An interview with Professor Rod Ellis and Professor Jack C Richards

Background

Professor Rod Ellis and Professor Jack C Richards are both distinguished world known professors in the field of ELT. Both these scholars delivered plenary speeches at the International Conference on Current Trends in ELT which was held by the Department of English Language and Literature of Urmia University, Iran, between 20 and 22 May 2013. A short joint interview was arranged with them during the conference, and what follows is these scholars’ views on various questions posed in the interview. The interview was coordinated by Karim Sadeghi (the Conference Academic Organizer) and was conducted by Sima Khezrlou and Heidar Abdi (both PhD candidates in TEFL at Urmia University). In the following transcript, RE stands for Rod Ellis, JCR stands for Jack C Richards, SK stands for Sima Khezrlou and HA stands for Heidar Abdi.
HA & SK: First of all, it’s a great pleasure to see you in our city and we would like you to thank you for participating in this interview.

HA: How many presentations do you make and how many conferences do you participate in every year? And what are the most common topics for the conferences that you participate in?

RE: I don’t know I think last year I probably did 8 or 9 conferences and presentations in a variety of countries. I did one in Turkey one in Bosnia, two in China, a couple in Japan and one in Australia. Topics? Well I talked on a variety of topics depending on the themes of the conferences.

JCR: I talk about different topics in the conferences that I get invited depending on the audience. This year I participated in a GULFTESOL in Dubai and then was in Turkey for a conference there a few weeks ago, as well as a series of lectures in different universities. I have another conference in Hong Kong in June. So the topic for a talk depends on the conference. I try to focus on issues relevant to classroom teachers and also try to match the talk to the themes of the conference.

HA: How do you evaluate the Urmia International ELT Conference? How do you find it in comparison to other ELT conferences in other countries?

JCR: Very impressive

RE: Yes I think it’s really, really impressive, There is enormous enthusiasm of the participants and a genuine interest in teaching English as a foreign language. That’s what impressed me first. Then we were asked so many questions as we walked around the corridors and the questions were really quite informed. A lot of people wanted to talk to me about their research.

JCR: We realize that not a lot of keynote speakers have the opportunity to come to Iran and a lot of people have worked hard to plan a conference such as this. We also realize that many of the participants would like to meet us personally so there are lots of requests for photographs. We don’t mind because we know it’s a special situation.

HA: You have been a teacher in all levels of education and also you are a great researcher. I would like to know how you link these two roles: being a good teacher and a great researcher.

RE: I think being a good teacher and being a good researcher are very separate things. I don’t think they are necessarily related. I think the skills that you need to be a good teacher are very different from the skills that you need to be a great researcher. For example, to be a good teacher one of the
most important things is to have a personality that makes people want to attend to you and to do things that you are asking them to do. Personality, classroom communication, and ability to interact with people in the classroom - those are central to my mind.

**JCR:** In a good lecture or conference presentation you have to tell a story in a clear and concise manner as you saw in Rod’s presentation. There is a lot of information but it is presented very clearly, step by step. To do this is a very special skill that you don’t always see in conference presentations.

**RE:** Research requires a lot of patience, very careful thinking, working out the research project very carefully, formulating your research questions very precisely, collecting the data you need in order to answer them, analyzing that data and then learning how to report it in a way that is going to get it accepted by a journal - that’s a very different skill from teaching. I will say one thing and that is I am very thankful that I started off as a teacher, because although my research is sometimes theoretical by and large it is linked to practical issues like corrective feedback.

**HA:** Could you please tell us how much of your work time involves research and what avenues are you currently pursuing and why?

**RE:** Well by and large my university requires me to spend about 40 percent of my time doing research. However, I probably spend more than 40 percent of my time – perhaps as much as 60 percent of my time doing research including writing books. Generally speaking I write books on some aspect of second language acquisition. The book that I have just finished and that will be published this year is called “Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition”. Each chapter starts with a pedagogic problem or issue and then it looks to see how second language acquisition research can help to address it.

**JCR:** I am not a full-time academic these days and am supposed to be semi-retired so I do small teaching assignments in different places depending on the invitations I get. Right now I’m in Hong Kong doing a consultancy at City University and looking at a new degree they plan to introduce. In Sydney I give occasional lectures at Sydney University. Later in the year I will teach a module on curriculum development in Singapore. If I do research, it’s literature research. I have just completed a couple of books that involved a huge amount of reading, trying to survey research and then package it in a way that will make it accessible to teachers.

