Editor's overview

Carol Griffiths

Key questions

In her seminal article Rubin (1975, p. 42), suggested that "if we knew more about what the 'successful learners' did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record." Aptitude, motivation, and opportunity, she argued, are essential characteristics of good language learners who either have or can develop these characteristics. Rubin constructed a list of strategies typical of good language learners, who, according to her observations, are willing and able to use clues (for instance non-verbal, word association, and general knowledge) in order to guess meaning; use a variety of techniques (such as circumlocution, paraphrase, or gestures) in order to communicate or learn from communication; manage inhibitions (such as the fear of appearing foolish or of making mistakes); attend to form (for instance by analyzing, categorizing, and synthesizing); practice the language they are trying to learn (for instance by seeking out native speakers and initiating conversations); monitor both their own and others' speech (for instance by learning from mistakes); and attend to meaning (for instance by interpreting mood and intonation). These strategies, as Rubin pointed out, will vary according to a number of factors including the task, the learning stage, the learner's age, the learning context, learning style, and cultural differences. Rubin concluded by suggesting that knowledge about good language learners "will lessen the difference between the good learner and the poorer one" (p. 50).

When Rubin published her article on good language learners in 1975, she probably did not expect that she would sow the seeds of a controversy which would still be unresolved more than 30 years later. This volume traces various aspects of the controversy, tries to draw the threads of consensus together, and points to the future for the critical questions:

- What is it that makes for a good language learner?
- Why are some learners more successful than others?
- How do learner characteristics such as motivation, beliefs, aptitude, age, gender, style, personality and culture, and learner behavior such

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as strategy use, metacognition, or autonomy relate to effective language learning?

- How can learners manage aspects of the learning situation such as teaching/learning method, strategy instruction, error correction, or task, in order to effectively reach learning goals such as building vocabulary, expanding grammatical knowledge and functional competence, improving pronunciation, and developing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills?
- What have we already found out and what do we still need to know?
- What can educators do to help?

Although Rubin focussed mainly on language learning strategies, this book approaches the question of how good language learners learn from a broader perspective. It pursues some of the areas Rubin identified as requiring further research, and includes yet others which she did not mention, at least directly (for instance gender, personality, and autonomy). These variables have also been identified as potentially important contributors to success or otherwise in language learning.

Aims of this book

In the 30 years since Rubin's famous article was published, debate has raged and continues to this day. Failure to reach consensus over even basic definitions has inhibited research initiatives (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, and Russo, 1985) and contributed to a "theoretical muddle" which is overdue for "clearing away" (Dornyei and Skehan, 2003, p. 610). This book attempts to contribute to this clearing away process by looking at a wide range of variables in relation to good language learners and their learning. However, given the "veritable plethora" (Ellis, 1994, p. 471) of such variables which have been identified, it has not been possible to include them all in this volume; as many as possible of those most commonly researched are represented. Given such breadth, it has not been possible to go into any of the topics in depth. The aim has been to:

- provide a comprehensive overview of learner/learning issues
- review the literature and research to date
- provide a reference base
- address theoretical issues
- consider pedagogical implications
- identify gaps in our current understanding
- suggest useful research initiatives
- consider how all of these relate to successful language learning by unique individuals in a variety of situations.

In other words, this book looks at language learning from research, literature, theoretical, pedagogical, and human perspectives.

Organisation of the book

The book is divided into two parts:

Part I is about learner variables, which include motivation, aptitude, age, style, personality, gender, culture, beliefs, strategies, metacognition, and autonomy. Although some of these variables may be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by external factors, they are individual characteristics or behaviors which make each learner unique.

Part II is about learning variables, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, function, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the learning of which is influenced by factors in the learning situation such as the teaching/learning method, strategy instruction, error correction practices, or task requirements. These variables have their origin externally, but must be managed by the learners if successful learning is to take place.

