

---

## Interview with Rod Ellis

Interviewed by Yeon Heo  
PhD student, Second Language Studies Program  
Michigan State University  
heoyeon@msu.edu

---

Professor Rod Ellis is the deputy head of the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He came to the U.S. as a Professor in the University's Distinguished Professor visitor program. He stayed in the U.S. for five weeks. He is planning to visit the U.S. again in April 2013 for a week. At Michigan State University, he taught a short course, "Planning and Task-Based Performance," and gave the PhD students insights into how to do research related to task-based learning/teaching.

His research interests include: second language acquisition, individual learner differences, form-focused instruction, teacher education, course design, and methodology of language teaching. He was kind enough to do the interview for the Second Language Studies Working Papers.

### **Could you tell me how you got involved in second language studies?**

Well, I suppose that's quite a long story. There were really two influences that motivated me to get involved in second language studies. The first was that, like many second language acquisition researchers, I started off as a language teacher. I was a language teacher in Spain for a short time, and then I was a language teacher in a secondary school in Zambia in Africa. One of the things that I became increasingly aware of was the gap between teaching and learning; teachers tend to make certain assumptions that if you teach something well, learners will learn it. It became quite clear to me that very often no matter how much effort you put into trying to teach learners a particular grammatical structure, there was no guarantee that they would be able to use it correctly in their communicative speech or in their writing. So that got me interested in why there was this gap between teaching and

learning and how one could minimize the gap. I realized that this would involve investigating language learning. Of course, this was back in the early 1970's and there wasn't very much published on second language acquisition at that particular time. In fact, it still is a very new subject. So that was one of the influences.

And the second major influence occurred when I left Africa in 1970 and went back to the United Kingdom. I decided to do a Master in Education and worked with someone called Gordon Wells. Gordon Wells at that time was working on a child language acquisition project. Gordon introduced me to the exciting and interesting work that was going on in first language acquisition research. At that time, it became quite clear to me that a lot of the things people were doing in that line of inquiry were also going to be very relevant to inquiring about second language learning. So those were two huge inputs. One from my experience as a language teacher and the other from my

experience as a researcher in a master's program with Gordon Wells.

**Would you briefly introduce your research interests?**

I guess over the last few years I've had a number of research interests in the field of second language acquisition and its application to language pedagogy. One of the areas is how teachers focus on form in communicative language classrooms. Together with Shawn Loewen and Helen Basturkmen, I conducted a project in 1999 and 2000 where we investigated what we called "form-focused episodes" as those occurred in communicative language lessons in a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand. That eventually led to Shawn's PhD thesis. He took our research further by investigating to what extent form-focused episodes actually facilitate language learning.

Another area that I have had a prevailing interest in is corrective feedback—both oral and written corrective feedback. I've been involved in studies that have investigated the effects of different types of corrective feedback on both students' oral production and their writing. The third area is ways of measuring implicit and explicit knowledge. Together with a number of other people including Shawn Loewen, I conducted a study where we attempted to develop tests that would provide relatively separate measures of those two types of knowledge. The results were eventually published in a series of articles and a book. In fact, there's a copy of the book just outside this room here called *Implicit and Explicit Knowledge in Language Proficiency, Testing, and Teaching* (Ellis, Loewen, Elder, & Erlam, 2009). So those are the main areas that

I've been working on and they continue to be so.

