Reviews
Comptes rendus

Understanding Second Language Acquisition

Rod Ellis
Oxford University Press, 1986, 323 pages

Understanding Second Language Acquisition is a thorough and careful synthesis of current research in second language acquisition (SLA). While generally intended for students taking a first course in SLA, Ellis specifically comments on the book's importance for teachers of second or foreign languages: "This book seeks to help teachers make their theory of language learning *explicit* through an examination of language-learner language and the processes that produce it. It is based on the conviction that teachers will be better off with an explicit set of ideas about language learning" (p. 2). The fact that Ellis does not explicitly address himself to the implications of SLA research and theory for teaching second and foreign languages should not deter language teachers from reading this book; it is a highly intelligible account of issues in SLA which are essential to an understanding of the language learning process. Chapter 1 provides a preview of the "key issues" discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters; Ellis considers factors that are both external (e.g. situation, input) and internal (e.g. linguistic and cognitive processes) to the learner.

In Chapter 2, Ellis looks at the role of the first language in SLA research, summarizing the criticisms responsible for the demise of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis. Whereas the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis viewed the first language as the sole determinant of SLA (and a negative one, at that), Ellis shows that more recent proposals see it as only one determinant among many. The chapter concludes with a reappraisal of 'transfer' as a learner strategy, potentially making positive contributions to a learner's development in a second language.

The primary purpose of Chapter 3 is the examination/evaluation of the claim that "second language learners acquire a knowledge of a L2 in a fixed order as a result of a predisposition to process language data in highly specific ways" (p. 42). In order to achieve this goal, Ellis reviews early research on Interlanguage, Error Analysis and the 'natural' route of development and makes the general point that learners from different language backgrounds go through similar developmental stages in acquiring

a second language. Ellis, however, interprets the results of the morpheme acquisition studies and longitudinal studies as supporting this view, devoting only a few lines to the methodological criticisms of the former. The reader is thus left with the somewhat false impression that these early morpheme acquisition studies provided unequivocal support for the natural order hypothesis.

While Chapter 3 focusses on the features of interlanguage that are common across learners, Chapter 4 is devoted to the variable aspects of interlanguage. Ellis draws a distinction between systematic and non-systematic variability; whereas systematic variability is determined by both the linguistic and situational context, non-systematic variability refers to performance variation and free variation. Of particular interest in this chapter is Ellis's consideration of the role of variability in SLA. Drawing on work by Tarone (1982, 1983), Ellis points out that development in a second language can be viewed as the extension of the linguistic (from simple to complex) and situational (from formal to informal style) contexts in which target-language forms are used.

Chapter 5 investigates the way in which individual learner differences affect the rate and ultimate success of SLA. In an attempt to impose order on the vast number of terms and concepts pertaining to individual learner differences, Ellis presents a taxonomy in which he differentiates between personal and general factors. "Personal factors are highly idiosyncratic features of each individual's approach to learning a L2" (p. 100) while general factors are those that are characteristic of all learners although possibly realized differently in different individuals (i.e. age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation and personality). As in other chapters, Ellis approaches the relevant research with extreme caution, the result being some very tentative conclusions regarding the effect of personal and general factors on the rate and ultimate success of SLA. Ellis does, however, take a stand on the issue of age; he is critical of biological and cognitive explanations for age differences but finds affective explanations convincing: "Children will prove the more sucessful learners, particularly when pronunciation is concerned, because they are strongly motivated to become part of the first language community and require a native-like accent" (p. 110).

According to Ellis, Chapters 6 and 7 constitute a pair; the former investigates "what happens outside the learner" while the latter considers "what happens inside the learner." Thus, Chapter 6 is concerned with the role of input and interaction in SLA. It is generally assumed that comprehensible input for non-native speakers (NNSs) results from modified *input* (modifications to the linguistic forms directed at NNSs) and modified *interaction* (modifications to the interactional structure of discourse

between native and non-native speakers). (This is a distinction made by Long 1981). Ellis describes both kinds of modifications as they have been investigated in natural settings and in classrooms. As for the role of input in SLA, Ellis surveys a variety of approaches that have attempted to establish a causal relationship between input and output. He is careful, however, to point out that "there is little hard research showing whether input and interaction does affect SLA . . ." (p. 161).

