Book Review

Usage in Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Critical Reflections and Future Directions, Kevin McManus. Routledge (2024). 210 pp., ISBN: 9781032668055, £29.59.

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As research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) continues to evolve, a variety of theoretical frameworks have been proposed, among which usage-based approaches have gained significant attention. Being rooted in cognitive linguistics and construction grammar, the usage-based perspective emphasizes that language learning emerges from repeated, meaningful engagement with linguistic input in authentic contexts (Pemberton, 2024). This view holds that learners acquire language not only through formal instruction, but also through regular exposure, active use, and interaction, which help consolidate linguistic patterns and facilitate retention (Ellis, 2020). Empirical studies have demonstrated that factors, such as input frequency, salience, and opportunities for communicative practice, strongly influence the pace and depth of acquisition (Ellis & Wulff, 2015; Geeslin et al., 2023). Recent research further underscores the dynamic interplay between cognitive processes and social interaction in shaping linguistic development, highlighting the need to examine language learning in relation to material conditions, historical context, and cross-disciplinary insights (Cheung, 2022; Ellis, 2016). This theoretical grounding provides a robust foundation for understanding how usage shapes the acquisition process and informs both pedagogical design and empirical inquiry in SLA (Javadi & Kazemirad, 2020).

Building on this approach, the book edited by McManus (2023) provides a clear yet detailed examination of the role of *usage* in SLA. It does an excellent job of explaining why this perspective is essential and offers multiple viewpoints on the topic. McManus has assembled a team of experienced scholars to produce a valuable and engaging collection of studies that explore the application of usage to language learning.

The book is divided into nine chapters, with the first serving as an introduction and the last as a conclusion. In the opening chapter, McManus gives an overview of the concept of *usage* in SLA, explaining how language ability develops through exposure to and practice with authentic language in meaningful situations. He encourages moving away from traditional, rule-focused theories toward usage-based approaches, which see language learning as dynamic and sensitive to context. This chapter also situates usage-based ideas within the broader field of SLA research, demonstrating their importance for understanding how learners acquire and use language. Such approaches highlight the role of frequency and repetition in shaping linguistic knowledge, show how form–meaning connections emerge from meaningful communicative experiences, and account for the influence of social interaction and context on learning outcomes. They also integrate cognitive processes with patterns found in real-world language use, offering explanations for both the development of grammatical structures and variability in learner performance. Finally, McManus outlines the book's structure and briefly explains what each chapter contributes to. Overall, this introduction sets the stage for the rest of the book, giving readers a solid foundation for understanding its interdisciplinary insights.

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In Chapter 2, Wulff examines the important role of learner corpora SLA, showing how they can be valuable tools for studying language use. The chapter begins by defining a corpus as a "large collection of authentic texts" (p. 27) usually analyzed with the help of computer tools. Wulff explains how corpora have contributed to SLA research, especially in studying *input* (the language learners are exposed to) and *output* (the language they produce). These datasets enable researchers to examine real language patterns, frequency of use, and development of learners' interlanguage over time, making corpora essential for understanding how language use affects learning. However, the chapter also highlights the limitations of corpora. While they provide a lot of data on observable language use, they do not reveal much about cognitive processes like comprehension or how learners process language. Wulff suggests that learner corpora work best when contain better metadata, such as cognitive and social factors, which give a fuller picture of SLA.

In Chapter 3, Eskildsen brings a fresh perspective to SLA by looking at the role of *multimodal resources* in communication and learning. Using an ethnomethodological conversation analysis approach (Kasper & Wagner, 2014), Eskildsen demonstrates how the interaction between words, physical actions, and the surrounding context in real-time shapes learners' language use. This chapter is exciting because it explains how meaning emerges through the coordination of different modes, spoken language, gestures, eye gaze, body movements, and even environmental cues. The use of conversation analysis provides detailed insight into these micro-level interaction processes, emphasizing that language learning is embodied and situated in real-life communication.

In Chapter 4, Gudmestad connects usage-based approaches with variationist sociolinguistics, offering an interesting perspective on SLA. The chapter examines two types of language variation—vertical and horizontal—and explains how these differences can provide insight into the language learning process. Gudmestad presents studies showing how input frequency and sociolinguistic variation influence what learners produce. By examining patterns in learner interlanguage, the chapter demonstrates how learners adapt their language to suit different registers, audiences, and communication needs.

In Chapter 5, Verspoor and Hans-Jörg Schmid take a closer look at the concept of *usage* through Dynamic Usage-Based (DUB) models. They argue that language learning comes from real-life language use, which is complex and constantly changing. *Usage*, they say, is not just about grammar and vocabulary; it also includes social and cognitive processes, the surrounding context, and even nonverbal elements like gestures and eye gaze. This broader view helps explain how meaning is created together in real-time interactions. The authors emphasize the importance of providing learners with meaningful, context-rich language experiences to support their learning. They also suggest focusing on the *co-semiotic potential*—how meaning emerges from multiple sources—rather than seeing language as a fixed system.