In order to provide a variety of perspectives, each part contains both state-of-the-art articles and research-based articles. Within each of these divisions, specialists in their various fields have written on specific topics (such as motivation, strategies, instruction, or vocabulary). Each topic is defined, the literature reviewed, and related issues discussed before implications for the teaching/learning situation and questions for further research are suggested.

The list of variables dealt with in this volume is, of course, not exhaustive. Indeed, as indicated previously, it is almost certainly impossible to include every conceivable variable in any one volume. Furthermore, new research initiatives are adding to the existing body of knowledge all the time. Especially fertile at the moment are the areas of situational variables, identity, volition, the development of pragmatic competence and self-regulation, as well as affective variables including self-efficacy and anxiety. Nevertheless, this book covers a wide range of topics related to how good language learners develop a target language, and aims to provide a basic core of information on the subject areas and to act as a springboard for those who want to pursue a particular topic in greater depth.

Terminology

The lack of consensus to which O'Malley *et al.* (1985) refer extends beyond definition to the even more basic level of terminology. A review of the literature reveals a bewildering array of terms used in the field of

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language development: ESL, EFL, SLA, ESOL, L1, L2, and so on. Sometimes these terms seem to be used to refer to much the same concept, other times their meanings appear to be quite different.

When talking about learners, many writers (for instance Cook, 1991; Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Sharwood Smith, 1994) opt for the terms *second language* or *L2* to describe the students, even though it may be used "somewhat confusingly" (Ellis, 1994, p. 12). The term is confusing because it does not allow for the many students who may already be multilingual and who may be in the process of learning a third, fourth, or subsequent language. There is also frequent confusion between the terms *second language* or *ESL* (to describe a language being studied in the environment where the language is spoken, for instance Somalis studying English in New Zealand), and *foreign language* or *EFL* (to describe a language being studied in an environment other than where it is spoken, for instance French as it is taught in England or New Zealand, or English as it is taught in China). Although some writers use the *ESL/EFL* terms with more or less the same meaning, others regard them as quite distinct from each other. The term *SOL* (speakers of other languages), as favored by publications such as *TESOL Quarterly, TESOL Matters* and *TESOLANZ Journal*, has arisen partly to avoid this confusion. However, it is rather long and clumsy. Other terms such as *non-native*, *non-primary*, *non-English-speaking-background* have been used, but the intrinsically negative perspective of these terms makes them less than universally acceptable.

Because of the sometimes uncomfortable distinctions noted above, the question arises of what to call the language being studied. Options such as *additional language* or *additive language* tend to make the language sound either marginalised or like a brand of food or petrol! The increasingly common term *target language* tends to sound a little aggressive and militaristic, but does at least denote the goal at which the student is aiming.

And, of course, the gulf established by Krashen (for instance Krashen, 1981) between acquisition (the development of language in a naturalistic environment) and learning (the development of language by means of conscious study) has never been entirely bridged in a universally acceptable manner. Although the field has moved on considerably in the more than 20 years since Krashen hypothesised a nil interface position regarding the learning–acquisition constructs, and although contemporary writers often use these two terms more or less interchangeably, the dichotomous view regarding the development of language established more than 20 years ago continues to create an area of uncertainty and potential misunderstanding.

Unfortunately, universally acceptable terms in the field of language

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development by students who already speak other languages and who are aiming to learn a new language have yet to be coined, or at least agreed upon. For the purposes of the present work, the term *speakers of other languages* (SOL) will be favored, since it at least avoids the confusion between second language and foreign language, it allows for the possibility that the student may speak any number of other languages, and it avoids negative implications. The language a student is aiming at will be termed the *target* or *new* language, and the term *language development* will be used to include both *acquisition* and *learning* unless some clear distinction is being drawn between the two.

Who is this book for?

Although Rubin's 1975 article focused especially on strategies, she suggested that many other variables need to be considered when looking at good language learners. This volume attempts to take Rubin's initiative further by investigating a wide range of variables, any one of which has the potential to affect how students learn, and which, in combination, present an extremely complex picture.

