

Carol Griffiths, ed. 2008: *Lessons from Good Language Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. xi+324pp. ISBN 978-0-521-71814-1 (Paperback)

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Since the late 1960s, the effective learning of languages has been a burning issue for language researchers, especially for those who have been dealing with successful learning strategies for second or foreign languages.<sup>1</sup> The present research in this field shows that some learners are capable of picking up the L2 rapidly and easily, while others, in comparison, never achieve complete fluency or are incapable of expressing themselves accurately in the foreign language (Cook 2002). Effective individual strategies, in fact, enable some to be comparatively good or effective learners of L2.

Carol Griffiths, the editor of *Lessons from Good Language Learners* (2008), is an eminent academic and also an experienced language instructor who has contributed independently and co-authored several chapters to this seminal work published by Cambridge University Press (CUP), a venerable name in the field of scholarly publications on second language teaching/learning. This volume has been designed with a specific format containing short chapters. Each article is well-defined and begins with an overview of previous research, continues with the concordances and disagreements with regard to respective studies and, finally, concludes with well-defined implications for the teaching/learning situation. Even though each chapter is stylistically distinct from the others, the structural consistency provides coherence to the book as a whole. It is worth mentioning that, in these articles, more often than not the authors seek references from fields outside ELT, such as psychology, educational theories etc., thus enriching the contents of this work.

*Lessons from Good Language Learners* (hence *LGLL*) is written to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Joan Rubin's pioneering article 'What the "Good Language Learner" can Teach us' (1975), published in *TESOL Quarterly*, in which she had set out to identify the useful strategies followed by successful L2 learners. Rubin stated 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" (1975: 42). Therefore, this edited collection takes into account the same topic in the light of current thinking and research, analysing the implications for the language teaching and learning fields, and re-examines some of the questions which are hitherto unresolved.

This volume contains 23 chapters in two sections. The first deals with 'Learner Variables' in 11 chapters on 'Motivation and Good Language Learners', 'Age and Good Language Learners', and so on, thus examining the individual characteristics or behaviours which make each learner unique. The second brings into focus the 'Learning

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Variables' commencing with a chapter entitled 'Vocabulary and Good Language Learners' and ends with 'Tasks and Good Language Learners'. Each of these two sections encompasses both research-based and state-of-the-art articles, thus providing a variety of perspectives on the issues concerned.

*LGLL* starts with a prologue by Andrew D. Cohen providing an explanation of the inspiration behind the book along with an overview of the field. This prologue also recounts some touching anecdotes about Joan Rubin. The chapter entitled 'Reflections', by Joan Rubin herself, contains her major observations. This section ends with a lucid and comprehensive synopsis of the whole book in the chapter titled 'The Learner's Landscape and Journey'.

The first chapter – bearing the title 'Motivation and Good Language Learners', by Ema Ushioda – commences with the universally accepted hypothesis that basically 'good language learners are motivated'. *Motivation* has been accepted by Rubin (1975) as one of the most essential variables on which the proficiency of an efficient language learner virtually depends. The first section takes into account the social-psychological and socio-educational perspectives of Robert C. Gardner (1972, 1988), which point not only to the learners' rudimentary attitudes towards the target language community, but also to more education-friendly approaches to language learner motivations providing more comforting insights for language teachers and learners. Apart from highlighting the social context of motivation, she reassesses several prior studies related to self-motivating strategies (Dörnyei 2001), self-regulatory skills (Ottó 1998), and motivational self-regulation (Ushioda 2003, 2007), which lead her to the valid conclusion that "motivation will suffer unless ways are found to regulate it" (26). Further discussions on the connection between identity and self-regulated motivation can be found in Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009).

The second chapter entitled 'Age and Good Language Learners', by Carol Griffiths, corresponds to the 'age' of L2 learners. Rubin (1975) categorized 'age' of L2 learners as content demanding further investigation, and even after three decades, the research on 'age' retains its controversial character in the field of L2 Teaching and Learning. While adult learners acquire language more rapidly at the initial stage, children reach the expected level of perfection in the long run. After recounting multiple success stories of adult language learners from various socio-cultural backgrounds, Griffiths finally drives home the axiom that 'younger is better'. Recent studies by García Mayo and García Lecumberri (2003), Singleton and Ryan (2004) and Muñoz (2006), however, question her claim on the matter.

Chapters on 'Style' (Chrisma Nel), 'Personality' (Madeline Ehrman), and 'Gender' (Martha Nyikos) of good language learners come next. Rubin (1975) included learning style as a subject of further research. After reassessing certain research literatures on 'Learning Style and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 3), Nel concludes that each and every L2 learner has his/her unique learning style, containing various preferences related to instructions, environment, personality and so forth.

