

PRINCIPLES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (SLA): History and ELLIS Design

A: An overview of language teaching approaches and methods

1. The Grammar Translation Method:

The dominant method for the first half of the 20th century.

- Was based on how classical languages were taught.
- Focused on reading, writing, and grammar; no emphasis on oral communication skills.
- Learning about language as an academic exercise rather than learning language as a practical skill.

Replaced in the 1950's by the Audiolingual Method (ALM).

2. The Audiolingual Method:

The first method to be based on a theory of learning (behaviorism), and a theory of language (structural linguistics).

- Language learning is basically a matter of developing a set of habits through drilling.
- Priority was given to spoken rather than written language.
- Teaching of explicit grammar rules avoided.
- Student errors were undesirable and to be avoided at all costs.

ALM was severely criticized in the 1960's as being based on inaccurate descriptions of the learning process and the nature of language. However, it is still popular today in some quarters, and a lot of CALL is based on its principles of learning.

3. Cognitive Code Learning

This approach briefly replaced behaviorism in the late 1960s.

- Based on cognitive psychology for its learning theory and Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar for its theory of language.
- Emphasized thinking, comprehension, and memory.
- Promoted language learning as an active mental process rather than a process of habit formation.
- Grammar was back in fashion, and classroom activities were designed to encourage learners to work out grammar rules for themselves through inductive reasoning.

Although it never took off in a big way, it is very close to current approaches to language learning.

5. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

In the 1970's the pendulum swung back again, away from grammar and towards language as communication. It is still the dominant approach in classrooms over the world. It is heavily influenced by Steven Krashen's views of language learning.

- Meaning is emphasized over form, fluency over accuracy
- The teaching of grammar is considered unnecessary
- Authentic texts are considered important for the learner
- Listening and speaking took priority over reading and writing
- The notion of comprehensible input became very influential (and still is today)

In the 1990s, task-based learning became a popular way of implementing CLT in the classroom, and is still a dominant methodology.

4. An Integrated Approach

In the late 1990s there was again a reaction against some of the extreme ideas outlawing the teaching of grammar, and a return to the ideas of the cognitive code approach of the 1960s and '70s.

- An attempt to reconcile the need for learners to be exposed to comprehensible input, use language to communicate, and the need to understand the underlying grammar (focus on form)
- Focus on form refers to the practice of drawing students' attention to important features of the language within the context of meaning-focused activities
- A recognition that both meaning and form are important
- Noticing plays an important role in converting input into intake

B: The ELLIS Difference: Distinctive Design and Methodology Features

Second language acquisition research base

ELLIS is broadly based on a **cognitive model of language learning**. The following conditions are thought to be necessary for second language acquisition to take place effectively:

1. Comprehensible input

- Language learners must have access to large amounts of **comprehensible input**
- For acquisition to occur, learners must be exposed to and understand the content of language which is just above their current proficiency level.

ELLIS does this in two ways:

- It provides the learner with **authentic samples of spoken English** in its full-motion video clips that focus on situations and topics of general interest and usefulness.
- It creates a multimedia environment in its script pages that provides a range of **learning supports** (slow audio, on-line vocabulary help, native language translation, text with graphics and audio, culture notes), all of which increase the comprehensibility of the input for the learner.

These features allow learners to interact with the input at their own pace, and according to their own **learning style**. This process plays a key role in **converting input into intake**.

2. The role of noticing in converting input into intake

- In addition to understanding the semantic content of the input, learners must attend to key features of its form.
- Research studies have shown that learners who are exposed only to comprehensible input without receiving any focus-on- form instruction fail to develop accuracy in speaking and writing.

ELLIS draws learners' attention to key language forms by highlighting grammatical and phonological features in its script pages.

- These features are explained in a series of **inductive, interactive tutorials**.
- These tutorials present **contextualized samples of language** from the video clips.
- They guide the learners towards a **discovery of the rules and patterns** involved.
- They probe their understanding through **interactive quiz items** with **specific feedback**.
- They offer extensive opportunities for **controlled practice**.

