

Second Language Acquisition by Rod Ellis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 147 pp.

Reviewed by Carleen Curley
University of California, Los Angeles

Second Language Acquisition by Rod Ellis is one of four published books in a series called *Oxford Introductions to Language Study*, edited by H. G. Widdowson. Although each book can serve as a self-contained unit which has its own purpose, the overall goal of the series is to "ease people into an understanding of complex ideas" associated with language (p. vii). According to Widdowson in the Preface, this book is intended to target a wide range of readers, including people who are not interested in studying linguistics technically, but are just interested in learning more about language. In addition, Widdowson suggests that the books in this series would be an appropriate accompanying text to a more technical introductory linguistics text in the classroom.

The books in this series are broken up into four main sections: Survey, Readings, References, and Glossary. The aim of the Survey section is to provide a brief overview of the area of linguistics that is being discussed within each book. Widdowson describes this section as "simple...not simplistic" (p. viii). In addition to presenting basic information about a particular area, this section aims to provoke questions that the readers wish to explore themselves. The Readings section is geared towards helping the reader take the information presented in the Survey section one step further. This is accomplished by presenting the reader with references to other topical literature, relating them to a specific section in the text, and then posing questions for the reader. The References section lists books and articles that are relevant to the ideas discussed throughout the Survey. Lastly, the Glossary lists the specialized terms that are discussed and referred to throughout the Survey section.

In *Second Language Acquisition*, the Survey section is broken up into ten chapters, each focusing on a specific topic within the field of second language acquisition research. Chapter One, *Introduction: Describing and explaining L2 acquisition*, starts by trying to define L2 acquisition and list the goals of and issues within this field of study. Throughout this section, as well as throughout the book, there are numerous examples illustrating main points. For example, "Finally, learners possess communication strategies that can help them make effective use of their L2 knowledge. For example, even if they have not learned the word 'art gallery' they may be able to communicate the idea of it by inventing their own term (for example, 'picture place')" (p. 5). Such examples help clarify the main points being discussed by Ellis.

In Chapter Two, *The nature of learner language*, errors, developmental patterns, and variability in learner language are discussed. Sentences from language learners exemplify different points being presented throughout this chapter. Also, in this chapter and throughout the Survey section, bold-face specialized vocabulary words are explained within the text, as well as in the Glossary. For example, "Other errors, however, reflect learners' attempts to make use of their L1 knowledge. These are known as **transfer errors**" (p. 19).

In Chapter Three, *Interlanguage*, Ellis briefly describes the behaviorist learning theory and the mentalist theory of language learning before beginning a discussion on interlanguage. This discussion of interlanguage presents six premises about L2 acquisition that are contained within the concept of interlanguage. He concludes this chapter with a diagram illustrating a computational model of L2 acquisition.

Chapters Four through Seven expand upon the topic of interlanguage by discussing multiple aspects of interlanguage: The social, discourse, psycholinguistic, and linguistic aspects of interlanguage are each addressed in a separate chapter. These sections, following the example and definition format described for Chapters One and Two, additionally present theories, models, and hypotheses that have emerged in L2 acquisition research, dealing in particular with their effects on the interlanguage of a language learner. In particular, some of the topics presented throughout these chapters are: the acculturation model of L2 acquisition, role of input and output in L2 acquisition, L1 transfer, universal grammar, and the critical period hypothesis. Overall, these chapters attempt to expose the reader to a variety of perspectives of L2 acquisition.

Chapter Eight, *Individual differences in L2 acquisition*, ventures away from universal perspectives on L2 acquisition discussed in previous chapters. Here, Ellis deals primarily with language aptitude and motivation. When discussing language aptitude, he primarily defines what it means to have language aptitude. In the case of motivation, he breaks his discussion into four types of motivation: instrumental, integrative, resultative, and intrinsic, and defines each of these types.

In Chapter Nine, *Instruction and L2 acquisition*, Ellis presents some past research that has been done to determine whether or not form-focused instruction works and what type of form-focused instruction works best. Chapter Ten, *Conclusion: Multiple perspectives in SLA*, emphasizes that, due to the complex nature of language acquisition, it is impossible to come up with one theory that adequately addresses all that is contained within SLA research. Therefore, there is still a need for multiple perspectives in SLA.

