

## From “The Good Language Learner” to “Learner Self-Management”\*

Joan Rubin

Where do ideas come from and how do they evolve? This has been a fascinating journey in which I have been an active participant helping to shape how the idea of looking at what learners know, think, feel, and do to be successful at learning a second language has evolved into a major focus of second language acquisition drawing important insights and support from self-regulation research in educational psychology (Butler and Winne, 1995; Pintrich and De Groot, 1990; Pintrich and Garcia, 1992, Pressley, Borkowski, and Schneider, 1987).

My own interest probably began as a successful learner of several languages characterized by skills in problem solving, flexibility, and an ability to adapt to new learning demands. In contrast, my ESL courses at the University of Michigan in the early 1950’s focused on teaching and how to be a good teacher and in fact, were very much Skinnerian stimulus-response, audio-lingual, and ‘don’t let learners make a mistake or it will be permanent.’ Fortunately, during my doctoral program in anthropology at Yale University in the late 50s and early 60s, I was exposed to the cognitive revolution of the 1950s in several courses with Professor Floyd Lounsbury and in particular to the theory elaborated by Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin, 1956, in their book A Study of Thinking.

The major focus of the 1969 TESOL meeting in New Orleans was on language teaching. It was there, however, that the idea of investigating what makes language learners successful came to me. Very shortly thereafter in 1970-71, while a Visiting

---

\*Unpublished document

Scholar at Stanford University, I began my study of the language learning process. I gratefully acknowledge Lily Wong Fillmore's help in securing funding for this study and early discussions with Andrew Cohen, both of whom were graduate students at the time. This and subsequent research at the East West Center at the University of Hawaii led to my 1975 publication "What the 'Good Language Learner' Can Teach Us." I want to thank the late Ruth Crymes, then editor of the Tesol Quarterly, for encouraging me to write up my research for publication. In about 1973/74, I met David Stern at a conference and discovered he too was interested in looking at learners (Stern, 1975).

There are a couple of ways to view the development of the field. One is to focus on the how language learning strategies has morphed into learner self-management (LSM)(elaborated in Rubin, 2005). This article suggests the following major sequence of trends in the field: 1. Recognition of the concept of the Good Language Learner, 2. Focus on describing cognitive and socio-affective strategies, 3. Focus on metacognitive strategies, 4. Focus on metacognitive knowledge. At this time, I would add another step to this sequence: 5. Consideration of the relationship between Procedural Knowledge (also called metacognitive knowledge) and Declarative Knowledge (Chamot et al, 1999, Rubin, 1999, Rubin, 2001). A second sequence presents the following progression: 1. Description and correlation studies of strategies, 2. Intervention studies to ascertain the effect of strategy training on performance (see Macaro, et. al. 2004 for a massive review of listening intervention studies), and 3. Work on Teacher Training to promote their ability to Self-Manage while integrating Learner Self-Management with Language Lessons (Oxford, 1990, Rubin, Chamot, Harris, Anderson, in press; Thompson and Rubin, 1996; Wenden, 1991, Viera, 2007). Both of these sequences include studies on

different age groups (while most work has been done with adults, for strategy research with children, see Chamot and El Dinary, 1999; Grenfell and Harris, 1999; Macaro, 2001), studies on different language skills (for listening see for example, Vandergrift, 2002 and 2003; Goh, 2005), studies on different contexts (Gu and Johnson, 1996; Uhrig, 2004) and studies on more and less successful language learners (see for example, Vann and Abraham, 1990; Gan et al, 2004) . Developing this progression has enhanced our understanding of how learners use (and abuse) their knowledge of cognitive, socio-affective and procedural knowledge) and how teachers can promote more effective control of the language learning process.

That the field has grown enormously is amply demonstrated by two massive volumes soon to appear (Cohen and Macaro, in press, and Griffiths, in process).

That initial focus on language learners resulted in our volume that provided students with knowledge and skills to take control of their learning (Rubin and Thompson, 1982). It provided some Procedural Knowledge (goal setting) and a great deal of Declarative Knowledge (about cognitive and socio-affective strategies, about the learning process, about the communication process, and about language). A later revision (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1994) further contextualized learning strategies by skill (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) as well as by grammar and vocabulary. It also included a questionnaire assessing both procedures of planning, monitoring and evaluating as well as cognitive strategies. Other similar books followed this initial learner self-help volume (Brown, 1991; Paige et al., 2002; and Lewis, 1999).

Further focus on the learner produced the first and only interactive videodisc

to help learners take control of their learning (Rubin, 1988; Rubin, 1996). While the program generated great interest around the world, this was period of dramatic changes in technology which unfortunately, quickly made the program obsolete.

Next, my research focused on intervention. My first experiment, begun in 1987, was conducted with two colleagues, Joann Enos and Jim Laffey (Rubin, 1990). It was the first longitudinal language strategy intervention research. The subjects were high school students of Spanish, the skill was listening, with a special focus on the role of video to enhance listening. Important findings from this study were (1) Strong indication that use of listening strategies can help students work with more challenging material, (2) Teachers need a lot more training and support to incorporate learning strategies into their classes, and (3) Promoting listening strategies enhances self-efficacy.

