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Interview with Rod Ellis on Researching Performance-Assisted Learning: Part 2

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Welcome to the May/June edition of *TLT Interviews*. For this issue we are very happy to bring you the second conversation David Kluge had with renowned linguist Rod Ellis. Continuing from the March/April edition, Dr. Ellis and Mr. Kluge also discussed *Performance-Assisted Learning*, but this time with an emphasis on the research in this field. Rod Ellis received his Doctorate



from the University of London and his Master of Education from the University of Bristol. Dr. Ellis has taught in numerous positions around the world including Temple University both in Japan and the US, and is presently in the Department of Education, Curtin University, Perth, Australia. David Kluge currently works at Nanzan University and his research interests include oral interpretation, speech, drama, debate, composition, and materials development. He is also a co-author of several books on composition and communication. So, without further ado, to the interview!

David Kluge: Thank you for coming and agreeing to do this interview. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of a Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL) approach to language learning and teaching?

Rod Ellis: Well, obviously, a performance-assisted approach is really focusing on encouraging the use of English. So, I think that in any approach to language teaching, one needs to think to a certain extent, about how to help learners acquire the language system of English, and secondly, how they are going to use English. In other words, there is a sort of skill-getting approach to language learning and there is a skill-using approach to language learning.

It seems to me that probably, the Performance-Assisted Learning as you have previously discussed with me, focuses more on the skill-using rather than on the skill-getting. Thus, I think one thing that people probably will need to think about is how Performance-Assisted Learning fits in with an overall approach that also caters to skill-getting and knowledge getting.

I always tell students that the way we teach them to act in debate should be a lesson for them to use when they do academic writing. Would you call that skill-using or skill-getting?

Yeah, I mean in terms of skill-getting, I think there are other things that you could do. One of the discourse structures that has been most investigated and written about, is what is called the problem-solution structure. Learners typically would be given some relevant situation information, then a statement of the problem, and then they would be asked to present a report. Now, the thing that I like about problem-solution is that it really does give a very tight framework for organizing a presentation. Whereas a lot of the other kind of rhetorical advice that is given, like supporting main ideas with evidence, is really rather vague.

Which is also not just an oral communication act but also a writing one.

Oh, very much so. Problem-solution doesn't just occur in expository mode. It also occurs in narratives because many stories typically involve a situation, a problem recounted by one of the characters, how that problem is handled, the solution that they try, whether in fact the solution works out or not, and what eventuates, etc. The problem-solution is absolutely ubiquitous. And thus, it seems to me a very useful structure to teach students and get them to practice performing. You know, it seems to me a much more concrete way of dealing with what you call logical thinking.

Problem-solution is definitely going to generate critical thinking, but it can do so much more than that. Michael Hoey (1983) wrote a whole book about

problem-solution in which he analyzed the kind of language that you get.

What about other weaknesses of the Performance-Assisted Learning approach?

Well, as you know, I'm an advocate of Task-Based Language Teaching, and one of the features of Task-Based Language Teaching is what Michael Long (1997) called Focus on Form, which is the drawing of the learner's attention to linguistic form, while they're trying to communicate. So, one of the things that I think Performance-Assisted Learning has got to take a look at is what you are actually doing to draw the learner's attention to linguistic form in their performances, because ultimately, competence in a language is built up by learners paying attention to the nitty grit bits of language. How does that happen in PAL?

Well, we know that when students are engaging in interaction in the preparation stage, for example in Performance-Assisted Learning, we know that students don't attend to form a lot; they tend to focus on meaning.

Yes, that's usually right.

That's why, really, the job of ensuring that there is this nitty gritty attention to form to a large extent, is going to devolve on the teacher.

In terms of research you talked about areas in which beginning PAL teachers can conduct primary research.

Right. You've got to really research two areas: one area being to look closely at the preparation stage activities, and second, maybe to start investigating different ways in which students can prepare for their performance, different participatory structures (e.g., individually or in small groups).

What approach or approaches would you recommend to researchers of PAL?

There are many possible approaches here, but the one that I would probably initially be interested in is a more descriptive approach. That is to say, I would like to start looking closely at what learners do to prepare, whether they are preparing individually or whether they are preparing in groups, and finding ways of investigating that. In groups or pairs, it means that you transcribe, and then you proceed to carry out a descriptive analysis as to what strategies they're using, to what extent they're focusing on form, what issues they are looking at, etc. In other words, to get detailed information as to what students are doing during the preparation stage. And that would really call for descriptive self-report research.

One of my colleagues requires that students do the transcription of their preparation discussion.

