

Past, Present and Future of Second Language Acquisition: An Interview with Rod Ellis

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The area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has been a constant issue for worldwide discussion in ELT. When one mentions the term SLA, Rod Ellis comes to our minds because of his extensive research in this area and that of Tasked-Based Language Learning (TBLL). The following is an interview with Rod Ellis carried out in 2009 at the University of Guanajuato where he taught a SLA course to students studying the *Masters in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages* from the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics of the University of Auckland in New Zealand. M. Martha Lengeling interviewed Professor Ellis and this interview was recorded, transcribed and edited (with Sanchez Hernandez and Brenes Carvajal):

M.M.L.: Where do you see the future of SLA and what shifts or changes have you seen in the field throughout the years?

R.E.: The field of Second Language Acquisition is really still quite a young field. It really only dates back to perhaps the late 1960s and work done by Pit Corder and Evelyn Hatch. So we are looking at a field that is still only 40 or 50 years old. A lot of the early research was quite clearly motivated by the wish to find out more about language learning in order to improve language teaching—to try to identify what constituted success in language learning, so those successes could be copied to the classroom. Over the years, however, SLA has become more theoretical, more academic and many of the issues which are now addressed in Second Language Acquisition are not clearly of direct relevance to language teaching. In particular, I would point to the work on Universal Grammar. I personally can't see that the SLA work on Universal Grammar has much application to the classroom.

Other changes that have taken place have involved theoretical developments. Two major theoretical developments that have taken place over the last 20 years have been the growing interest in what's called connectionism. This theory claims that language does not really consist of rules but rather a labyrinth of networks of neural connections, which enable us to use language as if we do know rules even though at a neurological level there is no such thing.

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So that is one major development that has taken place. Another, which I think in particular, is worth mentioning, is the growth of interest in socio-cultural studies of SLA. Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that acquisition does not necessarily take place inside the head, but rather in the social interactions that learners participate in. So, in Sociocultural Theory there is not a clear distinction between language use and language learning. In contrast, in cognitive-interactionist theories language use is seen as creating input and opportunities for output that can cause learning to take place, but is not viewed in itself as learning.

A third development that is perhaps worth mentioning is the growth in the areas of neurolinguistic, or neurobiological SLA in the last 10 years. That is to say, researchers are attempting to examine to what extent and in what ways the brain is involved in the learning of a second language.

These studies have been quite interesting because they have been able to investigate whether different parts of the brain are involved when we use the L2 as opposed to our L1. It would seem that once relatively high levels of proficiency in two languages have been achieved, the same parts of the brain are activated for both languages: there is no separation. On the other hand, research has shown that there are separate parts of the brain involved in the storage of what is known as implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge, lending support to Krashen's early distinction between those two types of knowledge, which he labeled *acquired knowledge* and *learned knowledge*. There is in fact a clear neurological separation between these two types of knowledge. That's not to say, however, that there are no neural pathways linking these two—just that distinct parts of the brain are involved with learning them and storing them.

The field of Second Language Acquisition is characterized by controversy and debate. Perhaps one of the biggest debates going on at the moment is the extent to which SLA is to be seen predominately as a cognitive enterprise as opposed to a social one. Different positions have been staked out here. There are some researchers like Long who see SLA as a branch of cognitive psychology. And then there are people like Firth and Wagner, who would argue that in essence, SLA is essentially a social enterprise, involving social beings interacting in social settings for social purposes.

M.M.L.: What research has been the most influential in your opinion?

R.E.: My interest in SLA has always been how it can inform us about what we do as language teachers—how can it feed into theories of language instruction. I'm most interested in that area of SLA that looks into the relationship between instruction and language learning. I have defined language instruction as involving both direct intervention in language learning and indirect intervention in language learning. By direct intervention, I mean attempts to actually teach learners specific linguistic properties such as the grammar of the language. By indirect intervention, I mean instruction that seeks to create the conditions likely to foster and facilitate the process of SLA. So a lot of my work is focused on studies that have investigated the teaching of grammar and to what extent this affects acquisition: do learners learn the grammar they are taught? Also I have been interested in Task-Based Teaching, which constitutes a form of indirect intervention (i.e., it aims to create the conditions where acquisition can take place naturally inside the classroom).

M.M.L.: Would you say that your position as a researcher has a direct effect on teaching?

R.E.: Well, I don't know if I have had a direct effect. I am not so sure that I even aim to have a direct effect on teachers. My aim is to influence how teachers think about teaching—that is their beliefs about teaching or their theories of teaching - by familiarizing them with some of the work in SLA. My aim as a researcher is not really to tell teachers what I think they should do in the classroom but rather to make them reflect on what they do in the classroom, for example by making them aware of some options they haven't considered, and then basically leaving it up to them to decide whether my suggestions might be applicable in their own instructional contexts. That is the only way that I think that research can influence teachers.

The purpose of research is not to tell teachers what to do. The purpose of research is to increase teachers' awareness of what potentially goes on inside the classroom, so they are in a better position to work out what they want to do.

