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How To Be a More Successful Language Learner

Joan Rubin and I. Thompson (1994)
Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers
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U.S. $17.50

*How to Be a More Successful Language Learner*, although written for the language learner, is packed with useful information for teachers as well. The informal nature of the prose will convince the reader skimming the opening sections that this is simply a “how-to” book for lay persons undertaking the study of a foreign language. Section headings such as “Before You Begin” and “Once You Begin,” as well as chapter headings such as “You, the Language Learner” and “What You Know Can Help You” reinforce this view. In every chapter the authors intersperse advice that resembles a pep talk (“the best time to learn is now,” “emotions are important”) with the findings of the latest language acquisition research. What sets this book apart from more scholarly texts is not the amount of information but the manner in which it is expressed. It may seem to be merely the advice of two experienced teachers based on their combined intuition, in fact they are a reflection of the latest theories in the field. Since there are no references to these theories and no long, scholarly explanations, the uninitiated reader might not be aware of the substantive nature of the recommendations. Those readers familiar with L2 acquisition theories in the field will recognize that the recommendations found on almost every page of the book are actually backed by empirical evidence.
discussions, followed by practical advice, concerning such issues as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, acculturation theory, humanistic classrooms, individual learning styles, memory theory, learner-centered learning, caretaker language, and the use of formulaic expressions.

The book begins by gently suggesting “there is no stereotype of ‘the good language learner’” (p. 1). Combinations of traits that will enable a learner to be successful. In this opening chapter the authors touch briefly on language learning aptitude and on psychological predispositions such as attitude and learning style. In describing language learning as a process, in the second chapter, the authors suggest that practicing in “small bits,” even as little as 30 minutes a day, is more effective than cramming once in a while. In the chapter on reading, they suggest that even reading ten minutes a day is a realistic goal at the initial stage of language learning and that by setting such modest goals the learner will be motivated to continue. The process of hypothesis formation, testing, and revision known as “successive approximation” authors [-1-] remind adult learners that in this long process errors are to be expected and:

The third chapter is devoted to a discussion of objectives. In order to be successful language learners, Rubin and Thompson recommend that prospective students should first figure out what objectives are most important to them and then set modest goals. The authors urge learners to be realistic about their level of commitment and the amount of time they can devote to this endeavor. They remind their readers that for different skills there must be different objectives, just as different languages will require different amounts of time. To enable learners to set goals effectively, the authors discuss the model of the inverted pyramid proposed by ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), and include level descriptions from the ACTFL Guidelines for each of the four skills. Certainly affords language learners many choices in terms of clarifying objectives.

After the issue of objectives, the book focuses on choosing an appropriate setting and course of study. The advantages and disadvantages of formal and informal settings and discuss the alternative of independent study as well. They remind their readers that individual learning style must be taken into account in making any decision about the right language course. Their discussion of language learning resources, in a later chapter, includes the use of dictionaries, supplementary texts, reference grammars, and media materials. Every aspect of the language learning process is covered in detail so that learners can make the type of informed decisions that will make a difference in the course of their study.

Following the discussion on goals and settings, the authors consider the nature of communication and implications for language learning. They discuss a variety of social functions associated with the need to communicate, activities of communication (expressing intentions, interpreting messages, and negotiating meaning), and problems in communicating, such as regional or social variations and nonverbal communication. The purpose of this chapter, according to the authors, is to remind readers “that language cannot be approached mechanically and in isolation” (p. 40).

The authors suggest that in order to be effectively in charge of your learning, you must be aware of the benefits of strategies. Although the book is replete with advice concerning strategy use, one chapter is devoted to this important topic. In order to develop awareness of how one learns, learners should keep diaries, talk to classmates about what they do (in terms of strategies), get advice from the teacher (if she seems to be knowledgeable about strategies),
Since Rubin and Thompson maintain that each skill needs separate attention, they follow chapters devoted to vocabulary and grammar as well as speaking, listening, reading and writing. They also provide instructions on how to identify the range of scores that indicate effective techniques associated with that skill as well as specific strategies related to each skill.

Throughout the book Rubin and Thompson advocate a learner-centered approach and exhort learners to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. They suggest that in choosing the language course that is right for them, learners should consider the course as they would any major purchase. Before making a decision about studying a language, learners should consider whether the course will enable them to achieve or move towards their goals. The contents of this book enable learners to make such a decision.

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