Book Reviews

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. Wolfgang Klein. Cambridge University Press, 1986. 191 pp.
UNDERSTANDING SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. Rod Ellis. Oxford University Press, 1985. 327 pp.

Language teachers in general are a practical lot. This is especially true of teachers of foreign or second language in the post-audio-lingual period. (Given that *teacher of a foreign or second language* is an awkward locution, I will use the term *foreign-language teacher* in reference to anyone teaching a language to students for whom that language is foreign.) Teacher trainers (a category which includes this reviewer) are often confronted by emotional requests like the following: "Don't tell me about theories, **give me something that I can use in the classroom!**" It is thinking like this that makes a title like *Methods that work: a smorgasbord of ideas for language teachers* (Oller and Richard-Amato 1983) so appealing to the contemporary foreign-language teacher. On the other hand, a text with a title like *Second language acquisition* or *Understanding second language acquisition* is likely to be among those which the average foreign-language teacher would prefer to avoid. Consequently, before discussing how well either of these texts meets the needs of foreign-language teachers, it is necessary to discuss why understanding second language acquisition (SLA) must be included among the fundamental needs of the contemporary foreign-language teacher.

We can look to Ellis for an excellent answer to this question. He sets the stage for this answer by noting that

> All teachers have a theory of language learning. That is, they act in accordance with a set of principles about the way language learners behave. This theory, however, may not be explicit. In many cases the teacher's views about language learning will be covert and will only be implicit in what he does. (p. 2)

He then argues that the foreign-language teacher who operates with

an explicit set of principles is at a distinct advantage when it comes to developing or evaluating novel approaches to problems in language teaching.

> It is only when principles are made explicit that they can be examined with a view to amending or replacing them. Teachers who operate in accordance with implicit beliefs may be not only uncritical but also resistant to change. Alternatively they may shift and change in an unprincipled way, following blindly the latest fashion in language teaching. Teachers who make explicit the principles by which they teach are able to examine those principles critically.
>
> This book is based on the belief that teachers will do better to operate with a theory of language learning that is explicit and therefore open to revision, than with an implicit theory that may ignore what learners actually do. Greater consciousness of the complex process of language learning will not guarantee more effective teaching ... but it will stimulate critical thought, challenge old principles, and maybe suggest a few new ones. A conscious understanding of SLA is a basis for modifying and improving teaching. (pp. 2-3)

This argument is virtually unassailable; to disagree would entail supporting the proposition that a professional foreign-language teacher can be an unthinking automaton. Such a low standard of professionalism is simply unacceptable.

Having established the necessity of understanding SLA, we now come to the problem of how best to provide foreign-language teachers with useful information about SLA. It is at this point that we gain a distinct advantage by being in the position to compare Klein's approach with that of Ellis. Comparison of the two texts reveals that there are actually two important aspects of this problem. First, given that there are a number of different perspectives that one could take in organizing a discussion of SLA, one must decide which perspective on SLA will result in the discussion that is most informative to the foreign-language teacher. The perspective that is adopted ultimately dictates the general organizational scheme for the entire volume.

Once having settled on a particular organizational scheme, one must then decide how individual discussions therein are to be presented. Any discussion of SLA involves a balancing act of sorts, with presentation of the concrete data of SLA on one side of the fulcrum and summary of the relevant literature on the other. Klein and Ellis differ significantly in their respective approaches to both aspects of this problem.

Ellis approaches the organizational aspect of the problem from the perspective of learner language, or interlanguage, as it has come to be called. Following an introductory chapter, in which he defines terms and introduces key issues in SLA, Ellis systematically examines factors which have been hypothesized as having some effect on the development of any given learner's interlanguage. These factors include: (1) the learner's knowledge of his native language; (2) the learner's hypothesized innate language-learning faculty; (3) the linguistic input with which the learner must interact; (4) the strategies the learner adopts in interacting with this linguistic input; and (5) formal (i.e. classroom) language instruction.

