

SLA Research and Language Teaching by Rod Ellis
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In *SLA Research and Language Teaching* Rod Ellis addresses the existing gap between Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and language teaching in the classroom. After initially demonstrating how the gap has developed and noting its continuing expansion, he attempts to bridge this gap. The book is divided into six parts: Background; Making Research Accessible; The Application of Theory; Second Language Acquisition Research in the Classroom; The Teacher as Researcher; Conclusion. It is aimed at language teachers who are interested in what SLA research has to say about language learning but who, perhaps, have found it difficult to apply the findings to the classroom. Ellis examines some of the research findings of the last twenty years along with factors affecting their adoption in classroom teaching practices. He presents the notions of implicit and explicit knowledge and introduces a model for using the research in this area to build a structural syllabus that is compatible with instructed language acquisition, as opposed to naturalistic acquisition. To further bridge the gap, he suggests that teachers carry out research in their own classrooms and defends this practice against the criticisms of SLA academics.

In the first part of the book Ellis examines the gap between SLA research and language teaching and also presents some ideas for bridging this gap. It seems that most SLA research in the 1960's focused on language pedagogy. There were two main approaches – research to investigate the relative effectiveness of different teaching methods and empirical study of how learners acquired an L2. The latter approach involved looking at individual learners and their errors. Teachers could easily relate to these studies which tended to be more rewarding than studies of methods in that they opened the way for further research. As a result, studies of L2 learning continued and “SLA was born” (p. 5).

As SLA grew, it became more of an academic pursuit in its own right as opposed to a support for the practice of language teaching. There are large bodies of research that have nothing to do with the classroom (e.g. research on Universal Grammar). Other fields of SLA have closer ties to the classroom. The study of the role of input and interaction in L2 acquisition and the study of form-focused instruction both address issues of extreme relevance to language teachers. However, the methods they have adopted in order to satisfy the demands of academia have made their findings of questionable relevance to the classroom.

As an academic discipline, SLA seeks to contribute to technical knowledge,

i.e., knowledge based on empirical study generalized so that it can address as many cases as possible. This knowledge has been codified so it can be examined analytically and disputed. Classroom teaching requires practical knowledge, i.e., knowing how to evaluate students' needs and choosing activities that suit those needs. Technical knowledge cannot be directly applied to classroom situations but can only inform decisions that are made on a more practical level. The question is, how can technical knowledge aid in the development of practical knowledge? How can the gap between SLA research and classroom language teaching be bridged?

Ellis proposes a number of models to address this question but settles on a framework based on Widdowson's (1990) view that an applied linguist should mediate between disciplinary theory/research and language pedagogy. Ellis proposes that SLA should be applied in the following ways:

1. Making SLA accessible – SLA research needs to be summarized and organized.
2. Theory development and its application - Theory construction is one way of operationalizing SLA for language teaching.
3. Researching the L2 classroom - Another way of operationalizing constructs is to investigate what happens in the classroom.
4. The teacher as researcher - Action research is a way of empowering teachers.

Ellis devotes the rest of the book to applying this framework to current SLA research in his attempt to bridge the gap between second language teaching and research.

MAKING SLA ACCESSIBLE

Since SLA research is written for researchers not teachers, Ellis feels that it needs to be summarized and organized so that language teachers can more easily access it. He suggests that these summaries can be organized around issues identified in the research (e.g. learner errors, input and interaction, fossilization, or the role of formal instruction) or issues based on pedagogical concepts (e.g. error treatment, the use of L1 in the classroom, or options in teaching grammar). In chapters 2 and 3 Ellis surveys SLA research regarding form-focused instruction from each of these perspectives.

In chapter 2, Ellis examines the issues that SLA has identified and traces their direct pedagogical implications. The issues of comprehensible input, form-focused and meaning-focused instruction, the quality of classroom communication, the effect of form-focused instruction on accuracy and on the sequence of acquisition, as well as the durability of instruction are discussed, and the relevant research referenced. Ellis synthesizes the literature well and comes to the following conclusions:

1. Teachers should teach grammar but the degree to which they teach it should depend on their learners. Students who have only been exposed to grammar need to develop fluency. Students who are learning under more communicative systems, however, can benefit from form-focused instruction because it can increase the speed at which they progress through the acquisition order.
2. Grammar teaching can and does work. There are conditions that apply to when it works and when it does not, and unfortunately, all the conditions are not completely clear. The learnability of the form and the level of the learner's interlanguage have an effect on the extent to which grammar teaching works.
3. SLA research does not point to what grammar features should be taught. There are a number of features that govern the learnability of a form (e.g. saliency, redundancy, frequency, scope and reliability, markedness and rule-boundedness) but the literature is unclear as to how these factors interact to determine learnability.

