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Five decades of language learning strategy research: a bibliometric review and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

As of 2024, almost fifty golden years have passed since the language learning strategy (LLS) concept was first brought to wide attention in 1975. This study analysed 2,580 publications indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection over the past five decades using bibliometric analysis and science mapping visualisation techniques to delineate the burgeoning scholarly discourse on LLSs regarding the leading researchers, countries, institutions, and sources. Author keywords were also analysed to explore the main research topics and h-classics publications were reviewed to understand the key focuses of the most impactful publications in LLS research. The findings reveal that research on LLSs is extremely vibrant despite facing severe competition from the self-regulation front in recent years. The USA, the PRC, England, and Taiwan dominate the production of knowledge in this field, and Rebecca Oxford, Ernesto Macaro, Suzanne Graham and Lawrence Jun Zhang have the highest average citations in their publications about LLSs. Further, *System*, *Modern Language Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly* have been the leading venues of publication for the most impactful outputs. The review of the 55 h-classics gave insight into future directions for LLS research theoretically, methodologically, and/or pedagogically.

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Language learning strategies (LLSs); self-regulation; research methodology; bibliometric review; VOSviewer

1. Introduction

A significant area of interest in applied linguistics - individual differences (IDs) in second language acquisition - is concerned with understanding the factors that can contribute to varying levels of language learning success among individuals (see Dörnyei and Ryan 2015; Griffiths and Soruç 2021; Li, Hiver, and Papi 2022). Research on IDs among language learners has undergone various changes over the past few decades. Some factors have lost their appeal while others have been receiving continued attention, such as language learning strategies (LLSs) - the focus of this paper. The study of LLSs appeals to learners, practitioners, and researchers no doubt because strategic language learning is a positive trait. This research area has also contributed to producing a much more sophisticated understanding of IDs in language learning by exploring the correlation between language learners' LLS use and other variables such as age, gender, anxiety, learner beliefs, learning style, and motivation (Gao 2010). Although LLS research is extremely vibrant, it has nevertheless been subject to criticism since its inception, mainly due to its operation within 'a theoretical muddle', as argued by Dörnyei and Skehan (2003: 610).

The term *strategy* has its roots in ancient Greece, where it was used to refer to the plans employed in warfare to ensure victory (Griffiths 2018). Although it is commonly associated with military