Ellis also devotes considerable attention to his 'pet' issue, variability in interlanguage. This includes a valuable discussion of the significant and uncontroversial fact that there are differences between individual learners which result in differences between the respective interlanguages produced by those learners. Unfortunately, it also includes quite a bit more discussion than necessary (at least in a book intended to be a general introduction to research in SLA) of Ellis' controversial (but not idiosyncratic) position that the linguistic competence of an individual speaker of any natural language, including interlanguage, is variable. A final chapter examines seven (so-called) theories of SLA.

Aside from the inordinate amount of space devoted to laying the foundations for and presenting his misguided Variable Competence Model,[1] the organizational scheme that Ellis has adopted is logical and easy to follow. One could not ask for more from any textbook.

Unfortunately, there is a major flaw in the way that Ellis has chosen to present the discussions with which he elaborates upon this organizational scheme. The entire text reads like a literature review chapter for a doctoral dissertation.[2] In virtually every chapter, the reader is confronted by a series of summaries of the most relevant recent research in the particular area. Although these summaries are usually woven together in a reasonably coherent manner, the result is seldom an effective discussion.[3] It is a pity that Ellis consistently fails to illustrate his points with examples from interlanguage. Without such illustrative data, the average foreign-language teacher will experience great difficulty in recognizing the connection between Ellis' discussion and the language learning problems that the teacher faces every day in the classroom. The instructor who adopts *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* as a textbook for a course in SLA will either be forced to supplement the text with the necessary illustrative data or run the risk of being inundated by cries of "**give me something that I can use in the classroom!**"

Where Ellis' text excels, Klein's also excels. Indeed the organizational scheme that Klein has adopted seems tailor-made for an audience whose primary interest is language teaching. As Klein puts it

> The focus throughout is the *learner,* who is seen as being obliged by social circumstances to apply his language learning capacity to the available linguistic material. (p. 1)

Klein's focus on the learner becomes most apparent in Part II of the book, which comprises chapters 4 through 8. Part I effectively prepares the reader for this focus on the learner by providing a clear and concise global perspective on the field of SLA. This global look at SLA is extremely useful in attempting to reconcile distinct perspectives on SLA, like those adopted by Ellis and Klein, respectively.

In chapter 1, Klein defines terms and briefly surveys attempts at theoretical explanations of SLA. Unlike Ellis, Klein carefully avoids revealing his own theoretical stance, thereby leaving the reader free

to do what Ellis has challenged him to do; to submit his own theory of SLA to careful analysis by making it explicit. Klein's chapter 2, "Six dimensions of language acquisition", is a real gem. Indeed, it is the most successful overview of the process of SLA that I have ever seen. The six dimensions of SLA are identified in the following passage:

> ... the three components which determine the process of language acquisition – propensity, language faculty, and access to the language – together with the three categories which characterize the process – its structure, tempo, and end state – comprise the six basic dimensions of language acquisition ... (p. 35)

Klein's elaboration of these six dimensions is followed by a brief chapter in which he considers which of the dimensions are easiest for the foreign-language teacher to control. If the reader is interested in 'test-driving' this text, chapters 2 and 3 are the ones to look at. I guarantee that you won't stop reading until you've reached the end of the book.

Part II, "From the learner's point of view", begins with an overview of the formidable task facing the foreign-language learner. In chapter 4, Klein analyzes this task into four fundamental problems:

(1) *the problem of analysis*:

> One of the speaker's problems is to segment the stream of acoustic signals into constituent units and to bring the latter into line with the parallel information on concurrent events which constitutes the situational context of the utterance. This is the problem of analysis. (p. 59)

(2) *the problem of synthesis*:

> Suppose a learner has coped with the problem of analysis to some modest extent: his knowledge of the language comprises fifty words: some nouns, some verbs, a few particles, and perhaps the personal pronouns *I* and *you*.. (This happens to be the vocabulary of a foreign worker who had lived in West

> Germany for five years; see Klein 1981.) In order to produce utterances that go beyond one-word sentences, the learner has to try and put these words together. This we call the learner's synthesis problem: strictly speaking, the problem of synthesis of words. A similar problem exists for sounds. (pp. 60-61)