In chapter 3 Ellis uses the various ways of teaching grammar as a frame for investigating the SLA research in these areas. From this point of view, we see that the methodological problems of isolating teaching options creates all sorts of difficulties. He explains how classroom researchers are pulled in two directions:

They need to produce good research but they may also feel the need to convince teachers. If they focus narrowly on specific instructional options, to 'tease out the variables'... they are in a better position to produce good research but run the risk of being dismissed as irrelevant by teachers. If they produce rich and varied instructional treatments they can satisfy the teacher but may produce research that is difficult to interpret. (p. 93)

Ellis brings attention to one study that balances the two sides well. VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) investigate the relative benefits of production-based and comprehension-based instruction. The study examined *form-focused instruction* (instruction focused on grammatical forms) and investigated whether production-based practice or comprehension-based practice produced better results. This study provides an example that is realistic in that it uses a number of instructional treatments, both consisting of several stages, but isolates one treatment for comparison.

THEORY DEVELOPMENT AND ITS APPLICATION

In order to operationalize SLA research for language teachers, Ellis argues that a theory must be developed and tested. Thus he proposes a theory of instructed second language acquisition that addresses the development of proficiency and the role of form-focused instruction. The theory is based on the distinction between explicit knowledge (i.e., knowledge that is analyzed, abstract and explana-

tory) and implicit knowledge (i.e., knowledge that is intuitive, that the learner is unlikely to be aware of). In this theory, explicit knowledge is the learner's conscious knowledge of surface-level rules of grammar. Ellis also proposes a second distinction, namely that of controlled and automatic processing. Knowledge can be processed in a controlled way, as in newly learned rules that are applied slowly

Types of Knowledge	Controlled processing	Automatic processing
Explicit	A A new explicit rule is used consciously and with deliberate effort	B An old explicit rule is used consciously but with relative speed
Implicit	C A new implicit rule is used without awareness but is accessed slowly and inconsistently	D A fully learnt implicit rule is used without awareness and without effort

Figure 1: from p. 112

and methodically, or in an automatic way, as in rules learned previously and now processed with some speed (see Ellis' figure below – Figure 1)

In this model, there is a weak interface between explicit and implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge can be converted into implicit knowledge if the rule is non-developmental in nature or if learners have reached that stage in their interlanguage development. Not all knowledge originates as explicit knowledge; it can be acquired as implicit knowledge with formal instruction helping to make knowledge automatic.

Extending his theory, Ellis next suggests that learning can take place on either an explicit or implicit level. Explicit learning is the conscious attention to new forms and their meaning. Sometimes the form is attended to at the expense of the meaning. Implicit learning is incidental, i.e., it happens while attending to some other activity. Ellis suggests that input becomes implicit learning when learners notice the form, compare the form to their own interlanguage, and then integrate the new form. Both explicit and implicit knowledge become automatic through practice. Implicit knowledge requires practice under real conditions, that is, interaction in which inaccurate utterances lead to misunderstanding and reformulation. Explicit knowledge can be practiced through more traditional grammar practice activities such as those in Penny Ur's (1988) *Grammar Practice Activities*.

Ellis continues his discussion with an examination of the structural syllabus as applied to implicit and explicit knowledge and presents some acquisition-compatible grammar tasks. He concludes that a structural syllabus is incompatible with implicit knowledge if the goal is production of accurate forms. If the goal is comprehension, however, a structural syllabus could be useful and promote input

enhancement and intake facilitation. In terms of explicit knowledge, Ellis finds that a structural syllabus can raise the learner's consciousness of the L2 grammar and the differences between the model and their interlanguage. One of the main points of Ellis' model is that learners will not internalize, and hence be able to produce, forms that they are not developmentally ready for. As a result, comprehension-based practice is the best alternative in that it will give the learners practice in the form but will not impede production because of incorrect usage and embarrassing correction. To this end Ellis gives some very interesting comprehension-based grammar practice activities that require the learner to choose between alternative pictures based on sentences containing the target form. The activities include interpretation and consciousness raising tasks (i.e., tasks that relate the language to the learner).

RESEARCHING THE L2 CLASSROOM AND THE TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

In the last two parts of the book, Ellis looks at classroom research. Ellis uses these projects to illustrate how classroom research can be carried out and to demonstrate how classroom interaction contributes to L2 acquisition. By including two examples of action research, he makes it clear that research carried out by teachers is just as valid as that carried out by SLA researchers though there may be differences in the focus. He also stresses the important role that action research plays in the development of the classroom teacher: By investigating their own teaching context in relation to SLA research, they help to bridge the gap.

I found *SLA Research and Language Teaching* to be a very interesting book. As a teacher embarking upon graduate work in Applied Linguistics, I find myself trying to bridge the gap between what is expected of me as a graduate student and what I do as a teacher of ESL. The gap, at times, seems unbridgeable; professors do not seem terribly interested in classroom research, and the focus is on "natural" language contexts rather than the classroom context. But as a teacher I cannot help but envision my studies in Applied Linguistics as eventually informing my classroom teaching. Reading this book has helped to re-affirm my view that language teaching can be informed by good Applied Linguistic research. So it is with renewed optimism and support from Rod Ellis that I hope to help bridge the gap.

REFERENCES

- Ur, P. (1988) *Grammar Practice Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Van Patten, B. and Cadierno T. (1993). Explicit instruction and input processing. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 15 225-241