

Lessons from Good Language Learners

Edited by

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To commemorate the publication of Joan Rubin's seminal article in *TESOL Quarterly* (1975) and to acknowledge those who have contributed to the field since then

 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2008

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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

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

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.

References

Rubin, J. (1968) *National Bilingualism in Paraguay*. The Hague: Mouton.