M.M.L.: How do you see the role of 'direct instruction' in SLA?

R.E.: 'Direct intervention' is an attempt to teach students specific linguistic features—to make these part of their interlanguage. The aim is to enable learners to use these features accurately in communication. I have always felt that there is room for such instruction in SLA, but there are problems. We know that learners have their own orders and sequences of acquisition. Clearly, if you are trying to teach them specific grammatical properties that they are simply not developmentally ready for, then direct intervention is unlikely to succeed.

With beginner learners I favor a Task-Based Approach—i.e., no direct instruction. In other words, one simply sets up opportunities through tasks for learners to 'experience' language and leave it to them what they actually learn from the performance of the tasks. Later on, however, when learners get to intermediate or more advanced stages, I think that there is much more clearly a need for direct intervention, because we know that even though learners have plenty of opportunities for interaction—plenty of comprehensible input—they will continue to experience problems with grammar. It seems to me that one way in which one could try to combat this would be to identify what these problems are and then devise more traditional-type grammar lessons. There is evidence that when learners get to intermediate stage, such lessons can be effective, partly because the learners have already begun to acquire the target features but without being able to use them accurately...giving them a grammar lesson that directs attention to a particular grammar problem they are having can help them move forward.

However, even at the early stages of language learning, there probably is a case for corrective feedback. So, if one sees corrective feedback as a kind of direct intervention there might be a case for direct intervention even in the early stages of acquisition. What I have in mind is that while learners are performing the communicative tasks, teachers can correct them, for example by means of recasts or requests for clarification. In other words, correction can be built into Task-Based Teaching.

M.M.L.: What are your characteristics of an effective language learning task in light of what we know about the process of SLA?

R.E.: First, I think I would like to give my definition of a task because people tend to have very different ideas of what this means. A task is a particular type of language learning that has four key characteristics: First, the primary focus should be on meaning—message creation and message understanding—when performing a task. Second, there should be some kind of gap—an opinion gap, an information gap, perhaps some kind of reasoning gap. This gap creates the communicative purpose for the task. Third, students have to use their own resources to perform the task. That is to say, they are not given chunks of language or pieces of language or models to use—they have to create their own language in doing the task. This idea about using their own linguistic resources applies equally to tasks that involve comprehension and production. I want to emphasize that in listening or reading tasks learners have to use their own linguistic resources to understand. Fourth, there needs to be some outcome to the task other than simply the display of correct language. For example, identifying the differences between two pictures or deciding what items to take with you on a desert island.

M.M.L.: So are you going against pre-teaching linguistic structures?

R.E.: I think there is always a danger in pre-teaching a linguistic structure to prepare learners to perform a task. It may lead them to try to practice the grammar structure and use it correctly rather than to focus on meaning and message creation. The purpose of the task is to ensure that the learners' orientation is primarily on meaning and message creation.

M.M.L.: What kind of task is most effective for language learning?

R.E.: Well, I don't think I can really answer that, because you need different types of tasks at different stages of language learning. For example, many teachers often say to me: "How can you do Task-Based Teaching with students who are complete beginners and don't know any English?" You can, but the tasks have to be very simple, and they have to be input-based—for example, listening tasks, and they have to be constructed in such a way that the task creates a context that helps learners to understand the language that they hear. It is possible to devise tasks that are suitable for complete beginners. They clearly need to be very simple tasks; they have to be context-rich tasks. The language has to be context-embedded. And they have to be input-based. There should be no expectancy that students will be able to speak. In fact students don't need to speak in order to learn. They can learn through listening. They can learn through reading. Later on, of course, one does need to introduce tasks that encourage students to try to use their linguistic resources to speak. Tasks of the information gap-type seem to work better with learners who are in the process of beginning to speak than say, opinion-gap tasks which work better with learners who are more advanced.

However, having said that, there is no scientific formula for deciding which particular type of task is best suited to which particular level of learner. All that we really know is that there are certain task features that make a task more or less complex. I'll give you one obvious example here. If one is asking students to do a narrative task, which involves telling a story based on pictures, it's going to be

much easier to tell that story when presenting two characters in the story than if there are six or seven characters in the pictures. So the amount of information that needs to be communicated, or the amount of information about different people that needs to be communicated is going to influence how simple or how complex the task is.

M.M.L.: How can Task-Based Language Learning be used or introduced in countries such as Mexico where grammar teaching has been predominant or has been quite common for many years?

R.E.: First of all, Mexico is not unique in this respect. I mean, I have run across the exact same situation in Japan, in China and Korea and other parts of the world. Task-Based Language Teaching constitutes an innovation; it involves change. What this question is really about is what makes some innovations work and other innovations not work. We do have some ideas of the factors that will facilitate the uptake of an innovation. One factor is clearly training. You can't just develop a whole new approach to language teaching and give teachers the new materials and expect them to go out and teach them in an appropriate manner. There is a definite need for teacher training to make teachers aware of the purposes of the innovation.

