

UNDERSTANDING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Rod Ellis (1986)
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In his introduction Ellis himself gives perhaps the best description of this excellent text.

The aim of this book is to provide a thorough account of what is known about second language acquisition (SLA). As far as possible the book will describe, rather than prescribe; that is, it will not consciously project any single approach or theory as received opinion. Indeed this is not possible at the moment, as the study of SLA is still in its infancy and there are still more questions than answers. Of course it is impossible to separate description from interpretation entirely, so my own views will necessarily colour the account I provide, if only in the research and theories which I choose to report. (p.1)

At first reading, this aim seems over ambitious if not presumptuous. Nevertheless, it is in great measure achieved which is the principle strength of the account. It is indeed thorough and in most cases descriptive rather than prescriptive in that it does describe rather than interpret reported research and the selection of reported research and theories, although in some cases leading to almost inevitable conclusions, is never unfairly skewed and is always fairly representative at least of the literature on second language acquisition research.

The structure of the book aids the reader first by identifying fourteen key issues. The first six are of a general nature such as the distinction between acquisition and learning or between competence and performance and are treated throughout the book and most especially in the last chapter. The remaining eight are treated in focussed chapters: The role of the first language, Interlanguage and the 'natural' route of development, Variability in interlanguage, Individual learner differences and Second Language Acquisition, Learner strategies, the Universal Hypothesis and Second Language Acquisition and

The role of formal instruction in Second Language Acquisition. I found both the addressing key issues one at a time and the postponement of the theories of Second Language Acquisition until the end both novel and useful. It was much easier to compare models after having read the chapters addressed to specific issues. Another plus is the further reading section at the end of each chapter. Ellis has managed to recommend helpful additions and has avoided the pitfall of merely presenting a reduced reference section.

Ellis envisions two kinds of readers for his book: students in a course on second language acquisition and teachers. I would heartily recommend this book for anyone giving a course on second language acquisition; in fact, I plan to make it required reading. It is an excellent, thorough overview of the "state of the art." On the other hand, I hesitate to recommend it to classroom teachers at least as the first book to read on the subject. Its very thoroughness and its attempt at description rather than interpretation might make it very heavy going although the conclusions chapter might bring it all together. In short, if you are giving or taking a course don't miss this book. If you are a classroom teacher don't miss this book but make it the second book you read.