The personality factor of a successful L2 learner has always been a vulnerable factor in L2 research. Madeline Ehrman, in 'Personality and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 4), finally settles for the reflection that successful L2 learners "tend to have introverted personalities" (70), a thought which clearly goes beyond pedagogical

intuitions. In chapter 5, Martha Nyikos touches upon issues related to gender in L2 acquisition. Gender has been argued “as one of the many important facets of social identity, [which] interacts with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age and social status in framing students’ language learning experiences, trajectories and outcomes” (Norton and Pavlenko 2004:504). To conclude, the author finally acknowledges that the commonly held view that women are more successful learners than men may not be substantiated by empirical research.

The succeeding three chapters are associated with ‘Strategies’ (Carol Griffiths), ‘Metacognition’ (Neil J. Anderson) and ‘Autonomy’ (Sara Cotterall) of good language learners. According to Rubin, language learning strategies are “techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge” (1975: 43). In ‘Strategies and Good Language Learners’ (Chapter 6), Griffiths marshals a large amount of data regarding the devices adopted by efficient L2 learners. But she keeps this research open-ended, since individual learners are infinitely variable. Next comes the discussion on ‘Metacognition and Good Language Learners’ (Chapter 7); in ELT, the students without metacognition have been treated as learners without direction who cannot monitor their process of learning. Previous investigations in this field propose that efficient L2 learners apply a number of metacognitive strategies to learn the target language (TL). However, in the concluding section of his article, Anderson places more emphasis on well-structured language programmes and efficient language instructors than on self-regulated learning experiences. In ‘Autonomy and Good Language Learners’ (Chapter 8), Cotterall closely examines the autonomy-fostering approach of language learning where she correlates learners’ psychological kinship with both the language learning process and the methodological aspects of language learning.

The concluding chapters of ‘Learner Variables’ move on to explore the ‘Beliefs’ (Cynthia White), ‘Culture’ (Claudia Finkbeiner) and ‘Aptitude’ (Leila Ranta) of good language learners. Unlike prior approaches where beliefs have been considered as somewhat static and monotonous, White attempts to re-examine learners’ beliefs from a socio-cultural outlook in ‘Beliefs and Good Language Learners’ (Chapter 9). The 10th chapter, by Finkbeiner, who discusses and elaborates the importance of culture and ethnic identity in a language teaching/learning classroom, is highly engaging. Not least, in the final section focussing on ‘Aptitude and Good Language Learners’ (Chapter 11), Ranta strongly challenges the long-fostered thought that “aptitude is undemocratic and irrelevant to language learners and teachers” (151).

The first four chapters of ‘Learning Variables’ examine the good language learners’ approach towards learning ‘Vocabulary’ (Jo Muir and Paul Nation), ‘Grammar’ (Margaret Bade), ‘Functions’ (Zia Tajeddin) and ‘Pronunciation’ (Adam Brown). The importance of teaching vocabulary in a language teaching/learning programme has always been a debatable question for language researchers; Moir and Nation in ‘Vocabulary and Good Language Learners’ (Chapter 12) analyse diverse ways of acquiring target language vocabulary. There is no doubt that the study of grammar is essential and rudimentary for effective communication in any language. However, the appropriate method of teaching grammar has always been debated. In ‘Grammar and Good Language Learners’ (Chapter 13), Bade endeavours to look into the most effective ways of learning grammar. The following section (Chapter 14) by Tajeddin focuses on the ‘functional approach’ of

language teaching and learning, a notion which has been designed to compensate for learners' needs. This article mainly investigates language learners' approaches towards achieving functional competence in the target language, an area which was left untouched by Rubin (1975) in her seminal article. In 'Pronunciation and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 15), Adam Brown investigates learners' attitudes towards pronunciation, and concludes that each efficient L2 learner is strongly aware of it since he/she "has a strong desire to communicate" (Rubin 1975: 46).

The next four chapters study good language learners' relationship with the art of 'Listening' (Goodith White), 'Speaking' (Yasushi Kawai), 'Reading' (Karen Schramm) and 'Writing' (Louise Gordon) in L2. Even though effective language learning does not depend only on good listening skills, White, in 'Listening and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 16), finds that efficient L2 learners often are good listeners. He further claims that the methodologies related to teaching listening skills are still underdeveloped, and far from acquiring momentum. Fruitful strategies to develop oral proficiency in a foreign language have always been questioned in SLA research. Kawai, in 'Speaking and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 17), clarifies that an introvert attitude towards oral communication in the (TL) does not inevitably indicate that the learner is less-motivated and therefore, unable to communicate in the TL. However, previous research shows that an active participation in the class by teachers as well as learners is necessary in order for the learner to develop oral skills. Schramm's contribution, 'Reading and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 18), investigates good language learners' attitudes towards the reading process in the TL. Schramm finds that efficient L2 learners can successfully "monitor their own comprehension, evaluate problems and take appropriate action" (238). This chapter, I find, is more closely directed to teachers than any other. Louise Gordon, in 'Writing and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 19), deals with language learners' attitudes towards writing in the TL. Composing something in a new language has always been a challenging task for L2 learners. Even though the communicative classroom does not recognise the importance of extensive writing, Gordon finds it essential for those who would like to carry out their further studies within a target language.

