active role was given to the learner (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). From the time of the influential work of Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972), SLA research remained largely descriptive for the

following 20 years. At that stage of development in the field of SLA research, the SLA process began and continued to be recognized as complex, non-linear as well as dynamic and social (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). As Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) is a cornerstone of Dörnyei's book, *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition* can be seen as a testimony to Dörnyei's journey of self-admitted intellectual development, e.g., leaving behind the individual differences paradigm (the traditional conceptual approach of L2 scholars) for a dynamic theoretical approach to SLA, largely Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) (pp. 180-231). Therefore, Dörnyei's work, while exciting in its accumulation of content, is not innovative, but builds on the work of other SLA scholars such as Larsen-Freeman (1991, 2007); de Bot; Lowie and Verspoor (2005, 2007).

As already inferred, *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition* is a book that can be read on a number of levels. On one level, it is a very comprehensive survey of contemporary SLA literature, issues, and research. On another level, it contains a list of scholars working in the various fields associated with SLA, while yet on another level the reader is given an overview of the more recent psychological theories and approaches in SLA (e.g., connectionism, emergentism, and dynamic systems theory). In Chapter 1, Dörnyei addresses the outcome of the convergence of linguistics and psychology as creating new 'hybrid' disciplines, which in turn has created a cross-fertilization process. Dörnyei's belief for the future of SLA is that it will need to embrace psychology, and so Chapter 2 introduces the reader to 'Neuropsychologese' (language drawn from neuroanatomy), brain anatomy, and also methods of researching the brain for language purposes. Chapter 3 contains a critique of the major limitations in the symbolic approach of two formal linguistic theories (Nativism and Universal Grammar), i.e., their inability to deal with language development. According to Dörnyei, non-nativist theories are not sufficiently developed and SLA theorists struggle with increasingly broad frameworks (Ellis, 2006). The second half of the chapter outlines some contemporary non-symbolic psychological theories exploring 5 specific research directions: connectionism and the competition model, two strands within the complexity theory (dynamic systems theory and emergentism), and usage-based theories.

Chapter 4 deals with psychological processes in language. At this point, Dörnyei embeds his (general) thesis that effective L2 learning needs the inclusion of explicit learning (i.e., instruction is needed for best results to be achieved in the second language learning process [SLL]). As the reader will come to see, Dörnyei does not appear to prove or provide substantial evidence for his thesis, which is a major limitation of his work. This serious limitation emerges when the book's propensity to appear as a series of edited notes from Dörnyei's intellectual journey comes into conflict with the pedagogical focus of his general thesis (the cooperation of implicit and explicit learning) in the final chapter (to be discussed later). In chapter 5, Dörnyei introduces DST as a major theory adequate to the task of representing the dynamism of the SLL, a critically useful and authentic approach to human learners and their learning needs. Here, the reader can begin to grasp that DST allows for the conversation about language development and the need for the co-operation of implicit and explicit learning to occur within the same framework, by regarding "... the

longitudinal development of a highly complex system and language acquisition as a highly complex mental function – communication – as it interacts with a highly complex linguistic and social environment” (p. 264). In chapter 6, Dörnyei examines age effects on L2 acquisition and deals with the ‘younger is better’ myth, a key issue in SLA research (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003). What Dörnyei makes clear is that in formal learning situations older is most often better, and that SLA cannot be explained by simple truths; the dynamic of age effects cannot be addressed by a simplistic approach.

In the concluding chapter 7, Dörnyei brings his thesis to rest, placing his concerns (the co-operation of implicit and explicit learning) within the context of pedagogy. This move leads to the only point in the entire work where I felt disappointed. In spite of Dörnyei’s continuing promotion of DST as a preferred theoretical framework, DST is only given scant application in the final chapter. The reader is given only glimpses of possibilities. Dörnyei’s failure to extrapolate concrete applications for language learning and teaching methodologies creates a major limitation for his work. Dörnyei himself admits this limitation of scant application in this final chapter, where “the material reviewed often failed to offer the level of detail and elaboration that classroom practitioners would need in order to be able to implement the proposed ideas” (p. 301). Unfortunately, this failure to extrapolate theory into practice compromises, to a large degree, the promised usefulness of Dörnyei’s work for second language teachers. This situation, however, does not stand in the way of the success of this book as being both timely and necessary for researchers working in applied linguistics and SL research. Indeed, this book, described by Dörnyei as being “a crash course in ‘what-you-definitely-need-to-know-about-the-psychology-of-SLA’”, does, in its comprehensive theoretical considerations, have potential to help those researchers struggling in the ‘paradigmatic earthquake’ of applied linguistics and SL research.

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