In Chapter 6, Han Luo examines SLA through Cognitive-Linguistic (CL) approaches, focusing on the strong connection between language, the mind, and real-life experiences. The chapter explains how mental processes, such as categorizing, building schemas (patterns of knowledge), and using metaphors, help learners connect new language input with the existing concepts. Luo argues that language learning is not just about memorizing forms and rules, it is a dynamic process where learners create meaningful networks of ideas based on real-world usage.

The chapter also critiques traditional SLA models for ignoring the fact that language learning is embodied and context-dependent. At the same time, Luo acknowledges that applying CL theories directly to research and classroom practice can be challenging. Still, CL approaches have strong potential because they combine both cognitive and experiential aspects of language learning. Luo suggests that teaching should focus on meaningful, real-life engagement with language, rather than just abstract forms.

In Chapter 7, Leow explores how language learning happens in classroom settings by focusing on mental processes. He argues that learning is not just about receiving input and producing output. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of factors, such as attention, the depth of learners' processing, and the mechanisms of memory during learning. Leow believes that these cognitive factors play a crucial role in how learners absorb and utilize language. He encourages teachers to design mentally engaging tasks, challenging enough to require focus but not so complex that they overwhelm the learner. The chapter also recommends incorporating ideas from psycholinguistics, such as statistical learning (how learners identify patterns) and salience (what stands out in the input), to enhance language teaching methods.

In Chapter 8, Suzuki builds on Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT) and delineates how it fits within a usage-based view of language learning. He discusses two interconnected paths: "learning to use language" and "using language to learn". At the heart of this approach is the idea that learners need to move from knowing rules (declarative knowledge) to using language automatically (procedural knowledge). This shift happens through deliberate practice—repeated use of language in rich, real-world contexts. Suzuki also highlights how personal differences like memory ability can affect learning. He suggests that teaching methods should be adjusted to match learners' cognitive strengths and needs.

In Chapter 9, Kevin McManus synthesizes the diverse perspectives on usage presented throughout the volume, offering a meta-analysis of the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical insights into SLA. McManus unpacks key questions central to usage-based SLA, such as: What constitutes "usage"? What are the tasks of L2 learning? How are usage and learning interrelated? The chapter defines usage as multifaceted, encompassing linguistic quantity (frequency, dispersion), quality (comprehensibility, modality), and broader sociocultural contexts. McManus critically evaluates the role of embodied cognition, interaction, and statistical learning in SLA while underscoring the field's shift from abstract linguistic competence to dynamic, situated learning processes. The chapter concludes by highlighting unresolved challenges in usage-based research, including methodological integration across disciplines and practical implications for pedagogy.

There is no room for vacillation in affirming that this edited volume is a valuable addition to academic libraries as it adds currency to the existing body of knowledge in the field and provides fresh perspectives on the interplay between the theory of "usage" and SLA. Indeed, the book's strength lies in its multi-dimensional exploration of usage-based perspectives, drawing on corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and sociocultural theories. The editor's choice to include chapters on both well-established and emerging approaches to SLA with a designated focus on "usage" is praiseworthy. This inclusivity ensures that readers are exposed to both foundational concepts and cutting-edge developments in the field, providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of SLA research.

Some parts of this book could be improved. While it offers many valuable theoretical ideas, its overall impact is reduced by issues with structure, accessibility, and practical relevance. One major drawback is that it is not equally easy for all readers to follow. Although it is aimed at an academic audience, several chapters assume a lot of prior knowledge. This makes it more challenging for readers new to usage-based approaches or SLA research to comprehend them fully. The heavy use of jargon and dense theoretical explanations may also discourage teachers or graduate students seeking more practical insights. To tackle with this problem, a brief glossary would provide quick access to definitions of specialized terms. Additionally, the intense focus on theory often overshadows the practical applications of language teaching. Although the contributors discuss important cognitive and sociocultural aspects of usage-based learning, they offer very few concrete teaching recommendations.

Overall, this book is a timely and essential contribution to the study of usage-based second language acquisition. Its main strength is the wide range of perspectives it covers, from corpus linguistics to cognitive and sociocultural theories, making it a valuable resource for researchers. However, it can feel overly academic and may not be as helpful for those seeking practical teaching ideas. For readers who already know the basics of SLA theory, though, it provides plenty of valuable insights and raises interesting questions. By bringing together diverse viewpoints and highlighting the complexity of "usage", the book helps advance SLA research and suggests new directions for future work.

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