
Barbara A. Lafford, Rafael Salaberry (Eds.), Spanish Second Language Acquisition: State of the Science, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, 2003, xii + 332 pp

One of the contributors to this book makes reference to 'the countless number of people trying to learn Spanish, in every variety of settings ...' and, indeed, the upsurge in Spanish-learning around the globe is good justification for what could seem

a rather specific slant on the subject of second language acquisition (SLA). It is also timely, given the recent demise of *Spanish Applied Linguistics*, one of the few English-language journals devoted to this area of research.

Ostensibly the aim of this volume is to provide, for the benefit of researchers and students, an overview of research over the last two decades into SLA in general, and Spanish SLA in particular. In truth, however, the goal this volume sets itself is wider than this and the editors clearly have a further motivation, which is to assess the quality of research undertaken and to promote increasingly rigorous standards for work in the empirical tradition.

The volume consists of ten chapters, each focused on a different aspect of SLA. Six are devoted to what the editors term the 'products' of SLA, namely phonology, tense/aspect, subjunctive/syntax, clitics, lexicon and pragmatics/discourse. Three papers examine the 'processes' of SLA, from a generative, a cognitive and a sociocultural perspective. Finally one paper examines how teaching has been influenced by research findings. Both the research reviewed and the authors themselves are firmly rooted in the North American tradition of empirical, classroom-based research.

The pattern of all the papers is similar: a broad general introduction to the topic is followed by a critical review of relevant Spanish empirical studies, the methodologies used and the contribution of the studies to the advancement of knowledge. A final concluding section outlines potential areas for future research.

A valuable aspect of this book lies in the way individual papers guide readers through the general theoretical context for whatever aspect of SLA is under focus, sometimes making reference to findings from first language acquisition. The synthesised research background is inevitably brief but is usually illuminating, albeit sometimes very challenging, and each chapter provides its own detailed bibliography for readers to follow up. The scope is broad and up-to-date, and covers a range of theories, from sociocultural theory, to connectionism, to minimalism, aiming to give as wide a sweep as possible. Although likely to be most used as a reference work, the committed reader, working through from cover to cover, could not fail to feel better informed and to have a fair understanding of the main theoretical currents and trends that have inspired SLA research in its relatively short life-span, right up to the present day.

The empirical sections of the papers strive to show how theory has underpinned Spanish-related research, and also how Spanish-related research has contributed to the development of theory. This entails substantial reviewing of empirical studies and, as with all such reviews, space available for detail is restricted and the true import of the information inevitably limited. This is especially true where few illustrations or examples can be given and those chapters that restrict coverage in the interests of more informative elaboration are the more readable and instructive as a result. But at the very least the motivated reader will be driven to seek out the original studies to see for him/herself and will know where to look. A substantial amount of the research reviewed is that conducted by the reviewers themselves or by their colleagues but it must be said that the reviews are objective and rigorous assessments of methodology, at times to the point of criticising the defects of the authors' own earlier work. They also often reflect the sometimes vigorous academic debate that

has surrounded different theoretical approaches. An example would be the claims and counter-claims for the Processing Instruction model, as reported in the chapter on instruction.

A weakness of the empirical sections of the papers is their localised focus. Research reviewed is, with a few notable exceptions, US-based and is heavily orientated towards university-based studies of classroom acquisition in a context with which US readers will be familiar, but the more general reader less so. This potentially alienating feature is compounded by the use of local terminology and assumed terms of reference. What does it mean, for instance, to refer to 'first year students' of Spanish in the US system? Are they beginners or do they have an assumed start point? Equally, the 'ACTFL oral interview' may mean little to the reader outside the US. Such terms of reference need to be explained for the wider market. Given the narrow focus, it is rather dangerous to make sweeping statements like 'no study of these issues has been carried out using adult learners of Spanish' (p. 135) when there is no real evidence that a wider, more global view has been taken.

As indicated earlier, a final feature of each paper is a section sign-posting ways forward, and some of these are excellent. The most useful ones provide a potential research agenda for the area being discussed, an indication of priority areas that need tackling for sustained accumulation of knowledge, and even, as in the case of James F. Lee (Chapter 4), suggestions for *how* research might be tackled, taking into account aspects of previous methodologies that have proved successful. For a potential research student, wanting to work in the empirical tradition, and not quite knowing which way to go, this could be a godsend but not without heeding the editors' later cautionary advice (see below)!

A book like this has to be assessed within its terms of reference to see whether it achieves what it sets out to do. As a reference guide to the whole area of SLA, and to work in Spanish in particular, as a guide for research students and programme planners, as an audit of the quality of research in the scientific empirical tradition, this book succeeds. Its weakness is its underlying parochial focus, which finally becomes more explicit in the chapter on instruction with reference to 'national standards for instruction and the proficiency movement...' (p. 287), where the footnote makes clear, and the subsequent page makes explicit, that US standards are the ones being referred to. The author of this chapter laments that current (presumably US) course-books do not reflect the state of research knowledge. The pity of this localised focus is that, across the Atlantic, course-books emerging from Spain latterly show distinct signs of attempting to keep up with SLA research knowledge and with the growing and lively Applied Linguistics culture there. The North American emphasis is also reinforced by the editors' own focus (p.320) on the US national context as the site of researchers' professional development and training.

Nonetheless, this book serves a valuable function in drawing together in one place a body of empirical research and highlighting the weaknesses, not just in Spanish SLA research but in SLA research in general, within the empirical tradition – which brings us to the broader purpose of the book indicated earlier.

The consciously chosen subtitle not only reflects, as the editors say, the adherence of research that is reviewed to the main characteristics of the 'scientific method' but also the criteria by which it is judged. The editors' 'Afterword' notes the increasing rigour of empirical research in the scientific tradition but argues forcefully for still greater rigour and an ever more scientific approach. What they, and the book as a whole, succeed in doing best is to show how research needs to be contextualised within a theoretical framework in order to be most useful, and, indeed, how more cross-fertilisation between theoretical approaches is necessary. The contributors demonstrate well how research has tended to be fragmented and at times theoretically vague and methodologically unsound. The editors' extensive checklist for future researchers is extremely valuable, as is their list of potential priority areas for development. If the daunting, but wholly reasonable, methodological agenda deters some from embarking on empirical research, one suspects that the editors of this volume would not entirely regret such an outcome. If it is taken to heart and heeded by others, and the result is more solid, theoretically founded and 'joined up' research, then their message from this book will have been entirely successful.

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