

Griffiths, C. (Ed.). (2008). *Lessons from good language learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Reviewed by;
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Re-reading Joan Rubin's original 1975 article, the thirtieth anniversary of which served as an inspiration for this collection, one is struck by how fresh, how commonsensical it seems. And in reading the book itself, an overview of the research prompted by Rubin's musings, one really gets a sense of how the study of language education and learning has grown in confidence as an academic field for research. It is immensely satisfying to anyone who sees English Language Teaching as a profession, but also shows what remarkable prescience Rubin had way back then – as much of her theory, borrowed from other disciplines and developed during a time when teaching was considered far more important than learning, has subsequently been proven accurate.

This book is organized into two halves, the first focusing on learner variables such as motivation, age and gender, the second on learning variables including vocabulary, functions and pronunciation. In this review I detail a few chapters which I feel best exemplify the strengths and weaknesses of the book.

Of course, in judging to which degree a book has succeeded, one has to consider the authors' intentions and the target audience. In her introductory overview, the editor explicitly states these goals; to review the literature and research to date, to identify gaps in our current understanding, to consider pedagogical implications and, perhaps paramount, to provide a reference base (pg.2). Griffiths identifies another of the difficulties in compiling this anthology as the lack of consensus, and hopes to remove some of the clutter in the field by drawing together that which we can agree upon. Even basic terminology is a minefield, but in that regard the collection is well edited for consistency. Although each of the contributors defines terms as necessary, I would have liked to have seen a glossary of key terms in a text which purports to "provide a comprehensive overview" (pg. 2). From the introduction follows a brief prologue from Cohen, and a fascinating insight into the origins of all this from Rubin herself.

To become *the* entry level text, albeit a fairly weighty one, amongst language professionals interested in this field is no small ambition, but Ushioda's chapter (one) is an excellent example of how it can be done. As I mentioned at the beginning of this review, looking back on thirty years of research one of the dominant impressions is of an academic discipline coming of age – and nowhere is this clearer than in Ushioda's chapter. Research started historically by social-psychologists and co-opted into use by language educators had, by the mid-nineties become directed by ESL classroom practitioners and applied linguists (pg.20). After a summary of the historical background, Ushioda defines her key terms (neatly explaining the intrinsic/extrinsic and integrative/instrumental distinctions) and reviews the literature as it relates to the theme of the book. The author concludes with a section on the implications for the

teaching/learning situation and another identifying gaps in the research.

There is nothing groundbreaking about this chapter but it is clearly written, well organized, and targets its audience with pinpoint accuracy. This is the template that the best chapters follow, another example being Griffiths' own chapter on strategies (chapter six). Here, Griffiths does an excellent job of digging out the key areas of consensus from a particularly swampy patch of research ground, and her pithy definition (pg. 87) of strategies as "activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning" works marvelously after her six point analysis of the essential features of strategies.

Although Griffiths takes time to detail a particular research study, and Ushioda's chapter is fundamentally a literature review, both benefit from a general consistency of form and goal. It is apparent that the editor held her stated aims clearly in mind during the preparation of the manuscript, in particular when one notices that every chapter contains a section headed "Implications for the teaching/learning situation" and another titled "Questions for ongoing research".

The chapters which don't quite follow this format sometimes suffer for it, when taken in the context of the book as a whole. Ehrman's case study of a particular research project studying personality and the good language learner (chapter four) is excellent in itself; methodologically rigorous and well argued. But when sat between the more generalist chapters on either side it appears to be too specific for a book of this nature. Perhaps the clue to Ehrman's decision to organize her chapter in this way comes in her conclusion when she tells us that "the best language learners tend to have introverted personalities, a finding which runs contrary to much of the literature..." (Pg. 70). Writing a wider-ranging review of a body of work which your findings indicate to be incorrect would be a challenging task for anyone.

The second section of the book, for me, doesn't work as well as the first. Although every learner is a unique collection of variables, each interacting with one another to enable or inhibit learning, researchers have been able to study each variable in isolation to some degree and reach conclusions of a sort about their impact upon language proficiency. To separate specific linguistic competencies and analyse them through the "kaleidoscope" of learner variables (a metaphor utilized well in Anderson's chapter eight about metacognition) seems to be much more difficult to do succinctly. The best chapters, such as Brown's study of pronunciation, tend to hone in on one or two particular learner variables (in this case motivation and cultural identity) in relation to the language factor under scrutiny. Brown himself actually highlights the difficulty of approaching the topic in this fashion; "Many learners, and unfortunately many teachers, treat pronunciation as if it were a separate aspect of language learning." (Pg. 203). If pronunciation cannot be separated from speaking, listening or reading, it certainly complicates the writer's task for the purposes of this volume.

That is not to say that the second half of the book is a failure. Amongst several good chapters, Moir and Nation (chapter twelve) report on their findings from a vocabulary building course, and raise some excellent points about the fallibility of learner feedback; participants may lack awareness of their own actions or

adjust their answers to meet the expectation of the teacher researcher. This chapter also serves as a reminder that sometimes students don't know why they are learning or how to learn. Even though the students selected their own vocabulary, most reported that the vocabulary they chose was not useful. The comment from one student in particular made me wince with recognition. "It's easy – we have to remember that for just one day" (pg. 165).

Despite these slight misgivings, I believe this book fulfills a need. To consolidate thirty years of research in such a hotly debated field was a Herculean task, but on the whole I think the editor and her contributors have put together a book which will be the first consulted by teachers, researchers and students with questions about how learners can learn well.

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