Drawing heavily on work by Færch and Kasper (1983), Ellis considers "the internal processes which account for how the learner handles input data" (p. 164) in Chapter 7. Following Færch and Kasper, a distinction is made between two types of L2 knowledge, declarative and procedural. The former is constituted by internalized target language rules and memorized chunks of language whereas the latter consists of strategies used by the learner in acquisition and use of the target language. The chapter focusses on procedural knowledge: that is, strategies used in internalizing and automatizing L2 knowledge (learning strategies) and strategies used in compensating for inadequate L2 knowledge (communication strategies). While most of this chapter is concerned with the defining and categorizing of relevant terms and concepts, it concludes with a discussion of the role of communication strategies in SLA.

Chapter 8, like Chapters 2 and 3, considers the influence of linguistic processes on SLA. More specifically, the role of linguistic universals in SLA is examined in an attempt to address the major problem of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, namely, why do some differences between the native and target language cause difficulty for the L2 learner whereas others do not? (In this sense, Chapter 8 would be more logically ordered immediately after Chapters 2 and 3.) Most of the research Ellis reviews concerns the interaction of linguistic markedness and transfer. While the results of such research is sometimes contradictory and inconclusive, the area generally adds a fruitful new dimension to investigations of the role of the first language in SLA.

Chapter 9 will be of particular interest to the second language teacher as it deals with the effects of formal instruction on SLA. Again, the results of research are somewhat inconclusive; formal instruction seems to have some positive effect on the rate and success of SLA but no major effect on the route. Ellis presents three explanations for these results (i.e. the non-interface position, the interface position and the variability position) and discusses the pedagogical implications of each. The differences between these three positions concern the relationship between two types of linguistic knowledge in SLA, 'acquired' vs. 'learned' or 'implicit' vs. 'explicit'. Thus, the pedagogical implications of each differ in terms of how the teaching of formal grammar or focus on the L2 code is viewed.

As Ellis does not come to any conclusion regarding the value of each of the three positions, teachers are not provided with definitive answers about the role of formal grammar teaching in the classroom. The pedagogical section is instructive, however, in its attempt to relate theoretical explanations to classroom practice.

In Chapter 10, Ellis briefly reviews seven theories of SLA and in this concluding chapter demonstrates how different theoretical perspectives can account for the same second language phenomenon in differing ways.

In sum, Ellis has synthesized a large body of research into an extremely clear and thorough account of relevant issues in the field. The book's greatest strength lies in its balanced, objective approach to the subject matter. Rather than putting forth his own views of language acquisition, Ellis carefully considers the relative influence of various factors on the SLA process. While his cautious interpretations of research findings are at times unsatisfying, his tentative conclusions are probably an accurate reflection of the 'state of the art' in SLA.

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THE REVIEWER

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Words for Students of English

Holly Deemer Rogerson and Lionel Menasche (Eds.)
University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988

Words for Students of English is a series of vocabulary texts composed of six volumes and designed for use by students of virtually all levels. The authors suggest that book one, which assumes a knowledge of six hundred words, and book two be used for elementary students, books three and four for intermediate students, and books five and six, available in the near future, for high-intermediate or advanced students. Upon completion of the series, the student will have been exposed to approximately three thousand new *base words* (the part of speech which is used most frequently) along with many more derivations. The texts are suitable for use as core texts in vocabulary classes or as supplementary texts in reading, speaking, or writing classes; they may also be used for individual study.

Each book in the series contains twenty-five units. The number of base words included in each unit increases as the student progresses through the series: approximately fifteen in books one and two, fifteen to twenty in books three and four, and twenty-five in books five and six. Each unit is centred on a particular subject area, such as housing, work, food, family, the government, banking, nature, etc. Topics are sometimes repeated within the same volume and are always repeated at least once (and often more than once) in later volumes to allow for review and further exploration of especially broad and relevant topics. Each book also contains an answer key and appendices of words taught in that volume, of words taught in preceding volumes, and of the six hundred words which book one assumes knowledge of.

