

**L**anguage Teaching and Testing

*Selected Works of Renowned Applied Linguists*

世界知名语言学家论丛 ( 第一辑 )

Series Editor: Rod Ellis

**Peter Skehan**

**任务型研究：表现，评定与教学法**

**RESEARCHING TASKS:  
PERFORMANCE,  
ASSESSMENT AND PEDAGOGY**

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# 世界知名语言学家论丛

第一辑

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## 出版说明

“世界知名语言学家论丛(第一辑)”由上海外语教育出版社约请国际知名学者、英语教育专家Rod Ellis教授担任主编。丛书作者均为国际应用语言学领域耳熟能详的权威专家。丛书中的每一本聚焦应用语言学领域的一个特定主题,收录一位在该研究领域最有建树和影响力的语言学家一生中最重要的经典文章,如: Rod Ellis:《语法学习与教学》; Paul Nation:《词汇学习与教学》; Charles Alderson:《语言测试》,等等。书中的每篇文章经由精心挑选,既有对某一领域理论主题的深入阐述,又探讨了对第二语言教学和测试颇具意义的话题;除了作者一生的代表性作品外,还有不少新作,体现了作者的思索过程和研究轨迹,也展示了应用语言学领域发展历程中理论和研究逐步完善的一个个精彩镜头。

相信本套丛书的出版定能为国内应用语言学研究提供一个新的平台,带来新的启示,进一步推动我国语言学研究的发展。

## Preface

This book is a collection of articles for the series *Language Teaching and Testing — Selected Works of Renowned Applied Linguists*. This series collects articles written by a number of leading applied linguists. Each collection focuses on a specific area of research in applied linguistics — for example, on grammar learning and teaching (this book), vocabulary language learning and teaching, language testing, and task-based language teaching. The aim of each book is to bring together older and more recent articles to show the development of the author's work over his/her lifetime. The articles are selected to address both theoretical issues relevant to a particular area of enquiry and also to discuss issues of significance to the teaching or testing of a second language (L2). As a whole, the series provides a survey of applied linguistics as this relates to language pedagogy and testing.

Each book begins with an autobiographical introduction by the author in which he/she locates the issues that have been important in his/her lifetime's work and how this work has evolved over time. The introduction also provides an outline of the author's professional career. The rest of the book consists of chapters based on articles published over the author's lifespan.

Each book, then, will contain articles that cover the author's career (over thirty years in some cases). Not surprisingly there are likely to be shifts (and possibly contradictions) in the author's positioning on the issues addressed, reflecting the changes in theory and research focus that have occurred in the specific area of enquiry over a period of time. Thus, the articles will not necessarily reflect a consistent theoretical perspective. There is merit in this. Readers will be able to see how theory and research have developed. In other

words, each book provides a snapshot of the kinds of developments that have occurred in the applied linguistic field under consideration.

This book brings together a collection of Peter Skehan's articles on task-based learning, teaching and testing. As Chapter 1 in this book shows, Peter's career has followed what is a traditional trajectory from teacher to researcher for a British applied linguist. However, unlike many applied linguists (myself included) his education did include a grounding in two areas (statistics and psychology) that was to prove very helpful in later years. Reading through Chapter 1, I cannot help but be impressed by the 'pedigree' of his experiences as a language teacher. In his formative years he has taught in a primary school, in private language schools, in an industrial language training centre, and in ESP and EAP programmes. I suspect there are few applied linguists around who can claim such an extensive and varied grounding in the practice of language teaching. His work on tasks melded the understanding of cognitive psychology gained from his education in the UK and Canada with his practical experience of what 'works' and does not work in a language classroom. As he says, 'tasks are good units for research but practical'. Peter (in conjunction with his co-researcher, Pauline Foster) has arguably contributed more to our understanding of how tasks can be made to work in language pedagogy than any other researcher/ teacher.

Peter, like the true applied linguist he is, has sought to bridge the divide between theory and research on the one hand and the practice of language teaching and testing on the other hand. This book is a testimony to this concern. It includes a section on the theoretical background of his work on tasks, a section reporting some of the key studies he has conducted, a section on testing and assessment and a final section — the longest — on language pedagogy.