3. Dual processing to promote fluency as well as accuracy

Understanding the content as well as the forms of the language is necessary, but not sufficient if the learner is to achieve a degree of fluency in English.

Second language learners use two different processing systems when producing language:

- a **rule-based system** that **focuses on form** to promote **accuracy**
- a **memory-based system** that draws on **prefabricated chunks of language** to achieve **fluency**.

ELLIS helps learners to develop both systems:

- **inductive** grammar and pronunciation **tutorials**, summary pages, and practice sections develop an understanding of the rules and patterns of the rule-based system essential for accuracy
- **highlighted phrases** in the script pages, communication and vocabulary tutorials expose learners to the **speech acts** and **idiomatic expressions** in the memory-based system that are drawn on to achieve fluency.

4. Output

- An additional condition for acquisition to take place successfully is for learners to have opportunities to produce the language that they have **converted from input to intake**, using both the **rule-based system** and **memorized chunks of language**.
- Without such opportunities, learners typically fail to achieve acceptable levels of fluency or accuracy, even with exposure to large quantities of comprehensible input.

ELLIS provides learners with extensive **opportunities for controlled production** in a psychologically **unthreatening environment**.

- It uses its unique **role play and smart recorder features**.
- This gives learners the confidence to move eventually from **controlled to automatic processing**.

Focusing on learners' individual needs

ELLIS' multi-media language learning environment allows the instruction to be adapted to the individual learner's **learning style, language background, interests, skill level, and on-line performance**. Such a high level of customization results in increased motivation and enhanced productivity from the learner.

ELLIS meets the needs of individual learners in the following ways:

1. Learning styles

- **Auditory, visual, and kinesthetic** sensory preferences are all catered to.
- **Linear learners** are encouraged to access the material by working through the units and lessons **sequentially**.
- **Exploratory learners** can use the **skill path** to navigate through the materials, or make use of the extensive network of **hyperlinks** to create their own path.
- **Inductive learners** can access the tutorials that use a **discovery approach** to learning.
- **Deductive learners** can use the **summary pages** for each skill.
- **Global learners** enjoy the communication and vocabulary tutorials that rely on the **memory-based system**.
- **Analytic learners** appreciate the **rule-based** grammar and suprasegmentals **tutorials**.

2. Language background

- Learners receive directions, tutorial instruction, and feedback in their **native language**.
- Grammar and pronunciation **tutorials are customized** to draw learners' attention to those features of the language which are known to be problematical for them, based on their language background.
- **Negative evidence** is customized to specific languages.
- Learners can focus on the areas of the language that they need help with.
- They are not required to work through sections which do not present a challenge for them.

3. Skill level

- Some tutorials include materials and tasks for learners with higher skill levels.
- Learners create their own **electronic personalized vocabulary notebook**, recording the words and phrases that they wish to learn.
- These items are available for creating **customized vocabulary quizzes**.

4. Performance

ELLIS tutorial instruction, practice, and quizzes adapt to the individual learners' performance.

- If learners responses to probe items demonstrate understanding of the concept, they can move to the practice section.
- The number of practice items presented is **calibrated to the learner's responses**
- A learner who is struggling in the practice section or lesson quiz may have access to **remedial instruction**.
- **Quiz items** can be **customized** to include those items which have caused difficulties in the practice sections.

Other design features

1. Immediate feedback

- In the practice section of each lesson for all five skill areas, learners receive immediate feedback on their responses.
- In the grammar and pronunciation tutorials, learners receive an explanation of why their response was correct or incorrect.
- Learners receive feedback on their general progress through the materials when they access their scores for each practice section and quiz and test,
- They can review which items they got wrong.
- The scores on their pre-, post-, and unit tests are broken down by skill.

2. Integrated skills

- Learning is enhanced when the materials are designed in such a way as to integrate the various skills.
- ELLIS does this by contextualizing all instructional materials within the initial video input for each lesson.
- No area of the language or skill is developed in isolation from its content base.