1

Self-Regulated Learning and Knowledge Blindness: Bringing Language into View

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Abstract

In the field of educational psychology, self-regulation is part of a well-established research paradigm that has been extensively applied to learning contexts. However, despite proposals highlighting its benefits, some researchers claim that its cross-pollination into applied linguistics has been slow. In their recent *Applied Linguistics'* Forum article, Teng and Zhang (2022) discuss some of the reasons why this may be the case. They also further repeated calls for the importance of self-regulated learning in second/foreign language learning and teaching. In this response article, we wish to add to their proposal by focusing on the role that language plays in language learning. Specifically, to maximize the benefits of second/foreign language learning and teaching centered on regulatory training (whether it is self-, co-, or otherwise derived), then alongside the *how* (learning process), we need to more fully consider the *what* (aspect of language being learned), and how the two are, in essence, mutually constitutive and reciprocally conditioned. This entails broadening our perspective on self-regulated learning to encompass the multi-functional nature of language use.

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In their June 2022 Forum article, Teng and Zhang state that "although the field of self-regulation has developed into a mature phase in educational psychology, unfortunately, it has not generated a profound influence in the fields of SLA [second language acquisition], applied linguistics, or foreign language education" (p. 2). By focusing on self-regulation, they joined an ongoing conversation in *Applied Linguistics* that debates the merits and roles of well-established psychological constructs to language learning. We agree that successful self-regulation can play a facilitative role in language learning, and while its expansion into applied linguistics may be slower than its early proponents would have hoped, continued progress is evident. In this response article, we explain how an expanded perspective can enhance Teng and Zhang's proposal to transfer self-regulation to second/foreign language (L2) learning and teaching, connecting their mostly psychological approach to self-regulation with broader concerns in the field of applied linguistics.

Teng and Zhang's (2022) recent article has its antecedents in Wenden's (1998, 2002) calls for an increased focus on metacognitive knowledge in developing strategic language learners and Palfreyman's (2003) response to Wenden. Palfreyman cautioned against *walling in* the view of autonomous, cognitively developing individuals (as opposed to social beings) and *walling out* "other conceptions of learning and development which are closer to the lived experience of learners in real-life contexts" (p. 244). A similar dialogue arose when Tseng et al. (2006) proposed "transferring the theoretical construct of self-regulation from educational psychology to the area of second language acquisition" (p. 78), and Gao (2007) responded with concern that strategic language learning is "not only the result of their [learners'] individual cognitive choices but also of the mediation of particular learning communities" (p. 619). Continuing the discussion, Rose (2012) argued that viewing strategic learning solely from the perspective of self-regulation would be a case of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" (p. 92)—an act Griffiths' (2020) later contended had not occurred.

In these discussions and others (e.g., Thomas and Rose 2019), we observe a continued, circular argument from esteemed scholars working under the umbrella of applied linguistics: An argument focused on the process of learning (the *how*) that backgrounds language (the *what*). Such discussions continue a precedent established when SRL was first imported into L2 education, wherein language was reified as simply the goal of the (self-regulated) learning process (Dörnyei 2005). In other words, many SRL researchers may have succumbed to knowledge blindness, wherein "knowledge as an object of study is obscured" (Maton 2020: 60), and a large part of the knowledge in this instance is language.

As Maton (2014) convincingly argues, such knowledge blindness can be attributed to the ontological and epistemological influence of much Anglophone educational research that has crossed over from psychology and sociology. Psychologically informed educational research, for instance, of which self-regulation as a construct was initially conceived, typically draws on a positivist epistemology, and most commonly conceptualizes "knowledge" as activities or states that reside within learners. This is evidenced in the focus of strategic language learning research in general, where—regardless of the source of regulation—language (the knowledge or goal of the learning process) is often broken down into the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In such instances, language is essentially reified as a compartmentalized skill. We see such knowledge blindness as problematic because language is not just a skill to be acquired or an activity we take part in. It is a complex, adaptive system (Larsen and Ellis, 2009): a social semiotic (Halliday, 1978) or emergent dialogic, linking the individual, the societal, and the cultural (Vygotsky, 1978; Bahktin, 1986; Allan *et al.*, 2017). In other words, the meaning-making practices that language construes/reflects are meditated by cognition that is "embodied, environmentally embedded, autopoietically enacted, and socially encultured and distributed" (Ellis 2019: 39).