*Rod Ellis*  
Auckland  
August 2011.

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## **Sidesteps towards Applied Linguistics**

### **In Search of a Career**

Not many applied linguists can, hand on heart, say that when their careers teacher (if they ever had one) asked them what they wanted to do, they replied 'Applied Linguist', or even ESOL teacher. Engine drivers and accountants may have a certainty from early life, but for our profession, in the U.K. at least, there is generally a story of a second (or third) choice of career, often leavened with a wish to travel and see the world. So a reasonable question to an applied linguist is 'What was your first degree really in?'. In my case the answer is a joint honours degree in Economics and Psychology. I had been fairly good at economics at school (and better than at Pure Mathematics and History, my other 'A' level subjects). So it seemed an obvious choice for university study. I did not realise how boring it was until I studied it at degree level! But, luckily for me, I had chosen to attend the University of Keele, in the Midlands in the U.K. where all degrees had to be joint honours. And so the second subject that I studied, psychology, proved to be more interesting. The ethos in the psychology department was towards a cognitive brand of psychology (then nothing like as widespread as it is now), and so while we had to learn about rats and conditioning (although I never actually had to touch a

rat, which gives me a lingering sense of accomplishment!), there was also a focus on memory and cognition, a useful, if accidental, starting point for me.

I graduated in 1967. The degree at Keele certainly proved interesting enough to me to induce me to apply for further study, and I was extremely lucky to receive a Roberts Scholarship to work on an M.A. in the Psychology Department at the University of Western Ontario. Here again, luck intervened. Again I managed to avoid handling a rat, despite a reasonable amount of rodent psychology being conducted there (in a special building, luckily a reasonable walk from the main psychology department). There were some cognitively oriented people on the faculty, and so I was introduced to psycholinguistics, social psychology and a lot of cognitive work. My dissertation, supervised by Zenon Pylyshyn and Allan Paivio, explored the psycholinguistics of processing negative sentences, using a Chomskyan foundation mixed with contextual effects. This was the time of great belief in the countability of transformations, and their psychological reality, and so the contextual effects concerned how the complexity of negative transformations was mitigated by the plausibility of negation in some contexts, so that sometimes negation was actually easier to process than were affirmative sentences. I am writing in Auckland in the winter, and so I can attest to the greater plausibility for processing a sentence like 'It's not raining' given the relevance of this to the current state of affairs in New Zealand weather!

The system at Western Ontario for M.A. students was that three graduate courses were taken, followed by a dissertation. In fact, two of the courses were pretty much determined — a contemporary survey course, where we met, in turn, the entire Western Ontario Psychology Faculty, each teaching their specialism; and a research design and statistics course. For the remaining course, my elective, I chose Psycholinguistics, taught by Professor Allan Paivio, and my first substantial contact with the subject. An excellent experience, and one which has paid huge dividends subsequently. Actually the research design and statistics course was

taught by Professor Robert Gardner. At that time I had no idea that his major area of research was the social psychology of motivation (although he guested expertly one week in our Psycholinguistics class). So my perception of Gardner was as a superb teacher of statistics and research design. He taught a seriously demanding course in Analysis of Variance, and did relatively little about his own areas of multivariate statistics. This was an excellent foundation for me (although I didn't realise it at the time). I was being given a thorough grounding in statistics (my undergraduate statistics at Keele was, I have to admit, not exactly cutting edge), and so when later I arrived in the area of applied linguistics, I discovered I had been given, for free, a wonderful underpinning which has become more and more significant over the years. When I was at Western, I was one of around 30 M.A. students, and the department also had something like the same number of Ph.D. students. This itself was a formative experience for me. The elective courses (Psycholinguistics in my case) were done with Ph.D. students sitting in. We also had Teaching Assistant and Research Assistant duties. None of this was familiar to me from my previous education. Nor was I familiar with the functioning of a large department, which Psychology at Western certainly was, and so without knowing the term, I was being inculcated into a discourse community, and this sense of large numbers of postgraduate students interacting together was a revelation to me, and one which has often proved relevant in my subsequent career, from the 'other side of the desk', as it were.