This book is intended for and will be especially useful to:

- those studying for degrees or diplomas in language development; they will find that this volume contains a wealth of information and references which can be used as the basis for completing assignments focusing on learners and how they go about learning language successfully;
- trainee teachers to help prepare them for the realities of life in the classroom;
- practicing teachers who want to be better informed, to clarify their insights into what may be happening in their classrooms day by day and to obtain inspiration;
- teacher educators who can use this volume as a means of augmenting their knowledge and as a base of information from which lectures can be developed;
- course designers who could use the volume as the basis for a number of interesting and useful learner-centered courses or programs;
- researchers, for whom a multitude of areas still needing investigation is suggested.

Finally, not least, it is for those who have been involved in the field of language education over the last 30 years. We owe a tribute to Joan for her insight and her perseverance in getting her seminal article published. We also owe a debt to the many who have toiled in the field since then. Two people whom I would especially like to mention and who have had

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a major influence on my own thinking and work, and on whose advice
and support I have depended while compiling this volume are Andrew
Cohen and Rebecca Oxford. The fact that they are referred to in almost
every chapter in this book testifies to the breadth of their influence and
the debt owed to them by those of us who have come later to the field.

As editor, I have tried to ensure that all the chapters in this book,
though inevitably having their own style, are highly readable, with a con-
sistency of structure that provides coherence to the book as a whole. To
all of you, our readers, I hope you find this book informative and enjoy-
able. And, perhaps most importantly, I hope it inspires you to continue
with the work which remains to be done investigating how successful
language development can be promoted. Good language learners have
much to teach us, and, even after 30 years, many lessons remain to be
learnt.

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Prologue

Andrew D. Cohen

Since this volume is commemorating Joan Rubin's seminal work on the good language learner and acknowledging the initiatives that it inspired, I thought it fitting to offer a brief prologue that will serve as an historical note regarding Joan's initial contribution to the topic of the good language learner. It is written more as a narrative since it is now in vogue to tell our stories as a means of enriching our academic experiences.

I was three years into my doctoral studies in international development education at Stanford University when I first met Joan in the fall of 1970. I had already had the pleasure of reading her study of Spanish–Guaraní bilingualism in Paraguay (Rubin, 1968) so I knew of her as a trained anthropologist and as an experienced sociolinguist. My advisor at the Committee on Linguistics at Stanford, Charles Ferguson, had told me many fine things about her.

Joan arrived at Stanford with questionnaire data she had collected in Indonesia as part of a sociolinguistic survey being conducted in various parts of the world, and her main mission was to analyze and report on the findings. I expected her to pursue her interests drawing on her survey work to make statements about language planning. What was a surprise for me at the time was to experience first hand Joan's keen fascination with the language learner and with studying the language learning act up close and personal. She was determined to pursue an interest in better understanding how language learners did what they did and why.

For those of you who don't know Joan Rubin, you need to know that she is a person with an impressive abundance of energy. When she takes on tasks, she takes them on with gusto. She became determined to explore the nature of students' participation in language classes, and she used Stanford's language program as a convenient vehicle for this exploration. She started sitting in on French, German, and Spanish classes and following what learners were doing in class. She would watch them as they attended to class activities, she listened attentively when individual students spoke up in class, and she also observed what they wrote in their notebooks – even taking notes on what they took notes on. During the breaks, she would go up to the students she was observing and would ask them about things they had written down in their notebooks. She

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wanted to better understand their rationale for doing what she observed them to be doing.

In order to situate Joan's activities within the current instructional context at that time, it could be said that the field of instruction, and specifically language instruction, wasn't really interested then in the learner's side. What was considered important was for teachers to have their instructional act together. This was seen as the key to success. In fact, at Stanford's School of Education, the emphasis was not just on teaching, but on micro-level teaching. My wife obtained her degree in that program, where the emphasis was on videotaping of teachers engaged in what was referred to as "microteaching" (based on the work of Dwight Allen, who had been on the Stanford faculty until 1967). A typical unit, for example, would focus on teachers' questioning techniques. There was no focus at the time on what the learners were doing. It was assumed that good teaching automatically meant good learning.