**Could you tell me what you're working on currently?**

I do have a research project we've been working on fairly recently, which again is a corrective feedback study. What we wanted to do was to test some of the claims of socio-cultural theory as opposed to cognitive interactionist models of language learning, because they make somewhat different predictions about the kind of corrective feedback that is likely to be most effective in promoting learning. Sociocultural theory argues for a scaffolded approach where the teacher moves from relatively implicit types of correction to more explicit types of correction, finding the optimal type of correction for eliciting the correction from the individual student. In contrast, cognitive interactionist theories are more concerned with trying to identify the particular type of corrective feedback that is likely to work for all students. Indeed, researchers in this tradition have reported that explicit feedback works better than more implicit types of feedback. So we carried out a study where some students were subjected to the scaffolded approach to doing corrective feedback while other students were given direct, explicit corrective feedback. We were interested to see whether in fact there were any differences in learning outcomes. In fact, we found none. There was no clear evidence that explicit or scaffolded feedback was better. This does raise a question about the claims made about scaffolded feedback because scaffolded feedback is very time-consuming. Teachers have got to weigh the various strategies in an attempt to find the least explicit one to elicit a correction from a

learner. As a result, corrected episodes tend to be long. In contrast, when you're providing explicit feedback, the episodes are much shorter. So, you might want to argue that explicit feedback is more efficient than scaffolded feedback.

I have a lot of PhD students who are working on a variety of areas. One PhD student just completed a thesis looking at oral corrected feedback, specifically comparing two types of implicit feedback: recasts and requests for clarification. Interestingly there have been no studies that have actually compared an input-based implicit strategy such as recasts with an output prompting implicit type of corrective feedback such as requests for clarification. Both are implicit, but they differ in terms of whether they provide learners with the correct form or whether they elicit the correct form from the learner. This study was carried out in high school French classrooms in Auckland. Interestingly, what she found was somewhat different from what Lyster found in his research. She found recasts were considerably more effective than the clarification requests. So this study in a way challenges Lyster's claims that output prompting corrective feedback is more effective than recasts.

### **What constitutes a good researcher, say, a good PhD student?**

I think that PhD students need certain skills and certain qualities in order to be really effective researchers. One of the things that I've noticed amongst my PhD students is a difference in how they look for and handle information. This concerns the well-known distinction between divergent thinkers and convergent thinkers. Divergent thinkers are often quite creative because they tend to see things

in ways other than those that are well-trod and well-established. On the other hand, they often find it quite difficult to develop a well-structured, coherent proposal. Students who are more convergent typically are much better at defining their research questions carefully, working out how to operationalize them, working out what kind of data they need, and how they are going to analyze the data, etc. Convergent thinkers often tend to elect for a more experimental quantitative approach whereas more divergent thinkers tend to opt for qualitative research. They both have strengths and weaknesses. I think one thing that PhD students have got to decide for themselves is what kind of person are they—how do they do their thinking. Do they tend to think holistically and in divergent ways or do they tend to be convergent in their thinking?

There can be cultural differences as well. For example, my experience of a lot of Asian students is that they tend to have a preference for quantitative, experimental, or correlational types of research rather than research that involves collecting data from a variety of different sources, looking for themes, and trying to analyze the themes, etc. But some people from other cultures tend to prefer a more qualitative approach. So I think students need to think very carefully about how they see the world, how they think, and then pick a research style that is going to suit them.

Probably the other quality PhD students need above everything is persistence. Not giving up. Not allowing themselves to get distracted by other things—keeping focused on their research, having a really clear schedule, a really good plan and trying to keep to the schedule and the plan. If you don't do that, you end up being a PhD student

for six–seven years and start to wonder about if you are ever going to complete. I never like my PhD students to take longer than four years because after that, I think there is a likelihood that they will not complete. They are wasting my time as well!

Another thing is good PhD students in my experience are not necessarily the ones who always do what I think they should do. I never require students to do what I think they should do. Very often they come up with something that is actually as good, if not better, than I have thought of. But I do expect them to listen carefully, to pay close attention to what I suggest. Perhaps, another characteristic of a good PhD student is that when they come to visit me to discuss their research they have worked out exactly what it is they wanted to discuss. I don't like students who just expect me to tell them what to do. They need to have very specific questions and very specific problems that they want addressed.

