REVIEWS

TEACHING AND LEARNING LANGUAGE

Rod Ellis. *Understanding second language acquisition.* Oxford University Press, 1985. viii + 327 pp. Paperback, R40,00.

Khurshid Ahmad, Greville Corbett, Margaret Rogers and Roland Sussex. *Computers, language learning and language teaching.* Cambridge University Press, 1985. vii + 158 pp. Paperback.

At the inaugural meeting of CITE:SIG (Computers in Training and Education: Special Interest Group) held in Pretoria recently, the guest speaker stated emphatically that only computers can solve southern Africa's problems in education. This is, of course, balderdash. First, computers are far too expensive in terms of a third-world backlog (the speaker blithely mentioned billions of rands). Second , we just do not have the trained teachers; nor do we have the people to produce the software.

If there *is* a panacea, it is likely to lie in distance education strategies, and in the proper and effective utilization of all the media at our disposal. This is not to say that computers do not have a place in the scheme of things: they do; but they need to be seen in perspective. And this perspective demands that we recognize both the potential and the limitations of the option. It also demands that we know whom we are to teach, as well as the particular modes of language acquisition within the target groups.

The watch-word, then, is not a computer cure-all, but rather an understanding of the fundamentals underlying many of the problems encountered by teachers and learners. Rod Ellis, in charge of EFL at Ealing College (and a regular, welcome visitor to these shores), provides a thorough account of what is known about SLA (second language acquisition) - although he is quick to point out that 'the study of SLA is still in its infancy and there are still more questions than answers'. His book will serve teachers who want to 'improve their understanding of how learners learn a second language'. As he states: 'unless we know for certain that the teacher's scheme really does match the learner's own way of going about things, we cannot be sure that the teaching content will contribute directly to language learning'. This applies equally, I think, to both the classroom situation and the CBE (computer based education) programme.

Of even greater interest, in the present context, is Ahmad's statement that 'schools and governments have devoted resources to "computer literacy", or knowledge about computers and computing. This effort has benefited mainly the younger generation, while older people, unless they have had a particular professional reason to become involved with computers, have been much less affected. Many teachers fall into this category' (p. 1). Note, here, that *Computers, language learning and language teaching* is referring to first-world economies: is South Africa going to astonish the world, Mr Guest Speaker - and overnight, too? I very much doubt it.

Computer aided language learning (CALL) did not, as Ahmad and his fellow authors point out, 'simply emerge ready-made' (p. 27): it has evolved over a period of time, with developments traceable back to the 1960's and to PLATO - a large system developed at the University of Illinois. What, though, is the relationship between computers, natural language, and the learner? It is difficult to disagree, for example, that 'future developments in CALL must be based on adequate models of the three corners of a triangle (Learner, language, computer) *and* on the relationships between them':

> So far, we know a considerable amount about the way computers work. We know much less about natural language and even less about the process of language learning. The gaps are therefore for theoretical linguists and psycholinguists to fill by building models which can serve as a basis for more 'intelligent' computer programs.
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> (pp. 45-46)

The point of departure, then, would seem to be 'process' - not computer process, but that of language learning. And here Ahmad

et al are particularly valuable, discussing as they do 'medium versus message' (p. 55), 'ergonomic' (p. 58) and 'pedagogic' (p. 61) considerations, and a CALL package named GERARD (pp. 64-76). There is also an interesting discussion of 'computers, computer programming and programming languages' in Chapter 6, and a well-reasoned section on the scope of the computer in language teaching. Added to this are a futurist peek at developing areas pertaining to CALL (Chapter 8), a list of useful addresses (pp. 144-148), an extensive bibliography, and a handy index. The result is one of the most sensible and stimulating works on the subject to have emerged in the past decade.

In much the same vein as Ahmad, Rod Ellis argues that 'different tasks require the utilization of different kinds of knowledge' (p. 214). First, therefore, it must be recognized that teaching is not the same as learning: in devising a teaching programme it is necessary to take into consideration how learners learn; but it is also desirable to take into account non-learner factors. Thus, where the route is concerned, formal instruction appears to have no effect:

> The overall sequence of development associated with natural communicative language use does not change, while only a few minor and temporary differences in the acquisition of specific grammatical features have been observed. Classroom SLA appears to involve the same processing strategies as naturalistic SLA. Where the rate/success is concerned, instruction is facilitative, although only in terms of relative utility, not in terms of absolute effects.
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> (p. 245)

Pertinently, Ellis warns that the above argument must be treated tentatively, as there 'has been little empirical research'.

From the foregoing, it would appear that the author – quite rightly – views SLA as a complex process, involving many interrelated factors. And, as the greater proportion of our population uses the language as ESL (if not EFL), the first chapter of *Understanding second language acquisition* (namely, 'Key issues in second language acquisition') is immediately relevant. The issues referred to by Ellis include: 'What is second language acquisition?; 'SLA as a uniform phenomenon'; 'the centrality of syntax and morphology'; 'competence vs performance'; 'acquisition vs learning'; and 'contextual variation in language – learner language'. Later chapters deal cogently with aspects such as 'Interlanguage and the "natural" route of development'; 'Individual learner differences and SLA'; 'Learner strategies'; and 'Theories of SLA'. There is also,

for the newcomer to the field, a more than useful glossary and an exhaustive bibliography.

In Chapter 7 ('Learner strategies'), Ellis considers the internal process which account for how learners handle input data and utilize L2 resources in the production of messages (p. 164). A complete understanding of SLA, it is argued, involves both showing how the input is shaped to make it learnable (an 'interorganism perspective'), and how the learner works on the input to turn it into intake (an 'intra-organism perspective'). There is sufficient in this section alone to question any assumption that computers and CALL, as instruments, will be able to resolve the education crisis in southern Africa.

Needed, rather (and particularly with regard to the teaching of English), is a sober, fundamentalist approach: careful, painstaking (and centrally funded) research of the needs of L2 learners; a decision as to what *approaches* are necessary to meet these needs; and a willingness to explore and utilize all the resources of a multimedia environment. The two works mentioned here might well be a good place to start. Certainly, *Computers, language learning and language teaching* and *Understanding second language acquisition* belong - well-thumbed - on the desks of all teachers (and would-be teachers) of English in South Africa.

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Wolfgang Klein. *Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 191 pp. Paperback.
Part I ('The process of language acquisition') comprises three chapters. In the first chapter various types of language acquisition are considered, namely first language acquisition (FLA), second language acquisition (SLA) and re-acquisition (RA). Several important theories are outlined, giving the reader an idea of what researchers in second language acquisition were mainly concerned with during the past decade.

In chapter two Klein discusses the three components which determine the process of language acquisition - propensity, language faculty and access to the language - as well as the three categories which characterize the process - its structure, tempo and