

Insights into the Field of Applied Linguistics:

An Interview with Rod Ellis

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Introduction

I am delighted to contribute to this special edition journal to honor the career and retirement of our esteemed colleague, Professor Toshiaki Inada. I have had the privilege of working under Professor Inada the past five years, in which he served as the Director of the Center for Language Studies at Nagasaki University. During this time, Professor Inada always supported me in my teaching and research and I am extremely grateful for everything he did for me. Among the many nice memories we shared, one of the most notable occurred two years ago when one of the preeminent applied linguists in the world, Professor Rod Ellis, visited us at Nagasaki University. Professor Ellis gave an excellent talk on 'Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Methodology' and we had a chance to discuss many other issues in the field of Applied Linguistics while he was here. In June of 2016, I saw Professor Ellis' keynote speech at a conference in Kyoto and was inspired to explore his great mind for further insights into the field of Applied Linguistics. I dedicate this interview to Professor Inada, who I know will be interested in hearing what Professor Ellis has to say.

Before starting the interview, I would like to provide some background information on my interviewee: Distinguished Professor Roderick James Ellis. As described in his University of Auckland faculty profile online, Professor Ellis' research interests include second language acquisition (SLA), individual learner differences (IDs), form-focused instruction (FFI), teacher education, course design and methodology of language teaching. In addition to his position in the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics in University of Auckland, he also helps run the MA in TESOL program in Anaheim University and is a visiting professor at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) as part of China's Chang Jiang Scholars Program. He also holds an annual seminar at Showa Women's University, Tokyo, Japan.

Professor Ellis has published widely (i.e., over a hundred articles and in excess of thirty books) on second language acquisition, language teaching and teacher education. Some of his notable books include *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* (British Association of Applied Linguistics Prize 1986) and *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (Duke of Edinburgh Prize 1995), *Task-Based Learning and Teaching* (2003), and *Analyzing Learner Language* (with Gary Barkhuizen) in 2005. A second edition of *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* was published in 2008 and *Implicit and Explicit Knowledge in Language Learning, Testing and Teaching* (with Shawn Loewen, Catherine Elder, Rosemary Erlam, Jenefer Philp and Hayo Reinders) in 2009. More recent publications include *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy* in 2012 and *Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition Research* (with Natsuko Shintani) in 2014.

Professor Ellis also published several English language textbooks, including *Impact Grammar* in 1998. He is currently on the editorial board of five journals. A second edition of *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* was published in 2015. In 2013, he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. In addition to his current position in New Zealand, he has worked in schools in Spain and Zambia and in universities in the United Kingdom, Japan and the United States. He has also conducted numerous consultancies and seminars throughout the world and now spends a lot of time travelling the globe giving keynote presentations on the Applied Linguistics conference circuit.

On Applied Linguistics

Pino Cutrone (PC): First off, Dr. Ellis, I know there are great demands on your time and I just want to say how much I appreciate you taking the time to answer my questions; I feel very fortunate to have this opportunity. To start with, I'd like to ask you some 'big picture' questions. For instance, throughout your career which has spanned over 40 years, what do you see as the major developments in the field of Applied Linguistics? Where are we now and what major challenges lie ahead?

Rod Ellis (RE): It is difficult to fix the date that Applied Linguistics got started

but it is a young discipline that arose after the second world war when there was a growing need for English language instruction and a strongly felt need for a theoretical base to inform pedagogy. Initially Applied Linguistics was 'linguistics applied' but it has increasingly drawn on a variety of disciplinary areas – psychology, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and education – and it has also moved away from its origins in theory-informed language teaching. It is now a highly disparate discipline incorporating language testing, language policy, lexicography, stylistics, forensic linguistics etc. in accordance with Brumfit's (1995) definition - 'the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems, in which language is a central issue' (p. 27). My own area of Applied Linguistics is 'second language acquisition', which has become an almost a separate area of enquiry. I foresee continued balkanization of Applied Linguistics to the point where it may not make any sense to continue to talk of it as a single 'discipline'. Perhaps this does not matter, though. It can serve as a cover term for a variety of different lines of enquiry for a variety of language-related purposes.

PC: In my English Language Teaching (ELT) career in Japan, I have noticed a significant gap between research and practice and have begun to suspect that accomplished researchers do not necessarily make for the most passionate of teachers (and vice versa). That is, researching and teaching would seem to require two completely different skill sets, not to mention personality types. I am wondering what your thoughts are on the relationship between research and practice in the field of Applied Linguistics? Is it realistic to expect teachers to conduct action research and publish and share their work? Furthermore, how can we get research to better inform practice?

RE: I agree that research and teaching constitute very different kinds of 'practices' and mastery of one will certainly not guarantee mastery of the other. In my professional life I have moved from being a teacher, to teacher educator and finally to researcher. But as a researcher I have always been concerned with issues that I saw as important to pedagogy – for example, how to teach grammar so that students can actually use the grammar they are taught, and how to develop communicative ability in the kinds of classrooms one finds in Japan. I think teachers need to draw primarily on their own experience of teaching and lan-

guage learning. But I also think that research has a role to play in helping them to reflect on their teaching and take up the challenge of making innovations in how they teach. Research only offers 'provisional specifications' - ideas, principles, techniques - that teachers will need to try out and evaluate in their own classrooms. Teachers do not need research but they will probably be better teachers if they are prepared to give research some attention.

On Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

PC: Speaking of research failing to inform practice, I want to now ask you about Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which you are a well-known proponent of (Ellis 2003, 2009). First of all, could you briefly describe some of the main principles of TBLT and what makes it different from other approaches to language teaching?

RE: TBLT differs from mainstream approaches to language in that it views language as a tool for making meaning rather than as a set of objects to be studied and learned. It is premised on the principle that learning a second language – like learning a first language – takes place most efficiently through the effort made to communicate in that language. Thus whereas traditional approaches are based on the assumption that learners need to learn some vocabulary and grammar before they can communicate, TBLT claims that language is learned as a by-product of trying to communicate. A 'task' is an instructional activity that is used to create a context for meaningful communication. Learners learn incidentally as they work to achieve the outcome of the task and also have their attention attracted to linguistic form as they communicate. TBLT draws on research in second language acquisition and in education, both of which emphasize the importance of learning-through-doing.

PC: As I alluded to above, for many years now there has been a great deal of empirical evidence advocating TBLT over other approaches (Long 1985, Crookes 1986, Long & Crookes 1992, Skehan 1996, Willis 1998, 2000), yet its use in the classroom has not been widespread and very few 'real' task-based materials currently exist on the market. In your opinion, why has TBLT failed to take off?

RE: TBLT has become widespread in some teaching contexts – in the Flanders region of Belgium as documented in van den Branden (2006) and, to a more limited extent, in Hong Kong. But it is true that major publishers have not taken up TBLT. The fundamental reason for the lack of uptake is the entrenchment of transmission-oriented styles of teaching in educational systems - not just in the language classroom but throughout the school curriculum and very notably in Japan. In transmission teaching a body of knowledge is specified item by item, students are encouraged to study and memorize each item, and then are tested on which items they have learned. TBLT requires a totally different approach. There is no specification of the objects to be learned. Learning takes place experientially and holistically. Teachers used to the transmission style of teaching do not find it easy to adopt TBLT. And in any case they have a duty to prepare students for formal high-stakes tests. Publishers cater to what teachers say that they want and need. And what teachers want is what they already know. The result is the endless cloning of the same old teaching materials in the books that publishers publish. The successful uptake of TBLT will require teacher education programs that take account of all the factors that have been shown to influence whether an innovation is successful. Such programs do not really exist.

PC: What are some of the misconceptions of TBLT?

RE: I published an article in 2009 in what I saw as a number of misconceptions that teachers have about TBLT. Two of the most common misconceptions are that TBLT consists of putting students into groups to perform speaking tasks and that there is no grammar in TBLT. In fact, TBLT need not involve group work. Prabhu (1987), who was one of the first to attempt a full-scale task-based course in a state school, developed an approach that involved only lock-step (whole-class) teaching. Nor does TBLT only involve speaking tasks - tasks can be designed for any of the four language skills and in many case involved integrating skills. Input-based tasks (involving listening and reading) have an important role to play in TBLT especially with beginner-level learners, with large classes, and in traditional, teacher-centred classrooms. Regarding grammar, although there is no attempt to teach grammar systematically in TBLT, there is in fact plenty of attention paid to it. In TBLT, however, in contrast to traditional language teaching, at-

tention to grammar is embedded in the actual performance of tasks through, for example, corrective feedback on learner errors.

PC: Do you buy into the argument that TBLT is not suited for Japanese learners and teachers? Why or why not?

RE: I don't think Japanese learners and teachers are any different from learners and teachers in other Asian countries – or indeed in any part of the world. Transmission-style foreign language teaching is firmly embedded in Japan but it is in Europe and America too. Perhaps, though, rather than a wholesale switch to TBLT what is needed is a mixed approach. In some of my recent writing on TBLT – where I had Japan very much in mind – I have been arguing for a modular curriculum. This would consist of a primary task-based module and a secondary more traditional module. The bulk of class time would be spent implementing the task-based module but more traditional, object-oriented learning activities could be introduced for self-study and especially for homework. I think there is a psycholinguistic rationale for this. Object-oriented learning does help the development of a second language even if it is never sufficient by itself. It might also make the introduction of TBLT more acceptable in a country like Japan.

PC: I know the mention of 'task' in some ELT circles sometimes conjures up simplistic images of 'communicative fun' and it seems that TBLT is not always recognized as a serious and systematic approach to language learning; any thoughts on this?

RE: One of the points emerging from evaluations of attempts to introduce TBLT is that teachers often do not have a clear understanding of what a 'task' is or its purpose. Again, this problem can only be addressed through teacher education. In my own work with teachers I spend a lot of time helping them to distinguish between a 'task' and an 'exercise' and to understand the rationale for using tasks in the classroom.

On English Language Education in Japan

PC: I have read a great deal about Japan's failure as a nation to produce competent users of English (Ellis 1991, Okushi 1990, Farooq 2007). Do you think this is true? If so, why?