(3) *the embedding problem*:

> ... utterances are generally embedded in copious contextual information and whenever a person intends to speak, he is bound to fit his utterance into this information flow. This is the embedding problem of the speaker. (p. 61)

(4) *the matching problem*:

> In order to improve his command of a second language, the learner must continuously compare his current language variety with the target variety. This matching problem tends to become more and more difficult as the discrepancy between the two diminishes. (p. 62)

These four problems are discussed separately in chapters 5 through 8. With respect to the manner in which those subsequent discussions are presented, Klein excels where Ellis fails. Klein makes very effective use of illustrative examples from his own research as well as from other published work. Klein doesn't overwhelm the reader with data, but he provides enough to make clear the important points he discusses. Some readers may be scared off by the fact that some of the data are from (interlanguage approximations of) languages other than English. This should not be a problem, however, because Klein has provided English glosses of the data whenever necessary.

With respect to the mechanics of presentation, both books have an occasional typographical error and Klein's prose periodically betrays the fact that his book is a revised and up-dated translation from a text originally presented in German. Neither of these problems is grave enough to distract the reader from the issues at hand. The only major distraction that this reader experienced was caused by Ellis' failure to identify in his list of references the work

he refers to in Chapter 10 as "Long (1983e)".

For the foreign-language teacher with little time to spare, I strongly suggest taking the time to read Klein's text from cover to cover. For the teacher trainer planning an introductory course in SLA, I recommend including both texts on your list of required reading. A very useful course could result from structuring the syllabus following Klein's lead and periodically drawing upon material from Ellis. In any case, the student of SLA will find both texts to be useful resources.

Reviewed by Bruce W. Hawkins
State University of New York at Buffalo

Notes

[1]For a clear discussion of the misguidedness of the Variable Competence Model, cf. Gregg (to appear).

[2]There can be no doubt that Ellis has been very thorough in surveying the literature, as a brief review of the list of references in the back of the book will reveal.

[3]Chapter 2, "The role of the first language", is a significant exception. In this particular chapter, Ellis provides a critical review of the contrastive analysis hypothesis and a useful summary of the behaviorist account of language learning from which the hypothesis was extrapolated. Because the discussion of these topics focuses on their historical importance, the summary style of presentation that Ellis has adopted is quite effective.

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Klein, W. 1981. Some rules of regular ellipsis in German. In W. Klein and W.J.M. Levelt (Eds.), *Crossing the boundaries in linguistics. Studies presented to Manfred Bierwisch.* Dordrecht: Reidel.

Oller, J.W., Jr. and P.A. Richard-Amato (Eds.). 1983. *Methods that work: a smorgasbord of ideas for language teachers.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

TECHNIQUES AND PRINCIPLES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING (Teaching Techniques in English as a Second Language Series). Diane Larsen-Freeman. New York: Oxford University Press. 142 pp.

Diane Larsen-Freeman's *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* (hereafter *TPLT*) is a volume that provides a good deal of basic, useful information about eight language teaching methods. It uses a series of observations, explanations, reviews, and questions, repeating this format throughout each chapter. The book views "method" as consisting of instructional techniques and underlying principles and selects eight methods from a spectrum of the traditional to the fashionable, both famous and infamous, from Grammar-Translation and Audiolingualism to Suggestopedia and Total Physical Response. My review begins with an examination of the format that *TPLT* uses to present the four methods just mentioned, plus Direct, Silent, Way, Community Language Learning, and Communicative methods, then moves to a discussion of some problems that exist in its assertions and philosophy, and concludes with recommendations for its use.

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction including that method's origin, its place in modern language teaching history, and references to its theoretical background, principles, and techniques. The reader then enters a hypothetical classroom to "observe" a lesson in progress. While no transcript or lesson plan is provided to orient the reader to the class, narration and description are instead combined by Larsen-Freeman to offer a clear, unbiased account of each "highly idealized session."