I followed my M.A. in Experimental Psychology by working as a clinical psychologist (untrained) in a large psychiatric hospital in Canada. (It seemed like a good idea at the time.) This was certainly a challenging experience, unlike any other either before or since. This was an era when shutting people up in such large institutions was sadly commonplace, and when treatment often involved nothing more than choice of drug treatment. But stressful though it was, it did lead me into a greater understanding of testing and some psychometrics, as well, strangely, as

behavioural modification, as it was then called. One of the most surreal things I have ever done was be the clinical psychologist on a psychiatric ward for institutionalised, chronic (i.e. they had been there a long time) mentally ill patients, based on the use of a token economy. To watch television, for example, first they had to do something to earn tokens, which were then cashed in by paying for television privileges.

Luckily, that came to an end, and I decided to return to the U.K. Obviously a job was necessary, and given that more work in psychiatric hospitals was definitely out of the question, I worked as a primary school teacher in North London. I taught at a school then classed as an Educational Priority Area school, near Finsbury Park. This was initially bewildering, since here I was, embarking on another untrained career! But I learned a lot, not least how to control a multicultural classful of rambunctious children. I also learned that a key for development is supportive colleagues, who can be very forgiving of ignorance, as long as someone is willing to learn. Initially, my lessons were planned the evening before, on a hand-to-mouth basis, but as time went on I even got to have lessons planned two days in advance! But this was a great introduction to education in an urban environment, and provided lasting insights into variety in classrooms, and the need to develop techniques for mixed ability teaching.

But the wanderlust which had taken me to Canada reasserted itself, and so I moved to France, and discovered the second (or in my case, third) career common to many applied linguists, and became an EFL teacher, first in Paris at a private language school, then at the University of Besancon, and finally back in Paris, organised through Besancon, teaching the pilots of Air France! (During this second period in Paris I completed a second M.A. at the University of Paris III in TESOL, writing a dissertation on foreign language aptitude, an area which was interesting me more and more.)

My first ever job as an EFL teacher in Paris was, to say the least, curious. French law, at that time, required companies to devote a certain

proportion of their budget to continuing education. Many companies, caught by this law but simultaneously wishing to do something useful for themselves, 'persuaded' their employees to learn English. Accordingly, in the Paris area, language teaching schools emerged which catered for this need. Typically, and certainly in my case, this involved teaching very early, then around midday, then at the end of the working day. It also had teachers travelling to companies, all around Paris, so that the classes usually took place in the company. There was even a school car which could be driven, nervously by me, for classes seriously outside Paris, although most teaching involved a metro journey from one company to another. So my day started early with a class of students not yet properly woken up, probably had me in a cafe for a serious chunk of the morning, followed by intensive teaching over lunch, followed by a cafe again, and then the early evening teaching.

Schools were competitive, and so tried to find their Unique Selling Point. Ours was, supposedly, the in-house coursebook series written by the toy-boy (British) husband of the (French) school owner. After our one-week training, this course, looking back, was not bad at all. Certainly, in 1972, it had many traditional features. But we were teaching adults who had passed through the French school and possibly university system, had been exposed to quite a lot of conventional instruction in English, but who couldn't speak a word. So while the course was systematic, and grammar organised, it was appropriately designed for the *faux-debutants* who had quite a lot of latent knowledge, but could not activate it. It was, therefore, surprisingly communicative in nature. Classes were relatively small (generally between four and eight), and although one was usually dealing with fairly tired and stressed students, the conditions were otherwise fairly good. The teacher was encouraged to push learners to speak, and to use any grammatical input as a means to that end. The underlying methodological principle was still P-P-P, i.e. presentation leading to practice leading to production, but the balance between the three phases heavily emphasised production. Units contained what were

portrayed as role plays, but which one could now recognise as tasks. These tasks were generally designed to meet Loschky and Bley-Vroman's (1993) 'useful' condition for a particular structure, i.e. stronger than 'possible' use of a particular structure but much weaker than 'necessary', and unavoidable use of the structure. The explicit instruction to the teacher was to foster the frequency with which a particular structure would be used, but at the same time generate some degree of naturalness in communication. The peripatetic staff of the school, around thirty of us, who would occasionally meet at a cafe to try to subvert the aims of the school, would also swap, much like football cards, their favourite role plays which would allow particular morphosyntactic structures to blossom in class. The teaching was also labelled 'direct method' in that we were forbidden from using any French in class (as if, at that stage, I could have strung more than ten French words together except in my dreams), and so this also provided an interesting constraint which was a great impetus to develop teaching techniques, especially at the beginner level.