**HA:** Teachers and researchers don’t always get on together; they don’t accept each other sometimes. Some teachers say that researchers are not well informed about the actual language classrooms. What is your view?

**JCR:** Well not all research needs to link into the classroom practice. Some researchers just try to clarify our understanding of the complex issues in second language learning. Not all research needs
to have an agenda which connects directly to classroom practice and a lot of researchers don’t see themselves as necessarily compelled to make such a connection. Research that does is “applied research”. A lot of research that students read in their graduate courses can be considered disciplinary knowledge: this is knowledge that teachers need to know as part of their professional education. Sociolinguistics would be an area of theory and research I would place in this category. Other research is more directly relevant to teaching, and Second Language Acquisition falls into this category I think.

**RE:** A lot of research is not intended to have any pedagogic application but I will tell you how I try to make a link. One of the courses I teach in my university in the moment is called Task Based Language Teaching. I do try to familiarize the students with the theoretical background and research related to work on task based language learning and teaching. But the assignment that I set requires the students to design a task and then write a rationale for the task they have designed. In the second assignment I ask them to teach the task they have designed and carry out evaluation. So one of the ways that I think research can be relevant to teachers is through materials evaluation – for example by evaluating tasks. Evaluation is a kind of research because you collect data and you report what you find out about the task, etc. It is practical research.

**SK:** What are your goals as specialists in applied linguistics?

**RE:** I think one of my main goals is actually to help those students and teachers who really do want to do research - to help them to do it and to do it well. That’s probably one of the main goals in my job. I have a lot of PhD students and I really enjoy helping them learn how to do and report research.

**JCR:** My work is mainly in the field of teacher education so my goal is to write books and articles that provide some of the theory and knowledge that will help teachers better understand and develop their practice.

**SK:** How did you get interested in task-based language teaching and corrective feedback?

**RE:** Through my understanding of research on how learners learn. I mean, to me, the question is how teaching can be conducted in such a way that is going to be effective for learning. That is the central question. And, you know I was in many different countries and one of the problems that I see in these countries is that students study English for six, seven years at high school and may be two, three years at university and yet at the end of it they can hardly say a thing in English - they can’t communicate. So, what interested me about task-based language teaching is its compatibility with what we know about second language acquisition research. I think that if a task-based approach was adopted, the chance of students learning how to communicate with some confidence would be much stronger.
**SK:** What are most common misconceptions about task-based language instruction?

**JCR:** I think people sometimes assume that any type of activity that involves a communicative task is a task-based teaching. Most of the time they do not talk about the principles and practices of task-based teaching in the way it's described by Prof. Ellis and other scholars. The term is used loosely to mean any classroom activity that involves communication. Lacking is the idea that tasks are mechanisms for activating and guiding language learning in a systematic and principled way.

**RE:** Teachers do not always have a clear idea of what a task is. So, the first thing I do when I talk about TBLT is identify the criteria that will be needed to decide whether a particular teaching activity is a task or is not a task.

**JCR:** I think this is because the word “task” has been a part of everyday discourse in language teaching in a very general sense, for many years, but in Task-Based Language Teaching it is used in a more specialized and precise way.

**SK:** Would you please talk about your projects and publications?

**JCR:** As I mentioned I have just completed two projects. One of them is a comprehensive 800 page overview of the field of language teaching, to be called Key Issues in Language Teaching. This will be published as a digital book (with some 30 or so short videos) by Cambridge next year. The other project is a 3rd edition of Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching.

**RE:** As I said, I just completed a book which will be published by Routledge called Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition. I am now revising one of my early books on language acquisition, the one with the black cover, not the big thick one, the one with black cover that was actually published in 1985. I intend it to be quite short and accessible. It's not intended to be encyclopedia; it's intended to get the main issues across. It is not yet finished – I have completed only four out of eleven chapters. I have to find time to work on the others. I also conduct research projects. I’ve just completed a couple of research projects on written corrective feedback. One was conducted in the United States and one in Japan looking at something quite similar. Teacher feedback on student writing is very time consuming. We thought that we could make it easier on the teacher if the students were given a handout explaining a grammatical structure they were making errors in and asking them to use the handout to revise their writing. So we compared the traditional way of doing error correction with this alternative way – giving them a metalinguistic explanation handout. We wanted to see which of these was more effective. In fact, the metalinguistic was more effective for one group of students but less effective for another group. That’s research! It’s never straight forward.

**HA & SK:** Thanks a lot for taking part in this interview.