Following this classroom experience is a series of related observations and principles, listed side by side, ranging from single sentences to concise paragraphs. Next, principles are reviewed in the form of answers to ten practical questions. These same questions concerning the teacher, learner, teaching process, learning process,

and native and target language and culture are asked in every chapter. Techniques are then reviewed along with any essential materials, such as charts and rods for the Silent Way, or classroom set-up, such as soft music and comfortable furnishings for Suggestopedia. Collectively, these aspects comprise the heart of Larsen-Freeman's compact but thorough discussion of method, and while the descriptions are sufficient for experienced teachers, additional prior knowledge may be needed by, or assumed for, teachers in training.

The concluding sections of each chapter offer reflective questions to help the reader assimilate and synthesize the information, as well as activities designed to check the reader's understanding and apply it to his/her situation. Larsen-Freeman used such exercises successfully in an earlier work (1983), and the inclusion of this element adds a dimension of closure to the instructional value of *TPLT*. As a final feature, each chapter concludes with a short list of extra reading. The book's format is consistent and, aided by clear print and numbering, helpful sketches, and ample use of white space, allows for ease of comparing and contrasting the eight methods. For those in the TESL/TEFL community who want a clear, concise, straight-forward presentation of methods by a prominent author-educator-researcher, *TPLT* will be a welcome resource.

My response to *TPLT*, while generally positive, is slightly less than the whole-hearted endorsement given to it by Oxford University Press series editors, Russell N. Campbell and William E. Rutherford, who cite its inception as being critical to the daily needs – ideas, suggestions, explanations, demonstrations, strategies – of both practicing and student teachers and hail it as "most illuminating and imaginative in meeting a critical need" (p. viii). I feel that some problems exist in its orientation and perspective. The criticism I have of *TPLT*, therefore, is directed primarily at certain assertions and omissions in its prefaces and introductory chapter which belie its espoused neutrality and confuse me as a reader, rather than at what it

says about method – chapters two through nine are fine, within the author's chosen scope. Granted, no one book can cover all the bases; to its credit, *TPLT* does not even try. This is more of an overview or "how-to" book than an exhaustive handbook of theory and practice. And if the author and editors had limited their description of and projections for *TPLT* to being an overview or starting point in considering the eight methods and one that promotes an ease of comparison/contrast between them, I would have little argument with them.

However, Larsen-Freeman and Campbell and Rutherford create a problem by stating that *TPLT* is designed to afford practicing and pre-service teachers greater familiarity with method, their idea of a "critical need." My experience and observations suggest that explanations and examples of techniques and principles don't provide sufficient background in themselves, that the critical need is not to generate more classroom "how-to" books. Greater is the need to produce books that promote development of the background and corresponding competencies needed to create or select appropriate instructional frameworks, knowledge of method being but one aspect, as Dubin and Olshtain (1986) seem to suggest.

Larsen-Freeman also asserts "no one-to-one correspondence between technique and method" (p. xi), that techniques can be shared across methods. Her contention may have some truth to it as her cassette-chalkboard example of recording student speech demonstrates (p. 2), but not all techniques lend themselves to such crossing over; she is remiss in not providing a suitable warning example. Larsen-Freeman further admonishes the reader not to be too quick in dismissing techniques seemingly impossible to apply or adapt or those apparently incompatible with his/her beliefs, stating that "the way teachers work with them is what makes the difference" (p. 2). Agreed, this makes *a* difference ... but not *the* difference. It's the student that makes the difference (Naiman, Frölich & Stern, 1975), and there is little in *TPLT* that addresses student make-up variable, a

variable so fundamental to successful instruction.

Regarding these matters, Larsen-Freeman's statements are surprisingly incomplete and naive. The growing eclectic trend in our profession, which she is endorsing, finds the teacher picking and choosing techniques and procedures from various methods and approaches in response to the daily demands of instruction. There is a danger in this eclectic position, for without a central theoretical framework, the instructor might choose incoherent or conflicting elements that could prove harmful to language acquisition. Stephen Krashen (1983), in a side remark, has labeled this scenario "an obscenity." This concern is also reflected in the works of a number of other scholars such as H. Douglas Brown (1980), who supports only an "enlightened" eclecticism neither based on trial and error nor guided by attractiveness, but one stemming from an integrated, broadly-based theory of second language acquisition.