By re-envisaging language to more accurately reflect its true nature, our perspective on how a learner's language shapes and is shaped by ecological forces not under the remit of the "self" (or the immediate sociocognitive environment) becomes just as important as focusing on language as a self-generated productive/receptive skill. This is evident in the large number of L2 studies that take epistemologically diverse stances such as socioculturalism (Lantolf *et*

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3

al. 2020), socioconstructivism (Byrnes 2019), complex dynamic systems theory (Larsen-Freeman 2020), or ecological systems theory in general (Chong *et al.*, 2022). In other words, learning (and using) language is different to say learning mathematics or playing chess, which possess systems of rules and constraints that can be easily broken down into structured one-to-one mappings and then learned in isolation; indeed, computers are very capable of mastering these types of patterned systems via self-regulated machine learning, yet they struggle with many aspects of language, especially situated dialogues where language and context are dynamically linked (Bateman *et al.* 2019).

Of course, there are language structures/systems that lend themselves to the types of learning processes that SRL engenders. For example, from a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) view on language, many experiential meanings at the lexicogrammatical level (e.g., those realized through the system of Transitivity as configurations of elements in a clause [see Halliday and Matthiessen 2014]) seem more amenable to SRL than interpersonal meanings at the level of discourse semantics (e.g., those realized through Appraisal [see Martin and White 2005]).[i] This is because experiential meanings have primarily evolved to describe the world around us from a cognitive perspective (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999): They are primarily denotative and construe/reflect an individual's naturalized reality (i.e., knowledge is the field of discourse or language as reflection). Take the following interaction, for example.

Example 1.

A: *When was America settled?*

B1: *Europeans arrived in 1565 on the east coast, and over the next 200 years they took the land from the existing population.*

In this exchange, A has initiated a request for information, which B gives in the form of objectified facts and descriptions. B has not exhibited any opinion on the matter (i.e., their interpersonal stance toward the topic), nor has B positioned themself to A in any way other than accepting the legitimacy of the request and supplying information: Grammatically, B has oriented to the exchange by producing a declarative in response to an interrogative (i.e., they have legitimized A's request by producing the expected syntactic unit and relevant information).

In SFL terms, B's response realizes the following choices in Transitivity (experiential meanings) and Mood (interpersonal meanings) at the lexicogrammatical level:

syntagm	*Europeans*	*arrived*	*in 1565*	*on the east coast, and*	*over the next 200 years*
interpersonal	Subject	Finite + Predicator[ii]			
experiential	Participant	Process	Circumstance	Circumstance	Circumstance

syntagm	*they*	*took*	*the land*	*from the existing population*
interpersonal	Subject	Finite + Predicator	Complement	
experiential	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance

B's response here is realized as a configuration of sequential elements (a syntagm) that reflects/realizes an interpersonal base (Mood realized as Subject ^ Finite) *and* an experiential one (Transitivity realized as a process type and its associated participants and circumstances).

However, in terms of content, B's response is primarily oriented to an experiential base composed of physical activities (material processes), human entities (participants [actors] responsible for the processes), and information that situates the processes and its participants in relation to time and space (circumstances). Experientially laden constructions such as these, and the meanings they contain, are perhaps more amenable to SRL, as they are primarily denotative and configurational (i.e., they reflect a naturalized, observable reality and are tied to a central unit [the process/main verb] in an orbital, mononuclear view of constituency).

Many interpersonal meanings, on the other hand, enact social relationships from an interaction base of positionings: They are often connotative and represent/enact interactant roles and social relationships (i.e., knowledge as the tenor of discourse or language as action). They are also less dependent on strict configurations tied to a central element—they often migrate across language units, realizing prosodic structures through iteration, dominance, and saturation (see Halliday [1979, 1981] or Martin [2008]). For instance, consider two additional ways in which B could have responded in the previous exchange (the words in bold highlight the increased presence of interpersonal language choices in B2 and B3).[iii]

Example 2

A: *When was America settled?*

B1: *Europeans arrived in 1565 on the east coast, and over the next 200 years took the land from the existing population.* (No position toward topic; minimal orientation to A.)

B2: *Well, **greedy**, **self-righteous** Europeans… **mostly white folk**… **invaded** in 1565 and over the next 200 years **decimated** the **helpless indigenous** population through **terrible, bloody** violence and **devastating pestilence**.* (Positioning toward topic; minimal positioning to A.)