**Do you think the qualities of a good language teacher and the qualities of a good researcher can be combined?**

I suppose your question is addressing to what extent a teacher should engage in research and also conversely to what extent a researcher should engage in teaching. There is quite a big literature that encourages teachers to do research of various kinds, at least action research, but there's not much in the literature that actually talks about whether researchers should do language teaching. Maybe that's the topic that is worth investigating! I have to admit that I haven't done any language teaching for a number of years now. Although I do feel that the early part of my life, where I was a language teacher for many years,

has been foundational. I continually draw on that experience in terms of what I think as a researcher, etc.

Teachers becoming researchers? I think we probably have to recognize that this is an ideal. I wonder, for example, if you were to give out a questionnaire to the teachers in the ELC program here, and ask them their views about whether they should do research, what they would say. I suspect you will find the vast majority is not doing any research. Perhaps teachers don't typically do research. I think that there are two main reasons: time and motivation. Teachers are busy and research takes time. If you try to do research, you're going to make your life even busier. And motivation, I think a lot of teachers are perhaps skeptical as to whether research is actually going to help in their teaching. They may think there are other things they can do that will help them more to become a better teacher than doing research.

I think it's also important to ask about what kind of research teachers might do. Dick Allwright proposed something called 'exploratory practice' (Allwright, 2003). He argues that teacher research should not really be focused on problems or research questions, but rather should look at sort of what he calls 'puzzles'—things that teachers are not clear about, or why is something happening in their classrooms, or why something is not happening in the way in which they want it to happen. Allwright's idea is that exploratory practice is something that teachers and learners do collaboratively. They have to be jointly involved in trying to understand a puzzle. I think what motivates him is the idea that an understanding of what is going on in a classroom is actually much more important than collecting data and

answering specific research questions. Allwright has developed a series of principles to guide exploratory practice and has published these in a number of different papers.

I have argued that one way teachers can do ‘research’ is by focusing on the instructional materials they use and how they implement them. It seems to me that teachers make certain assumptions that if they use a particular type of activity, it will contribute to learning in a certain way, or it will induce a certain type of interaction, a certain type of language learning behavior in the classroom. So a very practical type of research that teachers can do is to sometimes carry out what I call micro-evaluations of specific teaching activities. I’ve tended to focus this on “tasks” because of my interest in task-based language teaching. I get my postgraduate students to design a task that they could use in a particular teaching context and to plan an evaluation of it. They then have to teach the task and carry out the evaluation, and write up a report of it. It’s time-consuming but my students report that they learn a lot by carrying out such evaluations.

### **Do you have any hobbies?**

I spend a lot of time working! But I also do enjoy cooking. I do nearly all the cooking in my family. My partner does the washing up and I do the cooking! Cooking is very relaxing and also kind of creative. You have to think about how you can put together a tasty meal with whatever you happen to have in your fridge. Maybe when I finally retire—if ever I do—one of the things I’ll do is take

a cookery course so that I can improve myself as a cook.

### **Before we end the interview, do you have anything that you would like to add?**

It’s been a very pleasant time staying at Michigan State University. I’ve enjoyed teaching my little course. I’ve enjoyed meeting some people, being able to participate in a research project, collecting some data here. One of the really nice things about coming to live somewhere different for a period of time is that your lifestyle changes. My lifestyle here is built around the fact that I have no television, I have no car, I have no telephone. I do have the internet, so I am not totally unable to communicate with people. But believe me, when you remove those three things from your life, your life changes! I walk everywhere, which is very good and healthy. I guess when I go back to Auckland, I will be getting in my car and driving to work and driving to go shopping, etc. So I’ve enjoyed coming here because for a while I’ve been able to change my lifestyle. It’s so easy to get stuck in one’s lifestyle and it’s really good to change it!

### **References**

- Allwright, D. (2003). Exploratory practice: Rethinking practitioner research in language teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, 7, 113–142.
- Ellis, R., Loewen, S., Elder, S., & Erlam, R. (2009). *Implicit and explicit knowledge in second language learning, testing and teaching*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.