The reason I knew about Joan's activities is that we would meet periodically for lunch and she would tell me a bit about what she was doing and what she was finding. I must admit that at first it seemed totally off the wall to me. Given the educational context at that time, it was like the Wright brothers telling people about their ideas for a "flying machine." Just as that seemed a bit misguided at best when these two brothers first broached the topic, so too the thrust that Joan was taking didn't seem so valuable to me at first. Some might even have branded her a "heretic" in some respects since, in her focus on students as a key part of the instructional process, she wasn't toeing the party line.

Still, probably due largely to Joan's strength of character, it didn't take her long to convince me, and it started me thinking about learners and their approaches to learning. In fact, it was from interacting with Joan that I first started looking at language learner strategies. Even though I had studied seven languages other than English, I hadn't conceived of the learner's act in the way Joan was dealing with it. But then I began to see that she was truly onto something.

The real challenge for Joan, however, was in getting her ideas published. She wrote up her insights in the form of a paper on what the good language learner can teach us and wasn't able to find a publisher for it for a few years. Her paper had been circulating for perhaps four years before the *TESOL Quarterly* published it in 1975 – a clear indication that the field wasn't ready for this new direction at that time.

I think that all of us who have benefited from this learner perspective over the years are thrilled that Joan Rubin pursued her goal to raise consciousness about the language learner. In retrospect, we can see that the publication of the article helped to mobilize a movement of concerned language educators. The appearance of the article helped give

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momentum to the launching of a series of TESOL conference colloquia that a number of us participated in along with Joan Rubin (for instance, Anita Wenden, Michael O'Malley, Anna Chamot, David Mendelsohn, Martha Nyikos, and others) at the end of the 1970s/beginning of the 1980s.

So, scroll ahead about 25 more years, and the focus on the language learner is clearly well-established, as witnessed by this robust collection of chapters by a cross-section of leading and upcoming specialists in the field. The issue is no longer whether to look at learners, but rather what to look at and how to do it. We have come a long way since 1970, when Joan was a voice in the wilderness. The field has come of age, thanks largely to Joan's initial pioneering efforts. It is inspiring to see that Joan Rubin has continued to be active in the field and that she herself shares her current work in this volume.

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Reflections

Joan Rubin

Perhaps the most important change in the field of language research and teaching since my 1975 publication "What the 'Good Language Learner' Can Teach Us" is the clear recognition the field now gives to the role of learning as a critical component in the process of teaching, with an acceptance that the two are inseparable from one another and that teachers need to place importance not only on the target language but also on the learning process. In addition, there has been a radical change in research and teaching giving increased recognition and attention to the critical role of learners in shaping their own learning.

The teaching field did not always recognize the relationship of learning to teaching. This lacuna is perhaps best exemplified by an experience I had in the mid-1980s in a phone call from a Russian instructor, trained in the strong Russian pedagogical tradition, who called and asked "I understand you're interested in teaching?" "No," I replied, "I'm interested in learning." "Oh!" he said, "GOODBYE!!"

Clear recognition of the close relationship of teaching and learning can be found in current teacher training books. Examples include: Nunan (1988) *The Learner Centered Curriculum*, which presents curriculum as a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, and stresses the need for a differentiated curriculum for different learners; Cook and Cook (2001) *Second Language Learning and Teaching* and Brown (2000) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, both of which put "learning" before "teaching" in their titles and encourage teachers to use techniques which approach learners as individuals.

Further evidence of this trend to involve learners in the process includes manuals for teachers to enable learners to begin to take charge of their learning. For instance: Willing (1989) *Teaching How to Learn*; Oxford (1990) *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*; Wenden (1991) *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, and Robbins (1999) *The Learning Strategies Handbook*.

In addition, there are manuals that directly provide learners with the knowledge and skills to begin to take charge of their learning, such as: Rubin and Thompson (1994) *How to Be a More Successful Language Learner*; Ellis and Sinclair (1989) *Learning to Learn English*; Brown

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