B3: *Well, **perhaps** you **shouldn't** say settled because, **technically**, it was already settled before anyone called it America. You **would be better off** asking when it was **colonized**. That **horrific** process started in 1565.* (Positioning toward topic and A.)

The main difference in the two alternative responses above (B2 and B3) in relation to B1 is that they engender a more nuanced understanding of the interpersonal meaning-making potential of language as it relates to the topic and the social context. These responses also highlight how interpersonal meanings can permeate a clause in different ways, making their acquisition arguably more difficult in terms of learning patterned structures. Overall, the three responses highlight how language (and an individual) can be oriented to a perceived objective reality (experiential meanings) *and* a measured subjective position (interpersonal meanings) in a myriad of ways.

It is this latter aspect of language (i.e., the interpersonal) that is perhaps less amenable to SRL. Namely, in exchanges that call for more measured positions of interactants and subject matter, it is more likely that some outside mediator is necessary to acquire meaning-making practices that are contextually appropriate (i.e., a person [or persons] who accepts, rejects, and/or negotiates the position being made through language choices [Bowen *et al.* 2021]). Indeed, there is tentative evidence that such interpersonally oriented language is best learned through explicit inductive reasoning, where language use and discovery precede the provision of rules as negotiated in interactions with more knowledgeable others (Glaser 2016; Barón *et*

al. 2020). Such an approach is more in line with sociocultural theorizing or even discursive psychological perspectives on language learning, where a vital prerequisite for learning is the provision of opportunities for meaningful interactions (i.e., dialogue that is co-regulated by all interlocutors; see Prior and Talmy 2020).

Of course, self-regulation can engender a learner to seek out and navigate interactions, increasing their exposure to language as an enactment of social relations. However, we feel that this claim is somewhat of a slippery slope because, at a minimum, it assumes that a learner has (a) willingness to communicate with others in an L2 and/or about an L2 (MacIntyre *et al*. 1998; Gallagher 2011), (b) opportunities (physically, socially, and culturally) to seek out and engage a diverse range of interlocutors (Kinginger *et al.* 2016; Kim 2019), and (c) a sufficiently developed language system (Nation 2013; Taguchi and Roever 2017). This kind of argument also assumes a circular logic in that SRL pushes a learner to seek out co-/shared regulation that may be necessary for further language development. In this regard, a more encompassing view of the ecology of language learning is required.

However, previous attempts to apply such a perspective have stopped short of explicating how meaning-making systems and strategic learning systems are developed, shaped, and realized in similar ways (e.g., Oxford 2017). For instance, discussions of the functions of language (beyond macro-level ideologies) are absent in the literature—as are hierarchical accounts of regulation, where learners may strategically accept, reject, or realign how they and their meaning-making processes are positioned within fluctuating ecological systems that operate at multiple levels.

What we are suggesting here is an expanded perspective, so that the *how* (regulatory process), the *what* (the aspect of language being learned), and the *where* (site of mediation in terms of physical and interactional spaces)[iv] are seen as mutually constitutive rather than separate processes, products, and a unified, unchanging mise-en-scène for learning. This broadening perspective would better reflect how some meaning-making processes and strategic-learning practices are likely best developed and utilized in the environments where they have evolved to function. Interestingly, Teng and Zhang (2022, p. 6) state that "linguistic skills such as listening and speaking are almost ignored" in SRL research (cf. Zhou and Rose 2021). To us, this is unsurprising, as many of the meaning-making practices we find in these two skills have evolved to serve real-time, situated relationships between people; thus, we see an inherent contradiction in stating that self-regulated processes are the most productive mechanism for developing meaning-making practices that are most often oriented to others.

