
BOOK REVIEW: UNDERSTANDING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Maoping Cong

College of Liberal Arts, Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2023.0549>

ABSTRACT

As an important sub-discipline of Applied Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition focuses on the process and results of people learning a second language, and its purpose is to provide objective descriptions and scientific explanations of language learners' linguistic and communicative abilities. In recent years, with the continuous expansion and depth of research, the domestic academic community has a new demand for research materials, such as "task-based pedagogy", "English as an international lingua franca", "interdisciplinary research on second language acquisition" and so on, which has gradually become a hot topic. This book can reflect the frontiers of research in important areas of international applied linguistics, and make a new contribution to the comprehensive and in-depth promotion of foreign language teaching and research.

Keywords: Second language acquisition; L2 acquisition; Teaching; variability.

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, Ellis provides a sound knowledge base for language teachers and graduate students in Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition, focusing on relevant findings of research on second language acquisition by children and literate adults in both naturalistic and instructed contexts. The difference from the first edition lies in the loss of separate chapters on linguistic universals and learning strategies which represent two ontological extremes. Ellis has added two new chapters on cognitive and social aspects of L2 acquisition and also expanded the single chapter on form-focused instruction in the first edition to two separate chapters in this edition, focusing on explicit and implicit instruction.

The book has twelve chapters. Ellis gives a brief history of SLA research from its origins in the 1960s up to today in chapter 1, distinguishes between SLA and L2 acquisition, and provides definitions of key technical concepts, making readers obtain a general picture of what SLA entails and how it has developed over time. The historical introduction to SLA has neglected two important areas that are the role of age in L2 acquisition and the role of individual learner factors such as language aptitude and motivation which were illustrated in chapter 2 and 3. In chapter 2, Ellis explores the distinction between implicit and explicit notions of language learning. He answers the question "why young learners are capable of higher levels of attainment than older learners". Younger learners are better equipped to engage in implicit learning and older learners rely more on explicit learning. Implicit learning wins out because it is more likely to enable learners to develop high levels of L2 proficiency. Chapter 3 deals with the psychological factors and second language acquisition. Ellis divides the psychological factors into three principal types: cognitive, conative, and affective, then examines the representative factors of these three aspects, specifically language aptitude, motivation, and language anxiety. Ellis compares different research approaches and confirms the need to examine differences in terms of the whole learner. He also mentions the challenge to determine how this research can be done. In this chapter, he does not consider

individual learner differences or how motivation is treated in neuropsychological SLA. The following two chapters, on the development of a second language and variability in learner language, are expansions of similar ones in the first edition. Chapter 4 focuses on how the interlanguage system is constructed and reconstructed as acquisition takes place. Ellis considers the methods researchers have used to investigate interlanguage development and then goes on to examine what the research has shown about the nature of L2 development. Finally, he concludes that there are universal tendencies in how L2 is acquired with variability in the use of L2. The variability in learner's use of language is discussed further in Chapter 5, where Ellis explores two types of variation in learner language: type one variation is evident when learners vary between the use of a target and an interlanguage form; type two variation occurs when learners alternate between two or more target language forms although not necessarily in the same way as native speakers.

In chapter 6, Ellis deals with the role of the first language, focusing on the effects that the learner's L1 has on the use and learning of a second language. The transfer is influenced by a range of factors such as linguistic, psycholinguistic, psychological, and social factors. He concludes by saying that research should not focus so much on the separateness or comparisons of the learners' L1 and L2, but should focus more on multi-competence and bilingual/multilingual language use, as suggested by Cook (2000). Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the cognitive aspects of second language acquisition. In chapter 7, Ellis talks about the input and interaction from the cognitive interactionist perspective. This chapter also reviews research that has investigated the interaction approach, introducing important theoretical constructs as the review progresses such as modified output, corrective feedback, interaction, and working memory. Ellis summarizes the key theories and the main findings from the interaction approach in the conclusion. And he also agrees that cognitive systems influence how input is processed. Chapter 8 further discusses the cognitive aspects, taking a good close at cognitive theories such as implicit and explicit L2 learning, skill-learning theory, and processability theory. Then Ellis examines how these cognitive theories account for L2 representation, including the crucial issue of how the mind stores two languages. What's more, he also discusses the role of attention in L2 acquisition. Lastly, Ellis concludes the chapter with a brief look at the research methods that have been used to investigate cognitive aspects of L2 acquisition. Chapter 9 concentrates on the social aspects of L2 acquisition. Ellis uses two examples (Schumann's Acculturation Model and The Socio-educational Model) to talk about the role of social factors in second language settings and foreign language classrooms. Various social theories such as conversational analytic and social identity are discussed in Chapter 9. Chapters 10 and 11 return to the issues of explicit and implicit instruction. The focus of the two chapters has been on investigating the effects of different kinds of instruction like presentation-practice-production (PPP) instruction, integrated explicit instruction, concept-based instruction and comprehension-based instruction for explicit instruction, and extensive reading, the Natural Approach, and task-based language teaching for implicit instruction. Through the two chapters, we can see that both explicit and implicit instruction are effective in different ways. Explicit instruction influences internal knowledge via implicit intake for comprehension. Explicit instruction has lasting effects on certain linguistic features, which is more likely to benefit high-aptitude learners. Implicit instruction develops linguistic and discourse competencies. A language curriculum that includes both explicit and implicit instructional components is perhaps more likely to ensure that language pedagogy is efficient and effective for ensuring balanced L2 development. The final chapter deals with the understanding and applying of L2 acquisition. Ellis says that SLA

is still not able “to provide a uniform account of how L2 is acquired” (p291), considers different ways of applying SLA in language pedagogy, and finally concludes that there is no consensus about the overall direction that SLA research should follow” (p311).

This book gives the reader a comprehensive and in-depth overview of the research on SLA, which is a general SLA reference book for students and teachers who want to make research and practice in this field. In each chapter, the author introduces, compares, and evaluates a huge range of past and present studies, highlighting the benefits and shortcomings of different research approaches. Besides, each chapter provides the authors’ conclusion and ends with a clear summary and explanatory key points. Linked online resources include the glossary, weblinks to SLA journals, key SLA researchers, suggested further reading, discussion sections for each chapter.

However, during my reading, the contents of some chapters such as chapter 9 are opaque to read. It would be better if provided with more contexts. We know the main purpose of studying second language acquisition is to facilitate language pedagogy, so a more extended contextualization of some theories and practices is needed for readers and practitioners. Lastly, there is no single theory that simply explains SLA, as Ellis says that readers of this book must be prepared to grapple with this complexity. Therefore, we should look for insights rather than definite answers and then come to our own informed conclusions about how a second language is acquired.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ellis, R.1997a. Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- [2] Ellis, R.1997b.SLA Research and Language Teaching. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Ellis, R. 1997c. SLA and language pedagogy: an educational perspective, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* I. 9:69-92.