Conclusion: Final Remarks

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Introduction

In compiling this book we have strongly encouraged each author to bring their own perspectives on their respective topic. Our aim is to include a range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches that provide an up-to-date and comprehensive picture of thinking about language learning psychology. There are many different ways of understanding and approaching the psychology of the language learning experience and clearly not all questions can be answered using the same approach. However, despite the variety and individuality of the different chapters, some common themes emerge, which are suggestive of the direction in which the field as a whole is moving. In this final chapter, we would like to bring together some of these themes and consider possible future developments in the field.

Looking at interconnections

While encouraging individuality and a diversity of approaches in the writing of each chapter, we were also anxious not to convey the impression that we view psychology in terms of isolated, discrete constructs. One of the first challenges we faced was striking the balance between a need to organize the chapters logically and a wish to highlight the ways in which the various constructs are interlinked. Indeed, one of our principal objectives with this book is to bring together a range of concepts that have often been discussed separately in order to explore their commonality. Several of the contributors discuss the ways in which the various constructs considered in the book are in fact interdependent and function together in combination. For example, Cohen’s Chapter 10 on
strategies refers to the “close-knit intersection of styles, strategies, and motivation” in respect to specific L2 tasks. He emphasizes that research can benefit from examining the relations between variables rather than considering each in isolation, and he shows how strategy use only makes sense when considered in combination with other psychological constructs.

Ryan and Mercer (Chapter 6) note that in the past there has been a strong tendency for researchers to isolate and analyse discrete variables. With respect to the concept of mindsets, they argue that it may be more appropriate to consider how mindsets connect with aspects of motivation such as self-efficacy, goal setting, attributions and other specific beliefs. They suggest that mindsets might be more appropriately examined in their entirety rather than by analysing the various component parts in a piecemeal fashion (Robins & Pals, 2002). Similarly, Ushioda (Chapter 5) considers how motivation relates to a person’s entire complex system of motivation, behaviours, interactions, and experiences. She invokes a dynamic systems perspective on motivational processes which renders the notion of discrete, individual variables meaningless. As she explains, “processes of motivation, cognition and emotion and their constituent components interact with one another and the developing context, thereby changing and causing change in non-linear and unpredictable ways, as the system as a whole restructures, adapts and evolves.”

Related to this, some of the chapters remind us of the dangers of conceptions of causality. When considering affect, MacIntyre and Gregersen (Chapter 8) stress that the interrelations between psychological constructs are interesting, but there is a need to reject simple cause-and-effect models. Instead they consider how variables interact in context-dependent, non-linear ways. In his discussion of personality, Dewaele (Chapter 4) concludes in a similar vein; “no single factor is a fool-proof predictor of success in SLA and we need to map out the myriad of – often unquantifiable – factors that are interlocked.”

Interest in looking at combinations of constructs mirrors concerns that have been expressed elsewhere recently. For example, Dörnyei (2010) points to some of the advantages of researching conglomerates of factors in combination rather than looking at them in isolation. In particular, he suggests taking a tripartite view which looks at combinations of cognitive, affective, and motivational factors. In sum, these chapters add to this call for research to focus on combinations of psychological factors in a way that captures the complexity of these interlocking systems.