Essentially, the ecological or socially situated side of language learning—whether interacting with people, texts, contexts, or artefacts—has not been operationalized to the same degree in SRL research as it has in other fields related to L2 learning (cf. Schneider 2022). For example, Teng (2022) introduces the importance of sociocultural concepts such as mediation, zone of proximal development (ZPD), and scaffolding when teaching self-regulated writing strategies; she also states that such co-regulated processes are "a central transitional process in a learner's development of more productive SRL" (Teng 2022: 72). However, the term "transitional" suggests that they are simply transitory and a means to an end. Such fleeting coverage of non-self-regulated practices is problematic in L2 learning applications because, as

we have already noted, some aspects of language are perhaps best/only acquired through fluid, heterogeneous forms of mediation—they have evolved to position an individual through an emergent context in relation to the self and their unfolding environment (language as action; see Bowen 2021). Moreover, while we acknowledge that some scholars have made solid inroads advancing SRL from an individual cognitive enterprise to, at minimum, a person-centeredness initiative that draws more explicitly on learners' attitudes and affects (e.g., Teng 2022)—we feel that much of this work primarily reflects a stated move from a purely cognitive endeavor to a sociocognitive one. Thus, in practice, explorations of self-regulation are still somewhat anchored in the Cartesian-split-mechanistic tradition that we alluded to earlier (see also Dinsmore 2017; Rose *et al.* 2018).

This is not to say that we do not recognize the clear importance of SRL, whereby there is "solid ground to apply self-regulation principles to L2 research" (Teng and Zhang, 2022: 2). However, as outlined above, we see the need for a more thorough examination of how the relationship between what is being learned (language as a complex, adaptive, social semiotic) and how it is being learned (through various mediated processes) can best be exploited to benefit language learners. Indeed, Teng and Zhang (2022) make statements such as the "need to extend the methodological repertoires available in SLA studies" (p. 5), and "grounded in varying theoretical frameworks, the field calls for new explorations into …" (pp. 6–7), indicating promising areas of expansion. However, for their proposal to realize its potential, we need to progress beyond the layer of methodology and question what it is that language learners are actually developing beyond metacognitive components, psychological variables and, potentially, self-regulated processes. Fundamentally, importing a concept that was developed in one domain (educational psychology) into another (applied linguistics) requires ontological and epistemological realignment to account for the change in the nature of the knowledge being studied.

Admittedly, this is not a controversial or groundbreaking suggestion. Many researchers align methodologies with research problems, and there have been repeated calls for bridging, blending, or traversing the ontologies of cognitive and social paradigms through various alignments to epistemological concerns within SRL (Teng and Zhang 2022), SLA (Hulstijn *et al.* 2014), and strategic language learning in general (Schneider 2022; Thomas *et al.* 2022)—calls have also been extended to the application of flexible epistemologies to motivational and individual differences research in SLA (see Dewaele 2019). If operationalized, such realignments acknowledge that "the product of language learning and the process of language learning are not separate, unidirectional entities, but are mutually constitutive and reciprocally conditioned" (Thomas *et al.* 2021: 10).[v] And herein lay the crux of our argument: If self-regulation is to have a more profound influence in applied linguistics, then the true nature of language and its two-way, dynamic relationship with mediating factors should be given a more explicit and equal placement in self-regulation studies. Fortunately, there is evidence of such movement in Teng and Zhang's article—which mediated our entry into this arena and inspired our response—and in others (e.g., Gao and Hu 2020; Schneider 2022; Teng *et al.* 2022). However, there is still work to do if we are to break free of the confines inherent in the label itself, as there is far more to self-regulated language learning than just the "self".

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Notes

[i] Space precludes a discussion of textual and logical meanings here, which are the two other functions of language from an SFL perspective.

[ii] In this instance, the finite signifies "past" while the predicator is "arrive"; a similar explanation applies to "took". See Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 238-239) for the basis of labelling "from the existing population" as a Circumstance of place (locative source).

[iii] Space precludes a detailed analysis but, in interpersonal terms, the words/phrases in bold realize choices in Connotation, Comment, Mood, and Modality at the lexicogrammatical level (see Halliday and Mattheissen, 2014) and Appraisal at the discourse semantics level (Martin and White, 2005). In terms of structure, B2 exhibits dominant and iterative structures; B3 exhibits a saturating prosody (see Halliday [1979, 1981] or Martin [2008] for further explanations).

[iv] Interactional space here is referring to the macro, meso, and micro levels that learners/individuals transverse in their interactions with systems at varying levels of scale, which are commonly labelled with terms such as cultural, societal, institutional, and situational.

[v] A detailed discussion behind such a view is beyond the scope of this paper, but we believe it is commensurate with Teng and Zhang's (2022) call for "new perspectives on self-regulation from Sociocultural Theory and Complexity Theory for tracing and evaluating [the] transitory nature of self-regulatory processes" (p. 7).