

NEW PUBLICATIONS

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Ellis, Rod. 1994. *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP. pp. 824. R168,99.

Two of Rod Ellis's books, *Instructed second language acquisition* (Ellis 1989), and *Second language acquisition and second language pedagogy* (Ellis 1990), are standard works. In addition, he has an impressive list of publications in the field of SLA research and his practical research projects have usefully tested specific areas of language acquisition. His new synoptic work must then be greeted with particular interest.

Sharwood Smith (1994) has pointed to the lack of coherence in second language acquisition studies, and the difficulty for teachers and students in attempting to find clear answers from SLA research. In providing a cogent and coherent perspective on SLA, Ellis has served the interests of at least three groups of people: students of SLA research who need a solid, but accessible introduction; teachers doing advanced training, and researchers who require a sound reference work in areas other than their own area of specialisation.

The study of second language acquisition provides a comprehensive introduction to the various aspects of SLA. Ellis brings the range of information available in this multifaceted field into critical review, thereby giving one a sense of the current state of the discipline.

His own priorities in SLA research favour the needs of teachers. He sees SLA research as primarily offering a rich source of information and data which can be used to foster the main processes of teacher development: the formation of a language teaching ideology, the acquisition of techniques and procedures for action, and the evaluation of these through reflection (Ellis 1993). This constitutes an important means of ensuring that the teacher's "scheme of things does match the learner's way of going about things ... to be sure that the teaching content will contribute directly to the learning" (Ellis 1985: 1).

The book is divided into seven parts which take "account of (1) the general distinction between the 'description' of L2 acquisition, and (2) the various subfields that have developed over the years" (p. 5).

In **Part 1, Background**, Ellis carefully sets in place the content and formal schema for this book. He discusses his use of the term "Second Language Acquisition", conceding that "the term SLA is in many senses inadequate to refer to both second and foreign language learning, but bowing to common usage", in the absence of a neutral and superordinate term" (p. 12). Several important distinctions are made succinctly and crisply, perhaps the most important being the distinction between "naturalistic" and "instructed" learning. Here the reader is not offered a facile description: for Ellis the difference is sociolinguistic rather than psychological, i.e. the terms reflect the settings and activities in which all learners typically participate, not the difference between conscious and subconscious learning. The other key distinctions made are between competence and performance, and usage and use.

The elusive nature of the phenomenon termed "acquisition" is skilfully explored by Ellis in an account that brings Krashen's problematic distinction between acquisition and learning into critical review, and allows these terms to be used in inverted commas when a specific emphasis is required. Ellis also alerts readers to the danger of assuming that researchers have an agreed interpretation of acquisition; when some researchers use the term to refer to first-time use, whilst others require a high level of accuracy. Research findings have to be read in terms of the way in which acquisition has been measured, and the nature of the data used.

He distinguishes between two branches of enquiry in SLA research, reflected in two main goals. One of the branches focuses on **learning** and the other on the **language learner**. The two goals are accurate **description** of the learner's competence and **explanation**, both of the ways learners are able to develop and use knowledge of an L2, and of the factors which explain variation between individual learners.

In the next four parts (2 - 5), he explores the chief issues in SLA research under the headings: (1) learnt language, (2) learner-external factors, (3) learner-internal factors, and (4) the language learner as an individual. Part 6 focuses on learners in the classroom and Part 7 sums up "the state of the art" of SLA research.

At the end of each part Ellis lists a careful selection of books and articles which give readers access to more specialized knowledge on the various aspects that have been reviewed. His knowledge of the field is apparent both in the suitability of his choices and in the cogent comments intended to guide readers. (There are occasions where his recommendations fail to take account of the abstruse nature of a work. Richards (1974), which he describes simply as accounting key articles by Corder and Selinker, would quail the stoutest heart.) He is also scrupulous in not dismissing researchers who take a different line from his own.

In **Part 2**, *The description of learner language*, a critical assessment is given of Error Analysis. Ellis usefully identifies its substantial contribution to SLA, despite the methodological flaws in some of the studies. However, the chapter on the pragmatic aspects of learning a language is disappointing. As in the rest of the book, the studies he refers to are reflected accurately and his own comments are carefully substantiated. But he fails to direct the reader to the need for "contexts of situation" to be explored, and to point out the limitations of studies confined to illocutionary acts.

Part 3 considers the external influences, specifically the role of social factors and input/interaction. Cautiously, Ellis concludes after a review of the relationship between social factors such as age, sex social class and attitudes and L2 proficiency that "although quite a lot is known about the *general* impact of social factors on L2 achievement, it is not possible to make accurate predictions" (p. 240). Individual differences result from specific psychological factors impacting on social factors. Clearly much more refined research is needed to reach more specific insights.

Part 4 attempts the most complex of all - a description of the internal factors or an account of the "black box" of the learner's mind. This requires a review of the cognitive and mentalist accounts of language which offer explanations as to how learners learn a second language, why they vary in the pace at which they do so, and why they fail to achieve full target language competence. As opposed to the other parts of the book where Ellis succeeds in providing an accessible account, I found the style in this section rather dense and difficult to read.

Part 5 focuses on the language learner and the general psychological factors and learner strategies which explain the variation in the ways in which individual learners set about learning an L2 and what they actually succeed in.

In **Part 6**, Ellis moves away from the general approach of the previous parts to focus on classroom-based and classroom-orientated research. He returns to some of the issues discussed earlier to consider them in terms of the classroom conditions that are most likely to facilitate acquisition. He does not offer "recipes", but highlights the kinds of classroom behaviours teachers need to engage in "what questions to ask, when and how to correct learners' errors, how to instigate negotiation for meaning in a classroom etc." (p. 564) In Chapter 13 Ellis examines the research pertaining to the relationship between the interaction (the means by which opportunities are created) and L2 learning. And Chapter 14 Examines the research on the effects of direct intervention on learning. These chapters should form essential reading in any postgraduate training, particularly so in courses which subscribe to Nunan's view that teachers should identify research

questions important to them and attempt to find answers in and for their own classrooms (Nunan 1990).

Whether you see a study of SLA as offering the "best information possible", or take Long's strong line that the teaching profession (like the medical profession) must use specialized knowledge to inform its teaching practice (Long 1990), or Widdowson's more fundamental position that discussion of "issues of current pedagogic concern" (Widdowson 1990: 66), informed by "generalities" and "principles", is what is necessary, this volume will meet your needs.

Part 7 highlights the problematic nature of SLA research at present.

In this final section of the book it would be pleasing to demonstrate how all the separate lines of enquiry, which we have pursued in the earlier sections come together to form a single, well-defined picture. However, this is not possible. The object of our enquiry - second language (L2) acquisition is best seen as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon - more like a many-sided prism than a neat picture with clearly identifiable objects. The images that the prism presents vary in accordance with the angle from which it is viewed and the light directed at it, with the result that, while they are in some way inter-related, they also afford different perspectives of the same entity (p. 65).

It also examines the issues that currently preoccupy researchers: the kind of data used, theory construction and the application of the findings of SLA research to other fields.

The forbidding size of the book (824 pages) and its price should not dissuade serious students or researchers. I have no doubt that *The study of second language acquisition* deserves to become a standard reference work. The academic integrity with which it has been written and the comprehensive coverage of the subfields of SLA make it a substantial contribution towards the elusive goal of a single unifying view of Second Language Acquisition.

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