The main purpose of Task-Based Language Teaching is to develop linguistic competence in a way that will enable learners to use it effectively in communication. Now, many people misunderstand Task-Based Teaching, because they think it is to develop fluency, or communicative ability. The purpose is to develop linguistic competence in a way that becomes available for use in actual communication. So, Task-Based Language Teaching is not just about teaching people to communicate; it's about developing their linguistic competence in ways that will help them to communicate.

M.M.L.: So training would need to aim at a solid understanding of what Task-Based Language Teaching is?

R.E.: Absolutely! Another factor that is going to influence the uptake of Task-Based Language Teaching is the amount of support that teachers get. If all they get is a short, in-service teacher training program and then are handed a task-based book and told to teach it in their classrooms, they are going to struggle. Another factor that needs to be borne in mind is that we know that in introducing Task-Based Teaching, various sorts of problems arise. One of which is noise. Task-based language classrooms are often noisier than more traditional classrooms. They create the context where teachers have less control of what students are saying. So teachers need strategies for dealing with what might be seen as a disciplinary problem.

M.M.L.: Do you feel that Task-Based Language Learning has adapted to the Technology Revolution?

R.E.: Well, just as you can do a task face-to-face, you can do a task on a computer. This can involve the use of a chat room with the students doing a task either amongst themselves in the chat room or with the teacher. There have been a number of studies that have actually investigated to what extent you get the same kinds of interaction in a chat room as you do face-to-face. So I really see no

difficulty whatsoever in incorporating Task-Based Language Teaching into Computer Assisted Language Learning.

M.M.L.: To what extent are Second Language Acquisition research results in English language studies transferable to Spanish language studies? This refers to Spanish as a Second Language for English first language speakers, or other first language speakers and that refers to other languages that are spoken here in Mexico such as the Otomi or Nahuatl.

R.E.: Let me first say that there is quite a rich SLA literature on Second Language Spanish. Obviously the language which has been most investigated by Second Language Acquisition researchers has been English, but Spanish comes next. There is a rich literature on the L2 acquisition of Spanish. Two leading researchers that come to mind are Landtoft and Van Patten, but there are many others. Salaberry has worked extensively in Spanish. He is Argentinean and now works in North America. The answer to this question is really, very simple "Yes". Of course, the work that is done in one language is going to be relevant to another language because the purpose of work on any language is to construct theories, to form hypotheses, and to develop theoretical constructs that can inform how language learning works in general. Constructs such as language transfer, backsliding or fossilization are relevant to all languages. SLA seeks to identify universal principles.

M.M.L.: What advice or suggestions would you give to teachers or researchers who might be interested in SLA here in Mexico?

R.E.: It depends on what they are interested in looking at. In general, I guess they will be interested in how instruction can affect acquisition. One of the areas that I've been doing a lot of work on recently is corrective feedback. It's quite possible to do a very simple study on corrective feedback. What I would suggest to new researchers is that they get hold of a study, a simple study that is being done and replicate it. For example, in the 1990s, I had one of my Japanese students do what was a very simple study. She was interested in whether pushing learners to self-correct would have any effect on subsequent accuracy when they were doing a new task. So what she did was to ask few students to tell a story and whenever they made an error in past tense she would use a request for clarification. She would just say "Sorry?" or "Pardon?", which pushed them to self-correct. Then she had another group of students who functioned as a control—they were not pushed to correct their past tense errors. She got both groups to retell a new story a week or so later, this time with no correction. What she was interested in was whether the group that had been pushed to self-correct had become more accurate in the use of the past tense. The study was published in *English Language Teaching Journal* in 1993. It gets cited a lot. I think it is a good example of the kind of study teachers could try to undertake. Perhaps it could be replicated here in Mexico.

M.M.L.: Any last comments?

R.E.: I've been working in Second Language Acquisition now for 30 years. I actually started working in First Language Acquisition. I studied with Gordon Wells. He was looking at the aspects of caretaker talk that seemed to promote rapid child language acquisition. This got me interested because it seems to me the same

approach could be applied in SLA – that is to investigate how caretaker talk or teacher talk can assist L2 acquisition.

M.M.L.: Motherese?

R.E.: You know, the best way to look at classrooms is not as places where we teach people language. The best way to look at the classroom is as a place where we as teachers can foster interactions that can facilitate acquisition. Most of language acquisition is not intentional. Most of language acquisition is incidental. If you think that you're going to be able to teach your students all the language they need to become efficient users of the language, you are mistaken. We should think more about 'facilitating acquisition' than 'teaching the language'.

Note:

Dr. Ellis has mapped out the history and possible future paths for SLA and defined TBLL and a task for the readers. In addition, he has given advice for the Mexican context and made suggestions for the possible replication of previous studies for those who may be thinking of doing research in SLA. We would like to thank Rod Ellis for his time and permission to carry out this interview for the MEXTESOL readers. Also, we would like to thank the MEXTESOL members who contributed the above questions for the interview and Ana Belem Rodriguez Muñoz, a BA TESOL student of the University of Guanajuato, who transcribed the interview.