Each unit contains five sections. In the first of these, the *Word Form Chart,* the base words being taught along with some, but rarely all, of their derivations are grouped according to parts of speech. As progress is made through the books, more and more derivations are included. Nouns which refer to human beings are marked with a small stick-man. Irregular past tenses and past participles are included in brackets in the verb column. The adjective column contains present or past participles which are frequently used as adjectives. Some units also contain a column listing prepositions.

The next section, *Definitions and Examples,* presents the student with short definitions of the base words, followed by use of the word in a

sentence, or in a brief dialogue between two speakers, or both. The definitions only use words which it is assumed the student knows, having progressed to that point in the series. More than one definition is included if it is too difficult to determine which form of the word is the base word or if the word takes on very different senses of meaning in different contexts.

The student next becomes more actively involved as a section entitled *Introductory Exercises* is encountered. Consisting of two exercises, it may include matching words to definitions (which are phrased exactly as in the previous section), true or false questions, or filling in blanks in sentences. The authors recommend that these exercises be done orally or in writing immediately after first presentation of the preceding two sections and state that their intention in this section is "to lead the student to an initial understanding and acquaint them with the new words".

This initial understanding is developed and enhanced in the final two sections of each unit. The first of these, *Study Exercises,* consists of three (and sometimes as many as five) exercises drawn from the following types: true or false, sentence completion, forming sentences with given words, identifying the word in a group which doesn't belong, matching verbs and prepositions, identifying synonyms, identifying antonyms, word hunt puzzles, and crossword puzzles. In addition, a short reading passage followed by comprehension questions is always included here. These exercises are appropriate for individual study or for oral or written work in class and are the exercises for which answers are provided at the back of the book.

The final section of each unit is called *Follow-up Exercises* and consists of two parts. In the first, the student is asked to listen and write as the teacher dictates sentences which include the words being learned. The second part is made up of a group of questions designed to elicit short oral responses and lead to discussion, followed by a couple of questions to which longer written responses are better suited.

Although the weaknesses in this series of texts are few and far from serious, there are a couple which are noticeable enough to mention. Perhaps most striking is that the listening section seems out of place and rather pointless. No sentences are provided for the teacher and the attention to listening comprehension consists merely of half a page of blank lines to be filled in by the student. Obviously, this provision is not required for the teacher to make a decision as to whether or not to include this type of exercise, and it is useless to the student who is studying alone.

Far more impressive, however, are the good qualities which characterize these books. The choice of topics which the units are centred on is excellent; the student will certainly find the new words learned of great practical value. The context in which the words are learned makes it easier for the

student to comprehend and remember, particularly when dealing with the various derivations which are given, and should make it easier for the teacher to create effective activities and assignments. Secondly, the thoughtful and selective choice of derivations which are included is sure to be welcomed by teacher and student alike. The student will neither be overwhelmed by large groups of related words nor confused by the fine distinctions in meaning which sometimes exist, and, again, the derivations which are included will be found to be of great practical value. Thirdly, the authors have struck an effective balance between clarity and completeness on one hand and complexity on the other. Although, students working with the book in the classroom will often benefit from the teacher's embellishment on the meaning of some words, the student using the book for individual study will rarely be impeded by unknown words in the definitions and dialogues, even at very early stages of proficiency. Finally, and perhaps most noteworthy, is the versatility which characterizes this series. Teachers using the books as core texts in vocabulary classes will find that they can use the various sections in each unit in a variety of ways, both in the classroom and for homework assignments. Teachers using the books as supplementary texts in reading, writing, or speaking classes will have no problem in using only the sections within each unit which best suit their needs. Also, because the authors have varied the exercises which appear from unit to unit by drawing from a large pool of exercises, students will not be bored and numbed by doing exactly the same thing over and over again, yet they will have the sense that a methodical approach is being used to study vocabulary.

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THE REVIEWER

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