I didn't realise any of this at the time, of course. I didn't appreciate the extent to which I was being sheltered, through small classes, and fairly motivated learners. (If someone didn't turn up, that was more or less O.K., since the language school still got paid and the law was being complied with. So the learners who came were there for a reason.) Nor did I realise that much of the difficulty of introducing new language had in fact been handled by the previous educational system. So I was able to use my limited skills to develop language use, and except for the incredibly early start each day, this was a very supportive introduction to ESOL teaching and one which shaped my later teaching and researching.

In order to live in regional France, though, my next post was at the University of Besancon, near the Swiss border, and in the Applied Linguistics Centre of that university. Here there was a mixture of teaching. During the summer, when the Centre made its serious money, large classes were typical (well, thirty or so, which many people

would not consider that large at all, although lecturing apart, that is the largest number I have ever taught). Such students followed a lockstep coursebook which was very structural in orientation, and where the implementation of a PPP approach was much more weighted towards Presentation and Practice, rather than Production. This was my introduction to the way language teaching methodologies can be just as much about crowd control as they are concerned with developing language skills. Certainly once the initial challenge had worn off, this proved to be a dispiriting methodology to try to implement, even though at the same time, I have to realise that a high proportion of the world's language teachers are working under constraints significantly worse than this. Even so, to continue the way I realise I was sheltered, the students in these classes were fee-payers, and so in general they brought their own motivation, as it were.

Out of the summer months we had a variety of teaching to do, although generally with smaller classes. We taught classes at a local university, which was my introduction to ESP, since these were engineering students. We also taught one-on-one classes, for private students who wanted a linguistic 'bath'. This too developed my ideas because in this case, there is no way for you to avoid attention to error correction and the development of the individual learner. It has a different intensity as you are focussed on what the particular learner knows, knew yesterday and needs to be reminded of, and has to be developed. There is no shelter behind a coursebook or general materials, and no alternative to getting inside the head of the learner, and thinking about the nature of acquisition. (One-on-one teaching also has the by-product that it develops your ability to read upside-down.)

In addition, French law being French law everywhere, there were the same continuing education classes. One I remember particularly well. I had been misled that I was to go and teach a new class for the centre, in a local company, of beginners. Honed as I thought my beginner student skills were by this time, I soon got into it. Like most teachers in this



situation, using a direct method approach, I used names, my own, famous people, to get a minimal dialogue going, and instil confidence in these newcomers to the English language. I worked round the class, starting with the ones who, on the basis of dress-sense alone, I had decided knew more English than the others, and then working my way to the ones, still on the basis of dress, who I thought would know less. Things were going well until I reached a student where, after he had heard the same dialogue with several of his colleagues, produced this:

Me: What's your name?

Student: Bonjour.

Me (slightly louder): What's your name?

Student: Bonjour.

Me (loudly and impatiently): **What's your name?**

Student: Bonjour.

At this point, one of the students I hadn't spotted through dress to be proficient coughed and said, in excellent English:

'Actually, his name really is "Bonjour". It's a common enough name in this part of France.'

They turned out not to be beginners, and after a dip in attendance the following week, we got on fine. But it was a chastening experience and showed how over-confidence is a dangerous thing, and that finding out about one's learners is vital.

For my final year in France, I directed a group of teachers in a project to develop the English skills of Air France pilots. Curiously, we were not allowed to teach these pilots anything to do with air traffic control or the conventions of ground-to-air communication. Some Air France engineers who had been made redundant (since flight engineers had just been classified as superfluous) had been given responsibility for this, and lines of demarcation meant we had to stay clear of this work. (Nonetheless, a colleague in our team, Fiona Robertson, went on to write a coursebook, *AirSpeak* (Robertson 1988), which became the very first