

## An Interview with APPLE Lecture Speaker Professor Alister Cumming

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### INTRODUCTION

On April 11, 2014, the TESOL/AL Web Journal (represented by Rongchan Lin, Yuna Seong, and Catherine Box) had the opportunity to sit down with Professor Alister Cumming, guest speaker for the 2014 Applied Linguistics & Language Education (APPLE) Lecture Series, hosted annually by the TESOL/Applied Linguistics Programs at Teachers College, Columbia University. Professor Cumming was kind enough to take the time, during a very busy day, to speak about his research, his work on assessing writing, his thoughts on dynamic assessment, and his advice for new scholars working in the TESOL/AL fields.

Professor Cumming is professor in the Centre for Educational Research on Languages and Literacies (CERLL) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. His research and teaching focus on writing in second languages, language assessment, language program evaluation and policies, and research methods. His most recent books include *Adolescent Literacies in a Multicultural Context* (2012, Routledge), *A Synthesis of Research on Second Language Writing in English* (with Ilona Leki & Tony Silva, 2008, Routledge), and *Goals for Academic Writing* (2006, John Bejamins). Professor Cumming is currently the Executive Director of *Language Learning*, a journal he edited in the 1990s. For the past five years he has chaired the TOEFL Committee of Examiners at Educational Testing Service in Princeton. He received his PhD from the University of Toronto in 1988, MA and BA from the University of British Columbia in 1979 and 1975 respectively, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Copenhagen in 2009. From 2014 to 2017 he will hold a Changjiang Scholarship at Beijing Foreign Studies University. We thank Professor Cumming for his participation in a lively interview. We also thank Fred Tsutagawa for videotaping and Dr. Kirby Grabowski for coordinating the APPLE Lecture Series Interview.

### THE INTERVIEW

#### Question 1: Introduction and Becoming A Researcher

You are a renowned expert in the field of second language testing. We are curious to find out how you got into the field. Could you briefly describe your journey to becoming a researcher?

[\[Q1 video\]](#)

#### Questions 2-4: Assessing Writing

In your opinion, what are the challenges of assessing writing in a multicultural context? [\[Q2 video\]](#)

In your paper titled "Assessing integrated writing tasks for academic purposes: Promises and perils", you reviewed five studies with respect to promises and perils. This paper is very useful for us in formulating guiding principles for the design of integrated writing tasks. In your opinion, are there any existing tests that could serve as exemplars in assessing integrated skills? [\[Q3 video\]](#)

How should pragmatics be assessed in writing? In your opinion, are there any existing tests that assess pragmatics effectively? [\[Q4 video\]](#)

### **Questions 5 & 6: Dynamic Assessment**

There seems to be an increased interest in learning-oriented assessment in the language testing field. Why do you think the idea of using assessments as learning opportunities or learning tools, as in the case of dynamic assessment, is becoming increasingly important? [\[Q5 video\]](#)

Dynamic assessment may be daunting for teachers who may not feel that they are prepared/equipped to understand and purposefully attend to the different learning processes and levels of development. How can it be better understood and effectively implemented by teachers as part of their everyday teaching practice? [\[Q6 video\]](#)

### **Questions 7 & 8: Future Plans and Advice for Budding Scholars**

We understand that you have received the Changjiang Scholarship from the Ministry of Education of China to conduct research on writing in English at a consortium of universities across China. This sounds like a very exciting project. Could you tell us more about your plans and the nature of this project?

What would you do differently if you were to start your career over again today? What is one piece of advice that you would give students in their academic pursuit? [\[Q7 and Q8 video\]](#)