The second section is the Readings section. This section parallels the chapters discussed in the Survey section. For each chapter, this section lists different texts that expand upon the important ideas addressed within the Survey section. In each section, article or book references are given. Then, each article or book is briefly annotated. For example, in regards to an article by Lydia White, the annotation is, "In this text White considers how researchers can set about investigating

whether Universal Grammar (UG) is still available in L2 acquisition" (p. 112). Then Ellis discusses the main ideas or controversies presented in the annotated articles, also trying to relate them to the material presented in the Survey section. Lastly, he presents study questions geared at helping the learner explore these topics further.

Section 3, References, lists 62 sources, again organized to parallel the chapters in the Survey section. These references, both books and articles, are briefly annotated. These annotations are similar to the one described above in reference to White's article. Additionally, each reference is classified as an introductory, more advanced, or specialized text. According to the Preface, written by Widdowson, this section is supposed to contain accompanying comment to "indicate how these deal in more detail with the issues discussed in the different chapters of the survey" (p. IX). However, this particular volume does not contain such comments, which is unfortunate for the novice reader wishing to pursue these topics individually.

The last section, the Glossary, provides a basic list of the specialized words used throughout the Survey section. Although most of these terms were explicitly defined within the Survey section, they are again listed here for quick reference. At the end of each of the definitions, page references to the Survey section are given. A sample glossary entry is as follows, "**L1 Transfer** The process by which the learner's L1 influences the acquisition and use of an L2. [51]" (p. 140).


Overall, the Survey section provides an adequate overview of some basic concepts of SLA. I think that this section is especially appropriate for a novice interested in a basic introduction to SLA. Ellis gives his reader access to complex theories and hypotheses by providing numerous examples, definitions, and diagrams, when appropriate. Also, Ellis breaks this complex topic up into ten chapters, allowing the readers to focus on smaller sections within this large, intricate topic.

Because the Readings section presents comments about each topic and helps the readers explore the topics further, I think this would be especially appropriate to use in an introductory level undergraduate class on SLA. Not only does this section lead the readers to more complex references within SLA research, but it also helps them process these new references by posing questions at the end of each section.

In my opinion, the best thing about the References section is that it addresses the complexity of each article or book. This could be very helpful when the readers are trying to choose which type of reference they would like to read. Also, having these references parallel the chapters in the Survey section can help readers choose books that are applicable to the topics that interest them. Lastly, the Glossary is a useful tool for students to refer to while in the process of mastering the specialized words presented in the text.

In *Second Language Acquisition*, Ellis succeeds in giving the reader a basic overview of some issues in SLA research. He provides enough examples and

definitions to guide the reader through a self-study of this field. Then he presents complicated discussions and questions geared towards helping the readers explore the topics contained within this book by themselves. Although on the surface, this book may seem like an over-simplification of the complex field of SLA research, this book proves to be a powerful tool in opening the door, even to the novice, into this field and therefore accomplishes Widdowson's goal of "eas[ing] people into an understanding of complex ideas" of language (p. vii).



**Forget About
Needles in
Haystacks!**

Discover the information you need quickly and easily by consulting **Second Language Instruction / Acquisition Abstracts (SLIA)** — your window on the entire spectrum of second-language instruction literature published worldwide.

As a specialist in your field, it is important to keep pace with the latest research findings and teaching methods. **SLIA** can help you do just that with timely coverage of articles culled from among 1,900 serials, selected books, and enhanced bibliographic citations for relevant dissertations.

SLIA appears biannually — in July and December. Each issue offers approximately 700 abstracts, divided into 13 substantive areas, plus separate source, author, and subject indexes.

Among the subject areas covered are:

- Applied linguistics
- Non-native language pedagogy
- Non-native language acquisition
- Adult language development
- Bilingual education
- Computer-assisted learning, and more.

**Second Language Instruction /
Acquisition Abstracts**
(a Division of Linguistics & Language Behavior Abstracts)
P.O. Box 22206 • San Diego, CA 92192-0206
(619) 695-8803 • FAX (619) 695-0416
SOCIO@SDSC.BITNET