In my next longitudinal experiment the subjects were intermediate level university students of Russian. The research was conducted with my colleague Irene Thompson. The focus here was also on promoting listening comprehension through strategy training, with a special emphasis on using video to help learners leverage their knowledge. In this study, we avoided the need for teacher training by having Irene Thompson provide strategy instruction to the experimental group. Major findings from this study were (1) Systematic instruction in the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies resulted in improvement of listening comprehension (2) Learners metacognition improved as evidenced by learner ability to give reasons for their cognitive choices, and (3) Enhanced self-efficacy.

Stepping back a bit, I must credit the Linguistics Department at Stanford University in 1982 for asking me to give a lecture on what the teacher's role in learner

strategies was. I must admit at that time I was more focused on the learner. However, this was a wake-up call and after my experience with the high school Spanish experiment, I began to realize how important it was to help teachers understand how to promote “learning to learn.” My understanding has been greatly enhanced by preparing workshops given for teachers around the world including a special European course, Socrates Lingua B In Service Education on Learner Autonomy and the Role of the Teacher. During this five year project, I became familiar with the special work of Flavia Viera who dedicates much of their teaching training degree to considering how to integrate “Learner Self-Management” into language curricula and focuses especially on the constraints that teachers face.

While a Visiting Scholar at the National Foreign Language Center in Washington, D.C., I developed a model (Learner Self-Management) which integrates the knowledge base that expert learners use with the procedures needed to exercise control over their learning. This work benefited greatly from the work of Butler and Winne, 1995; Wenden, 1991, and O’Malley and Chamot, 1990. In the model, I included five kinds of knowledge and beliefs (task, self, strategies, background and beliefs) which interact with procedures (planning, monitoring, evaluating, problem-identification/problem-solution, and implementation of problem-solution).

Continuing with this work, I began to unpackage one aspect of planning, namely, Task Analysis (consisting of Task Purpose, Task Classification, and Task Demands). This work helped to delineate a more effective way to select “appropriate” strategies. Once learners clarify their purposes (the “why” of doing a task), analyze the nature of the task (task classification), they are better prepared to consider which strategies are

appropriate for the task, the context, and their own learning styles instead of using strategies in a random fashion. My colleague, Pat McCoy and I then conducted an experiment to determine the extent to which promoting Task Analysis would affect language learning (Rubin and McCoy, 2005).

Since finishing this experiment, I have learned that the kind of Task Classification work that I developed (including genre, rhetorical style, language, vocabulary plus other features) is quite similar to work being implemented in the New Zealand School System, for English composition and reading and to some extent for ESL students (see: [www.tki.org.nz](http://www.tki.org.nz)).

My most recent focus has been on Language Counseling (Rubin, 2007). Many institutions are considering ways to offer learners more time on the language learning task, looking for ways to offer learners the opportunity for more independent study, and recognizing learners' need to be self-reliant once a class ends. Much of this focus now occurs in "Self-Access Centers." Recognizing that learners need a coach to do this, the contributors to this volume describe ways in which teachers are helped to be more effective coaches or counselors and learners helped to take control of their learning.

I would like to conclude by noting some of my next foci in this field.

(1) I hope to continue research to understand how Task Analysis applies to all levels of proficiency and how learners can begin to do this for themselves. Given the recent increased interest in promoting higher levels of proficiency, Task Analysis can provide an important tool for learners to reach higher levels, (2) I hope to continue my work with teachers to help them integrate LSM (i.e. focus on the process) with language learning (i.e. focus on the language). (3) I hope to find ways to ensure that once exposed to LSM,

teachers are enabled to understand and integrate it within the constraints of a school system.

Finally, I would like to express special thanks to all my colleagues and students who have stimulated me to expand on my original ideas and take them much much further than I ever imagined. A special thanks to Anna Uhl Chamot, Andrew Cohen, Peter Gu, David Mendelsohn, Rebecca Oxford, Pat McCoy, and Anita Wenden. Viva la learner!!

### References

- Brown, H. D. 1991. Breaking the Language Barrier. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Bruner, J.S., Goodnow,, J.J. and Austin, G.A. 1956. A Study of Thinking. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Butler, D.L. and Winne, P.H. 1995. Feedback and Self-Regulated Learning: A Theoretical Synthesis. Review of Educational Research 65(3): 245-82.
- Chamot, A. U., S. Barnhardt, P. B. El-Dinary, and J. Robbins. 1999. The Learning Strategies Handbook. White Plains, N.Y.: Addison Wesley Longmans Inc.
- Chamot, A. U. & El-Dinary, P. B. 1999. Children's learning strategies in language immersion classrooms. Modern Language Journal 83, iii: 319-341.
- Cohen, A. D. and E. Macaro, eds. In press. Language Learner Strategies: 30 Years of Research and Practice Oxford: Oxford University Press Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gan, Z., G. Humphreys and L. Hamp-Lyons. 2004. Understanding Successful and Unsuccessful EFL Students in Chinese Universities. Modern Language Journal, 88(2): 229-43.
- Goh, C. 2005. Second Language Learning Expertise. In: K. Johnson, ed. Expertise in Second Language Learning and Teaching. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, pgs. 64-84.
- Grenfell, M. and V. Harris. 1999. Modern Languages and Learning Strategies. N.Y.: Routledge.