That's one way in which Focus on Form can come, because you can not only ask students to prepare a transcription, but you can ask them to actually edit their transcription and attempt to correct whatever errors they see. And arguably they should have a go at doing that themselves before the transcript goes to the teacher, who might also offer a little bit of corrective feedback, etc. There are interesting questions – for example, if you are asking students to transcribe, then to what extent are they able to correct errors, what types of errors are they able to correct and what types of errors are they not able to correct, etc.?

I think another approach would be an experimental approach. One might want to take a closer look at the preparation stage, and obviously one way that one could investigate what impact the preparation stage has on actual performance, would be to record performances. And so, if one was asking students to prepare individually before a performance or asking students to prepare in groups or pairs before a performance, one might want to compare the quality of the performances from individual preparation as opposed to pair work or group preparation.

There are various ways in which one could do this. One could do it holistically by getting people to rate the quality of it in terms of organization, pronunciation, etc. That's one way. Or one could use a discourse analytic approach where one may look at micro-aspects of their language, complexity, accuracy, fluency, and there is a whole range of different measures available for measuring those constructs. So, if the preparation stage is important, it's worth investigating different types of preparation and seeing what impact they actually have on the quality of performance, and the quality of the language that's used in the performance.

For most of the people doing research, they tend to focus on surveys and questionnaires of the students because it's easier to do. For these people, could you outline the steps that beginning researchers should take when doing quantitative research on Performance-Assisted Learning?

Well, you know, surveys and questionnaires are useful in tapping into learners' attitudes and beliefs towards Performance-Assisted Learning. But they're not going to tell you very much about whether any learning actually takes place, and they're not really going to necessarily tell you what learners did in order to prepare for it, etc. What we really want to know is, what learners do when they're preparing,

what impact preparation has on their performance, what impact cumulative performances have on their long-term proficiency in English, etc. These are the questions, and you can't answer those by means of a questionnaire.

So, the main point is for the teacher's own professional development, it may be interesting to get attitudes of the students towards these performance activities, but in terms of convincing other people of the value of performance in learning, we need to use more quantitative research methods to describe what learning has occurred.

Yes. You know, quantitative research methods don't necessarily involve heavy statistics. Descriptive research can simply tell you the frequencies with which this strategy or that strategy is being used, what feature is present or not present. So, it can give you a picture of what is actually going on. I am suggesting that you actually get down to look at the language that the learners are using, and not just resort to a questionnaire where they tell you what they think about X, Y, and Z because I feel it's not going to take the research a lot further.

You've already talked about some of this, but what do you think are things that researchers in the field of PAL should be careful about or concerned about when conducting research?

Hmm . . . well, you know, good research starts with clear research questions. So, what your group might want to do, would be to sit around and think about some of the key research questions that you would like to try to find answers to with regard to Performance-Assisted Learning. I've been suggesting some in what I've said previously, but there are probably a lot of others that you would be interested in. And remember that the idea of a clearly formulated research question is that it's got to be answerable with data.

That's right.

The question drives the data that you will need in order to answer it, which means that the question itself cannot be vaguely formulated.

I wrote a little paper once that got published in *ELT Journal* and I talked about three ways of carrying out an evaluation of an activity, and this would apply to Task-Based Teaching, but equally to Performance-Assisted Learning. I talked about student-based evaluation, which is typically done by means of a questionnaire. I talked about response-based evaluation, which is to what extent do

you end up with a quality or kind of performance that was intended by the task that was specified for the students? What is the relationship between what you intended to achieve with a particular performance activity and what students actually do? Is there a match between the aims and the goals of the activity and the actual performance itself? And then the third type was a learning-based approach to evaluation which asks, "What did they learn?" And that is much more difficult to answer, particularly in the short term because possibly what learners learn from doing a single performance, is not measurable because it's microscopic, or it's going to vary very much from learner to learner, so it's difficult.

But one might want to try to set out conducting a learning-based evaluation of say a whole course involving Performance-Assisted Learning. You know, "What did they learn at the end?" And again, learning cannot really be effectively measured by questionnaire where you ask the students, "What have you learned?" because half the time they don't know what they've learned. Because a lot of the learning goes on incidentally. You might be interested in the effect that the course has on oral fluency. You might be interested in what effect it has on delivering well-structured performances, etc. To what extent does participating in a semester-long set of Performance-Assisted Learning activities actually result in learning? And that would call for an experimental approach. You would need to measure where they are at the beginning and where they are at the end, and then look to see if there are any differences.

I would want to emphasize two things at this stage for people who are probably not used to doing research: one, sit down and formulate a set of meaningful research questions that can be answered by collecting data; and two, focus initially on response-based evaluations involving descriptive data. Do you agree?

I agree completely. As a matter of fact, this is the purpose of this interview, to start a large-scale quantitative research on the value of Performance-Assisted Learning.

References

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