

Rod Ellis Interview with *The English Connection*

Conducted by Dr. Andrew White

In July, *The English Connection* was fortunately able to reach Professor Ellis for the following interview. The interview was conducted by the editor-in-chief. — Ed.

The English Connection (TEC): As one of two plenary speakers for KOTESOL's 2019 International Conference, what can attendees look forward to in your presentations?

Professor Ellis: The main foci of my work at this time are task-based language teaching (TBLT) and how to assess L2 learners' pragmatic competence. My interest in TBLT is a long-standing one and has grown out of my earlier work in second language (L2) acquisition. In my plenary, I will attempt to provide a historical perspective on TBLT – describing where it came from and suggesting where it is going. My interest in the assessment of L2 learners' pragmatic competence is more recent; it is the focus of a current research project. It grew out of my earlier research into the measurement of implicit and explicit grammatical knowledge and was motivated by the fact that current tests of pragmatic knowledge are really only tests of meta-pragmatic (i.e., explicit) knowledge. In my workshop, I will describe the tests I am developing and give participants the opportunity to try them out.



TEC: In addition, how else will you be spending your time in Korea during the two-day conference?

Prof. Ellis: KOTESOL is one of the major TESOL conferences in Asia and attracts teachers and researchers from a range of countries. It will provide me with the opportunity to meet old friends, exchange ideas, and just enjoy their company. I am sure I will also make some new friends. I will especially look out for papers on TBLT and on the teaching of pragmatics. I will also be interested in papers that discuss the teaching of English at the primary level. I am currently

the joint editor of a new journal – *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*: <https://www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/2589207x> – published by John Benjamin and will be on the look-out for potential articles!

TEC: Your research career and expertise spans several broad areas, including SLA, classroom interaction and comprehension, focus-on-form (FoF), task-based learning, and corrective feedback. What are your impressions, past and present, of the Korean ELT scene, when viewed from some of these areas?

Prof. Ellis: All my research has been motivated by a wish to make language teaching effective. I became interested in second language acquisition research when teaching in Zambia, and it became clear to me that very often my students did not learn what I taught them! Grammar teaching seemed to have very little impact on accuracy if learners were focused on communicating meaningfully – even after plentiful practice. I realized that I needed a better understanding of how languages are learned. My first research project, however, focused on how children acquired English as their first language, and only later did I start to inquire into second language acquisition. It soon became clear that much of what I was seeing was very similar to what happens in L1 acquisition – similar errors, variability, the same transitional constructions, formulaic chunks. One of my first books – *Classroom Second Language Development* – documented how three children gradually acquired English in a classroom context in London. Research into L2 acquisition led me to ask some fundamental questions about language teaching. How can teachers ensure that learners engage in the kinds of interaction that we know facilitate acquisition? What is the role of corrective feedback? Should we teach grammar, and if so, how? What general principles can inform instruction? The focus of these questions was on the conditions that teachers need to foster in the classroom to facilitate acquisition, if we view language teaching as involving both the “what” and the “how.” My focus has been primarily on the “how.” In this respect, I think I differ from what I see as the overriding concern with the promotion of the coursebooks that will be on display at conferences like KOTESOL and JALT. Of course, teachers need materials and coursebooks,

but ultimately it is what they do with them that matters more. Acquisition takes place from within the interactions that occur in the classroom, so what requires our attention most is how to ensure the right kinds of interaction.

TEC: Could you explain your research on the role of explicit and implicit knowledge? How is a focus-on-form (FoF) involved in this interplay?

Prof. Ellis: Implicit knowledge of a language is knowledge that is tacit, automatic, and thus available for use, without effort, in everyday communication. It is acquired incidentally (i.e., without conscious effort). Explicit knowledge is declarative; it involves controlled processing and so only available in those uses of language – such as careful writing and language tests – that allow time for deliberate access. It is acquired consciously and intentionally. A learner can have explicit knowledge of a particular feature (such as third person –s) but no implicit knowledge of it, and as a result, will only manifest knowledge of it in controlled language use. Different types of instruction cater to the acquisition of the two types of knowledge. Explicit grammar teaching – what is sometimes called focus-on-forms (FonFs) – is likely to result only in explicit knowledge. Meaning-based approaches such as immersion and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) help the development of implicit knowledge. But such approaches, while effective in developing learners’ communicative abilities, often do not result in very high levels of linguistic competence. So the question is what else is needed?

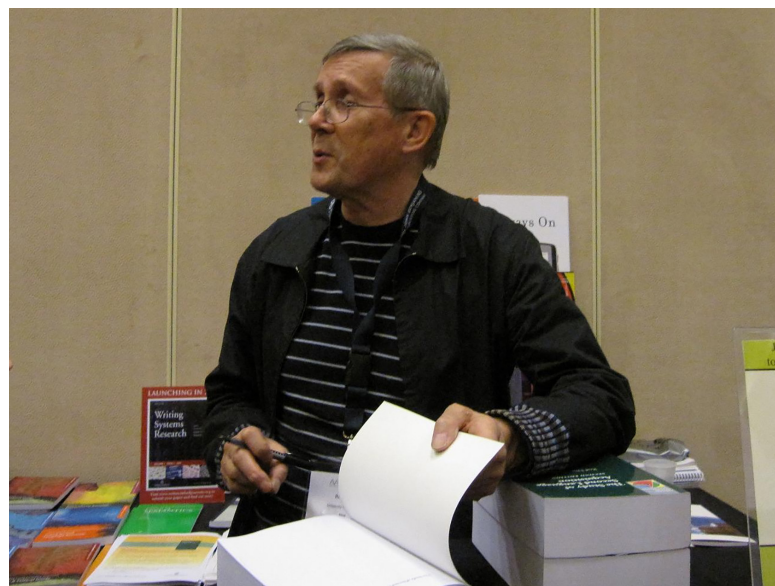
There are two answers to this question. One is TBLT. TBLT differs from other meaning-based approaches in that it recognizes that learners need to attend to form as well as meaning. This is achieved by means of focus-on-form (FonF) – that is, ways are found to draw learners’ attention to form *while* they are