The succeeding two chapters of 'Learning Variables' are concerned with good language learners' attitudes towards 'Teaching/Learning Method' (Carol Griffiths) and 'Strategy Instruction' (Anna Uhl Chamot). Although innumerable approaches have been introduced over the years in order to learn and teach foreign languages, Griffiths in 'Teaching/Learning Methods and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 20), advocates strongly in favour of a contemporary 'eclectic approach' which actually is a melting-pot of diverse language teaching/learning techniques. In effect, Griffiths maintains that proficient L2 learners generally do not stick to any specific method of learning; rather, they switch to diverse learning techniques according to their needs. Chamot, in 'Strategy Instruction and Good Language Learners' (Chapter 21), takes into account questions associated with strategy instruction in SLA. Learning strategies of efficient as well as those of unsuccessful learners have always been a question of extensive research. Chamot, in this article, not only criticizes explicit, implicit, integrated and discrete strategy instructions, but also investigates the wide range of consequences related to strategy research and its reflections on language teaching. Above all, there is no single

method which can be proved unanimously helpful for each and every learner in the classroom. Therefore, language teaching, at any level, should be learner-centred.

Chapter 22 – entitled ‘Error Correction and Good Language Learners’, by Michael Roberts and Carol Griffiths – engages those readers analysing good language learners’ attitudes to error correction or corrective feedbacks. This chapter will be useful for classroom practitioners, for the importance of error correction has always been questioned in SLA research. While a certain group of linguists condemn it as “erratic, ambiguous, ill-timed and ineffective in the short term” (286), others find it useful for the learner’s development. However, the teacher’s role in the classroom has also been criticized, since excessive emphasis on errors may prove disappointing and demoralizing for students. Therefore, correction and encouragement should go hand in hand. To sum up, Roberts and Griffiths affirm Rubin’s observation that an efficient learner accepts the feedback and learns from his/her mistakes.

In the 23rd chapter, titled ‘Tasks and Good Language Learners’, Joan Rubin and Patricia McCoy make an important observation on task-based language teaching and learning. Task-based language teaching/learning curricula have been designed to modify learners’ communicative abilities outside the classroom. This article could be seen as a development of Wenden’s (1995) ‘tripartite task analysis procedure’, which, by and large, explains studies related to ‘task purpose’, ‘task classification’ and ‘task demands’. Task analysis has often been associated with planning, one of the five main metacognitive procedures (Rubin 2001, 2005). Efficient L2 learners use their knowledge to analyse tasks. Depending largely on their analysis of tasks, expert learners finally decide their goals of learning. After an extensive study, the authors come to the conclusion that ‘task analysis’ has been used widely by successful language learners.

The final section – bearing the title ‘The Learners’ Landscape and Journey: a Summary’, by Rebecca Oxford and Kyoung Rang Lee – sums up the whole body of research on good language learners. This chapter, I find, outlines a wide range of studies related to learner identity, learner self-regulation, the learning situation and the learning destination, a perfect synopsis of extensive research on SLA as in *LLGL*. The hypothesis associated with the detectability of a unique set of characteristics possessed by the good language learner and the possible transferability of those characteristics to less-successful learners slowly but surely gave way to the insight that no ideal set of characteristics existed.

*LGLL* is a thought-provoking book opening windows for further enquiries and explorations. Reading such a well-planned book is a pleasure. While in Rubin (1975), the focus was mainly on language learning strategies, *LGLL* goes one step further and approaches the question of how effectively successful language learners learn from a more elaborate perspective. This collection relocates some of the genres Rubin identified as requiring further investigation, and includes others which were not mentioned by her directly (such as gender, personality or autonomy). These variable factors have also been accepted as virtually important contributors to achieving proficiency or otherwise in the learning of the target language(s).

However, more extensive research is needed to determine whether L2 acquisition is an innate ability (Saville-Troike 2006: 17) and how far it can be channelled so as to facilitate successful L2 teaching/learning results. It has been found that while some

people are endowed with inborn qualities to be good language learners, others can also be aided to become equally efficient. The articles in this book are immensely inspiring and contribute effectively to the improvement in the field of language teaching/learning in the next few years. After all, good language learners have a lot to teach us, and even after three decades, several lessons are still to be learned.

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