A response to Ellis: The dangers of a narrowly-focused SLA canon

Jason Anderson

I thank Rod Ellis (2020) for taking time to read and respond to my critique of his original work (2019). However, while he grasps some of the aspects of the TATE framework that I propose as an alternative (Anderson 2020), there is evidence in his response that he misconstrues it, and assigns my nuanced discussion of explicit and implicit processes within what I called a 'TSLT-mainly framework' (p. 183) to the category of 'structural approach', which he then argues is not as effective as his proposal, drawing on familiar arguments used against structural approaches. First I consider his responses to my two criticisms of his model, and then I sound a word of caution regarding the dangers of a narrowly-focused SLA canon that frequently interprets 'learning' as acquisition of morphosyntax, and 'use' as spoken production to the detriment of other aspects of language.

Firstly, Ellis acknowledges that I 'correctly' point out his neglect of lexis in his framework, and also acknowledges that lexis is clearly amenable to synthetic, sequenceable instruction. He notes that 'the early stages of acquisition are lexical rather than grammatical' (p. 191), even though his model, paradoxically, rejects any attempt at planned, sequenced instruction at such stages. His response to this acknowledged weakness is to state that 'lexis can be acquired naturally through performing tasks', or 'through out-of-class activities' (p. 191), apparently leaving to the vagaries of chance what has been argued to be *the* central element of language learning and use (Lewis 1993), what Crystal (2009: 7) has called 'the Everest of language'.

With regard to my second criticism, this is stated in my article as follows:

> … Ellis appears to overlook the fact that, even when used within a synthetic grammar curriculum, tasks can retain [misreported by Ellis as 'will retain'] the primarily meaningful communication and holistic language use that allows for implicit learning to occur alongside the explicit practice of specific structures. (Anderson, ibid. p. 177)

While he cites his own study (Ellis, Li and Zhu 2019) as contrary evidence that explicit instruction before a task may reduce overall 'quality' of language use (operationalised as complexity, accuracy and fluency), other research indicates that it does not (Mochizuki and Ortega 2008; Sangarun 2005), validating my claim that such tasks 'can retain' meaningfulness (not that they *always will*; multiple factors are likely to be involved). Nonetheless, I agree with Ellis that further research would be useful in this area, and would argue that such research should embrace wider conceptions of 'quality' (for example, including lexical range, as recommended by Skehan, 2009), and wider sources of evidence of appropriate use, including writing tasks. Interestingly, the fact that Ellis chooses Ellis et al. (ibid.) to argue against TATE reveals a misunderstanding of my proposed framework. Those learners in the task-only group that produced what Ellis interprets as higher 'quality' language use underwent treatment wholly consistent with the TATE framework (see Figure 1). Thus, somewhat ironically, his example provides evidence of both the efficacy and flexibility of TATE, and also evidence that he has misunderstood the role of Analysis in TATE – that 'it may be retrospective (analysis of text), and may be preparative (as preparation for a task in TSLT)' (Anderson, ibid. p. 181), and that it assigns no less emphasis to lexis than it does to grammar.

The 'task only' treatment described in Ellis, Li and Zhu 2019: 42	TATE phase	Extract from Anderson 2020
Pre-text introduction to lexis. Brainstorming to raise schemata and stimulate interest in the task.	Text	'pre-text preparation activities may involve lexical work (for example, brainstorming) or schema-raising (for example, thematic discussion)'
Teacher read out the text of the task as a dictagloss activity.		'involves a written or aural text (recorded or live)'
Teacher presents the text on slides with vocabulary annotations.	Analysis	'analysis of specific features of grammar or lexis found in (or related to) the text(s) that are likely to be useful during the subsequent task phase'
Learners practise retelling the story in pairs and add an appropriate ending.	Task	'a meaningful opportunity for extensive productive skills practice, either written or spoken'
Each pair presents their version of the story to the class.	Exploration	'The phase may include: … 2. learner-centred presentations … of outcomes of tasks or projects when appropriate'

Figure 1. Treatment steps of the 'task only' group in Ellis et al. (2019) are consistent with the TATE framework.

Perhaps the biggest concern I have with Ellis's conception of language learning and use—something very evident in his response to my article[1]—is his consistently narrow focus on the implicit 'acquisition' of grammar for spoken use, frequently neglecting the importance of lexical learning, and overlooking the fact that explicit knowledge is accessible for much written language use (Williams 2012). The narrow focus of cognitive SLA has been criticised before, especially during the sociocultural turn in SLA (see Block 2003; Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007). It may require further reappraisal as we move into wider understandings of the role of diverse Englishes, and the use of English resources translingually within wider conceptions of multilingualism worldwide (Anderson 2018). As more and more additional language use today involves technology-mediated, written, multimodal discourse (Leung and Scarino 2016), I suggest that the TATE framework, which offers a translanguaging-inclusive, lexically-aware, integrated skills conception of language learning, may be more suited to curriculum design for 21st century classrooms than frameworks based on the spoken morphosyntactic bias of cognitive SLA research.

Notes

1. For example, Ellis's frequent discussion of 'fluency' (n = 11) and 'fluent' (n = 2) communication implies spoken use only, while there is not a single reference to written language use in the piece. His choice of terms such as 'structural/structure-based approach' (n = 9), 'structural/structure-based module/component' (n = 14), 'target structure(s)' (n = 7) and

grammar/grammatical features (n = 12) all imply an interest primarily in morphosyntax, rather than lexis/lexical elements, 3 of 7 mentions of which refer to my critique of his neglect of these.

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