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communicating, for example, by means of corrective feedback. A task requires a primary focus on meaning, but this does not exclude attention to form. The other way is to complement a meaning-based approach such as immersion with some explicit language teaching to remedy the grammatical gaps that appear in learners’ L2 knowledge. In this way, even if learners do not acquire implicit knowledge of a feature, they will have explicit knowledge, which can facilitate subsequent

development of implicit knowledge. If we know something explicitly, we are more likely to notice it, and noticing assists the development of implicit knowledge.

My position has always been that the job of instruction is to foster both implicit and explicit knowledge. Implicit knowledge is primary and should therefore be the main goal, but explicit knowledge is useful for some types of language use and can facilitate implicit knowledge. I do not think, however, that explicit knowledge converts into implicit knowledge. The interface between explicit



▲ **Rod Ellis at a recent AAAL conference.**

and implicit knowledge is a weak one – not a strong one. So my model of instruction is a fluency first, accuracy later on. Explicit instruction is just an add-on to a meaning-based approach, not an alternative.

TEC: Faced with large classes with learners of mixed levels, obviously multiple personality types and learning traits, and partially constrained by a required coursebook, what’s your advice for teachers looking to promote speaking fluency in their students?

Prof. Ellis: Irrespective of learners’ personality type and preferred learning traits, the only way to promote fluency is by engaging learners in fluency activities (i.e., tasks). But there

are ways of addressing the anxiety that some learners experience when required to speak instantaneously. Giving learners time to plan before they perform a task is one of the most effective ways. Pre-task planning leads to greater fluency. Another way is to give learners the chance to repeat a task. That too results in more fluent L2 production. Another technique used to encourage fluency is to set a time limit for completing a task in order to encourage within-task fluency. Fluency

involves listening as well as production. In the case of input-based tasks, the teacher can vary the speed of the input, gradually increasing it over time. One last suggestion for dealing with mixed classes: Always make sure that it is a weaker student who is given the job of reporting the group's findings to the whole class. This is more likely to ensure that the weaker students work hard on the task and get support from the more proficient students.

TEC: Concerning implementing Task-Based Learning (TBL), there can be confusion with the various procedures and phases (for example: teachers'/students' roles and pre-task/task/post-task stages) as designed and researched by you and other leading researchers (Willis & Willis, Nunan, Skehan, and



others). How can teachers incorporate a TBL element in their class, without feeling they're breaking one of it's "rules"?

Prof. Ellis: I prefer to talk about "principles" of TBLT rather than "rules." The principles that govern the pre-task stage, the main-task stage, and the post-task stage are different. The main difference lies in how the teacher tackles the language needed to perform the task. In the pre-task stage, the teacher is free to direct proceedings by helping learners with the content and language required by the task – for example, by pre-teaching vocabulary (but not grammar). In the post-task stage the teacher can address any grammar problems that were evident when the students performed the task explicitly. In the main-task phase, the teacher has to balance roles associated with being a task manager, a communicator, and an instructor (see Ellis, 2019). This is where "focus-on-form" takes place. I agree that task-based teaching requires a high level of skill on the part of the teacher. This is why teacher-training for TBLT is so important.

TEC: And as a follow up question, what advice can you give to Korean-based language teachers desperate to increase students' motivation and spoken production during TBL interaction (considering Korean EFL teaching has long been a teacher-fronted dynamic)?

Prof. Ellis: This question seems to assume that TBLT is invariably learner-centred. But this is not the case. TBLT is learning-centred, but there is plenty of room for teacher-fronted activity. For example, with learners not accustomed to TBLT, it would be wise to start with input-based tasks. These are conducted in lockstep with the whole class, with the teacher (or an electronic device) serving as the source of the input. A lot of problems that teachers have experienced with TBLT arise because they have rushed to group-based, speaking tasks too soon. When learners realize that they can understand input in English, they will be motivated to start trying to speak.

TEC: How do you view technology (computer-assisted or otherwise) playing a part in EFL going forward? I have in mind automatic translation apps and programs for student writing feedback, but really the influences are diverse.

Prof. Ellis: Well, there is no escaping technology! Will they help language learning? In so far as they provide learners with rich input, I am sure they can. I suspect translation apps may actually impede it, as they obviate the need to learn, but it may be possible to find effective ways of using them. I see technology supplementing face-to-face teaching and learning not replacing it. There have been some interesting uses of electronic feedback.

TEC: What is your advice for new EFL teachers?

Prof. Ellis: I will suggest three things:

1. Work hard to make sure that students always understand you when you speak English. Your communication skills are more important than your technical knowledge!
2. Have a clear plan for each lesson, but be prepared to depart from it.
3. Take risks. Be prepared to try something different.

TEC: What do you see as the emerging (or reemerging) areas of research in our field?

Prof. Ellis: I guess the ever-increasing encroachment of technology. This is inevitable. But we need to evaluate how technology can assist, not replace, the teacher. I think it might be more interesting to ask what do we see as the continuing areas of research. Certainly research investigating task-based language teaching will continue and grow! We are still a long way off working out how it can work best in different instructional contexts.

TEC: Apart from teaching at Curtin University, Australia, and presenting at conferences, what keeps you busy?

Prof. Ellis: Trying to grow old gracefully! I enjoy cooking – for myself and for others. It takes my mind off writing books. I am a lover of cricket.