- Griffiths, C. (ed.) In process. Lessons from Good Language Learners. Cambridge University Press.
- Gu, Y. & R. K. Johnson. 1996. Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Language Learning Outcomes. Language Learning 46, 643-679.
- Lewis, M. 1999. How to Study a Foreign Language. Houndsmillsl, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Macaro, E. 2001. Learning Strategies in Foreign and Second Language Classrooms. London: Continuum.
- Macaro, E., R Vanderplank, S. Graham, Y. Nakatani, and U. Wingate. 2004. A systematic review of effective teaching approaches for uni-directional listening comprehension for learners of a modern language. EPPI Protocol.
- O'Malley, J.M. and Chamot, A. U. 1990. Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paige, M. R., A.D. Cohen, B. Kappler, J.C. Chi, and J.P. Lassegard. 2002. Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition.
- Pintrich, P. and De Groot, E. 1992. An Integrated Model of Motivation and Self-Regulated Learning. San Francisco, CA: American Education Research Association Meeting.
- Pintrich, P. and Garcia, T. 1990. Motivational and Self-Regulated Learning Components of Classroom Academic Performance. Journal of Educational Psychology 82:33-40.
- Pressley, M., Borkowski, J.G. and Schneider, W. 1987. Cognitive Strategies: Good Strategy Users Coordinate Metacognition and Knowledge. In R. Vasta and G. Whitehurst (eds.) Annals of Child Development vol. 5. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, pp. 89-129.
- Oxford, R.L. 1990. Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know. N.Y.: Newbury House.
- Rubin, J. ed. 2007. Language Counseling. System 35:1. Special Issue.
- Rubin, J. 2005. The Expert Language Learner: a Review of Good Language Learner Studies and Learner Strategies. In: K. Johnson, ed. Expertise in Second Language Learning and Teaching. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, pgs 37-63.

- Rubin, J. 2001. Language Learner Self-Management. Journal of Asian Pacific Communication 11(1):25-37.
- Rubin, J. 1999. Promoting Increased Learner Self-Management in Language Learning. Washington, D.C.: National Foreign Language Reports.
- Rubin, J. 1996. Using Multimedia for Learner Strategy Instruction. In R. Oxford, ed. Language Learning Strategies Around the World: Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Rubin, J. 1990. Improving Foreign Language Listening Comprehension. In J.E. Alatis (ed.) Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1990 Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press. 1990, pp 309-316.
- Rubin, J. 1988. "The Language Learning Disc," In Wm. Flint Smith (ed.) Modern Technology in Foreign Language Education: Applications and Projects National Textbook Company, 1988.
- Rubin, J. and I. Thompson. 1982. How to Be a More Successful Language Learner. Boston, MA: Heinle and Heinle Publishers, Inc. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1994).
- Rubin, J. 1975 What the 'Good Language Learner' Can Teach Us. TESOL Quarterly 9 (1) 41-51.
- Rubin, J., A. U. Chamot, V. Harris, N. Anderson. In press. . Intervening in the Use of Strategies. In A. D. Cohen and E. Macaro, eds Language Learner Strategies: 30 Years of Research and Practice Oxford: Oxford University Press Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rubin, J. and P. McCoy. 2005. The Role of Task Analysis in Promoting Learner Self-Management. Paper given at AILA Conference, Madison, Wisconsin.
- Stern, H.H. 1975. What Can We Learn From the Good Language Learner. Canadian Modern Language Review 31: 304-18.
- Thompson, I. and Rubin, J. 1996. Can Strategy Instruction Improve Listening Comprehension? Foreign Language Annals. 1996:29:3:331-342.
- Uhrig, K. 2004. Context Orientation in Language Learning Strategy Research. Paper presented at TESOL Conference, April 3.
- Vann, R. and Abraham, R. 1990 Strategies of Unsuccessful Language Learners. TESOL Quarterly 24(2):177-98.
- Viera, F. 2007. Teacher Autonomy: Why Should We Care? Paper given at the 41st International Annual IATEFL Conference, Aberdeen (Scotland), 18-22 April

Wenden, A. 1991. Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy. N.Y.: Prentice Hall.

Vandergrift, L. 2003. Orchestrating Strategy Use: Toward a Model of the Skilled Second Language Listener. Language Learning, 53:4663-496.

Vandergrift, L. 2002. "It was nice to see that our predictions were right:" Developing Metacognition in L2 listening comprehension. Canadian Modern Language Review, 58:555-575.