RE: I think it is easy to overstate Japan's 'failure' to produce competent users of English. My impression is that over the years there are more and more Japanese people who can use English to communicate and are prepared to try to do so. Let me tell you about the research of one of my PhD students. She was interested in investigating why some Japanese high school students are successful in developing high levels of communicative ability. She located seven high school students (all female) with strong communicative abilities and interviewed them in English for two hours to explore why and how they had achieved this ability. Now what struck me was that when she asked their teachers about these students their teachers told her that they were just very average students. In other words their teachers had no idea that they had students with real communicative ability in their classrooms. I think this says everything. In terms of how these students were expected to learn in the classroom these students were indeed just average. But in terms of what they had been doing outside the classroom they were extremely successful learners. There are many successful Japanese learners of English but the source of their success is typically not what went on in their English classes at school.

PC: If you were in a position to do so, how would you go about reforming English Language Education in Japan?

RE: I think Japan might like to consider what some other countries do – namely setting up special secondary schools that focus on the teaching of foreign languages. This might help to develop a cadre of highly proficient citizens who could work in enterprises (including schools as teachers) where knowledge of foreign languages was needed. But central to effective language teaching is effective teacher education. I think Japan should investigate what constitutes 'best practice' in language teacher education and then proceed to find ways of introducing

'best practice' into teacher education programmes in Japan. I am not convinced – from what I have seen – that teacher education for languages is working very well.

PC: In an effort to catch up to other Asian nations like China and Korea, the Japanese government has proposed changes like starting introductory classes in the 3rd grade and making English compulsory from the 5th grade (Miller 2014). Is starting earlier really the answer?

RE: There is no evidence that starting earlier results in higher levels of ultimate achievement in learning a foreign language and I suspect that when Japan comes to evaluate the impact of introducing English as a mandatory subject in the elementary school they will find the same as other evaluation studies. For an early start to have any chance of enhancing language learning outcomes it needs to ensure (1) that English is treated as a tool for communicating (which actually comes naturally to younger learners) rather than as a set of objects to be mastered and also crucially (2) that there is extensive exposure to English outside the classroom, primarily through an extensive reading program. Without ensuring these elements are present I see no real advantage of starting English in the elementary school.

On the Use of Technology in ELT

PC: Over the past decade, I have seen the use of technology expand exponentially in the language classroom. I, personally, have mixed feelings about this. Of course, I can fully appreciate the fact that new technologies can be useful in that they provide learners with new mediums for meaningful language exchanges; however, I wonder if we have gone a bit overboard and are using technology in some cases just for the sake of it. For instance, in English Communication classes in Japan, wouldn't it make more sense (and better use of class time) for learners to communicate with their teachers and peers face-to-face instead of doing activities on a website or app (which they can do as supplemental activities outside of class)? What are your thoughts on this and what role do you feel technology should play in language learning moving forward?

RE: Clearly technology has a role to play in language learning. It serves as a source of the rich exposure to input that is essential for successful language learning. It can also offer opportunities for interaction in chat rooms or in online video contexts. I have seen Google Docs used very effectively to give corrective feedback to learners as they write online. So technology enhanced instruction need not exclude the teacher and can certainly provide opportunities for the kinds of interaction that we know promote learning. That said, however, ideally technology should not be seen as a replacement for face-to-face instruction but as a supplement to it.

Conclusion

PC: On a more personal note, I wonder what you have planned in the next few months in terms of speaking engagements? Also, if I may, I'd like to ask you to share a little bit about some of the research projects you are currently working on?

RE: I am about to leave my position at the University of Auckland and take up a position as Research Professor at Curtin University in Perth, Australia in early September in 2016. So at this moment I am completing teaching my final courses at Auckland. Later in the year (November) I will be visiting Tokyo to teach a weekend seminar on TBLT. I continue to travel widely to conferences and seminars around the world. My latest book is "Becoming and Being an Applied Linguist: The Life Histories of Some Applied Linguists" to be published by John Benjamins later this year. This is a collection of professional autobiographies by well-known applied linguists (including myself). I am also planning another book on task-based language teaching.

PC: First of all, congratulations on your new post and on the publication of yet another book, Professor Ellis! The book sounds fascinating and will surely attract a great many readers in the field of Applied Linguistics; I can't wait to get myself a copy. Now, last but certainly not least, on to my final question: as you know, our beloved Professor Inada will be retiring at the end of March, 2018. Is there anything you would like to say to him?



My Two Favorite Linguists: Professor Inada (left) and Professor Ellis (right)

RE: Coming to the end of a long career can be a relief but also a little frightening and challenging. I know because I too am not so far away from the end of my own career. I know that Professor Inada will take great satisfaction from his achievements in his long career and will be much missed. I hope that he will enjoy many fruitful years ahead in the 'new life' of his retirement.

PC: Thank you again for your time Professor Ellis. It has truly been a pleasure, not to mention a tremendous educational experience, to hear your thoughts on many of the issues I have been pondering recently. We look forward to welcoming you to Nagasaki University again in the not too distant future.

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