Even the call for a "multi-faceted" approach (Sharwood Smith, 1981) and an "efficaciously-balanced" activities approach (Harmer, 1983) to teaching are directed more toward curriculum design based on adult learning theory than endorsing the "whatever works" nature of eclecticism. I don't believe that the former justifies the latter. Earl Stevick (1975), while promoting the improvement and adaptation of some lessons and techniques, concludes that important distinctions exist between what he considers the productive versus reflective and receptive versus defensive learning of other languages. Psychologically, much more underlies the learning processes behind method than *TPLT* suggests. And borrowing from education, John Smith and Louis Heshusius (1986) trace the long-standing debate over quantitative versus qualitative research methods, going from conflict to detente to cooperation, and conclude that compatibility across paradigms is unsupportable. The implications for TESL/TEFL, based on both theory and practice, are that Grammar-Translation is incompatible with Suggestopedia, as is Audiolingualism with TPR.

Another danger for Larsen-Freeman and her editors in advocating

an eclectic philosophy resides in the identity of the reader. No distinction is made between the trained professional, one still in training, or the untrained novice abroad. The reader is encouraged not to limit his imagination – and perhaps rightly so – but is nowhere cautioned about the hazards at the other extreme, that of having no theoretical or working model. This is a "do-it-yourself" approach, at best, and lacks appropriate consideration on the author's part regarding the disparate experience of her audience.

This is also a teacher-centered view of successful teaching that evaluates on the basis of whether or not something "works" in the classroom. But successful teaching is more than the well-lubricated administration of techniques. I submit that successful teaching is more accurately a student-centered phenomenon that helps individuals move nearer overall language goals, while being consistent with a well-framed, cohesive, larger picture which includes many factors that *TPLT* doesn't address, such as the divergent cognitive and affective styles and strategies of students, the various needs each individual brings to the classroom, and curriculum/course development, to name but a few. *TPLT* doesn't attempt to be all things to all people, but when it simplistically implies that an adequate level of sufficiency can be found between its covers, it overlooks a lot.

In addition, a text intended for teacher training should clearly define its place in the field relative to its purposes and those books already in print; *TPLT* fails to do this, but it is perhaps more the fault of the series editors and publisher than the author. Yet because it asserts itself as a text that meets a critical need, one for present and future teachers, and one that promotes plurality of method, greater breadth and depth in scope and demarcation are needed. Contrary to Campbell and Rutherford's problematic assertions, there is much classroom instructional material available to our profession. However, I believe that fewer teachers lack expertise in method than in theory or curriculum.

Oxford University Press should also take greater responsibility in pointing out to the reader the place of this volume in relation to others about learning, language acquisition, curriculum, etc., in order to clarify all that is implied by method, whether or not they publish such texts themselves. For the sake of clearer reference within the profession, *TPLT* should also address the ESL-EFL-EIL distinctions more substantially (Richards, 1978), as well as provide more back-ground information about method on a "meta-level," particularly relative to the work of Edward Anthony (1963) and subsequent reformers (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Such omissions detract from the book's comprehensiveness and utility.

My suggestions for *TPLT* are influenced by all of the above, as well as TESOL publications regarding teacher certification and preparation (1975) and core standards for professional programs (1985). In all, this is not really a book best designed for the practicing professional to sample; that kind of exposure and practice regarding method should be more the province of teacher training or more detailed personal investigation. It should be useful for the inquisitive professional, however, as a quick reference text for any of a variety of purposes (e.g., closer inspection of colleagues' methods or reference citations for research). More accurately, *TPLT* is a teacher preparation text best suited for collateral reading, easy reference, and discussions at the undergraduate level, rather than being the central text around which to build a graduate course. Its implementation should follow course work in theoretical foundations and precede the in-depth study of methods of individual interest. In such contexts, *TPLT* will be a valuable resource for the TESL/TEFL community.

Reviewed by D.R.M. Stone
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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