

Professor Rod Ellis – Task-based language learning

Welcome to this episode of Exploring the Humanities, Voices from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Our podcasts allow us to showcase the exciting and innovative work being done by our colleagues in the humanities. Intersecting with fields as varied as aviation, mental and physical health, virtual reality, Gen AI, design, neuroscience...

I am Renia Lopez from the Faculty of Humanities.

We are very lucky to have with us today, Professor Rod Ellis, Emeritus Distinguished Research Professor at the School of Education, Curtin University, Australia. Professor Ellis, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview and welcome to PolyU.

- It's a pleasure to be here.

Professor Ellis, you have spent most of your life studying how people learn languages. Before we actually get into the research that you do, I think most of us have been students of a second language. Most of us have been in a language class, memorizing vocabulary lists, studying grammar, but when we actually have to speak to someone, we find it really difficult despite having that vocabulary, that grammar. So why does this happen? Why is there such a big gap between studying a language in the classroom and actually using it?

- If you want to use a language, in particular for face-to-face interaction, then the best way to learn it is to learn it the way in which you want to use it through face-to-face interaction. And the problem with classrooms is that they do not typically afford a lot of opportunities for face-to-face interaction. And so, classrooms tend to substitute a different way of learning. They focus on explicit learning, as you said, of vocabulary, grammar, pragmatic features, etc. And you develop an understanding of what these features are, but you don't develop procedural ability in actually using them.
- So, the solution to the problem is to change the way in which you experience learning inside the classroom and to offer more opportunities to learning through using, rather than learning about the language.

So how do we do that in the classroom? Because it sounds ideal, but in practice, is there

a way of doing that?

- Well, this is what really drove the communicative language teaching movement, which started back in the 1980s and evolving out of that communicative language movement, has been a growing interest in task-based language teaching, which is a form of communicative language teaching. Task-based language teaching, the underlying premise, is that students will be engaged in using language receptively, productively, in order to achieve some type of communicative outcome. So, the focus will be on achieving the communicative outcome of a task, rather than on learning language. And the learning of language that takes place in task-based language teaching is therefore incidental, rather than intentional.

Could you give us an example of such a task that we could have in the classroom?

Something very specific?

- Well, let me give you an example from one of my PhD students. Her name was Natsuko Shintani. And what she was interested in doing was trying to see whether it was possible to do task-based language teaching with very young Japanese children, six-year-old Japanese children, who were complete beginners, no English. And therefore, she developed two basic types of tasks. One was what she called going to the zoo, and the other was going to the supermarket.
- Basically, these were both input-based tasks. That is to say, the teacher would give a series of instructions about what animals needed to be taken to the zoo. The children had little pictures of the animals. They would listen to her instructions, and they would have to carry them out, pick up the pictures, take them to the picture of the zoo, put them in a little pocket in the zoo, etc. And similar for the task involved going to the supermarket, etc.
- So, the idea here was that she would not teach vocabulary. She would not teach any grammar. She would simply expose them to instructions, and they would have to work out what the meaning of those instructions was, and then carry out the relevant actions. And she was able to show that they were able to learn not only vocabulary, but even some grammar in this particular way. And she was also able to show that even though she didn't require them to speak, that as time went on, and she repeated the tasks, she found that they did spontaneously start to speak, in very simple ways, but speaking started.

So if one is not teaching grammar explicitly, like the case you've just given us, how do the

students pick up on that grammar? What is the process for them to learn that grammar?

- Well, I think, again, it's best to illustrate this through Shintani's study, because she designed some of the pictures of animals that needed to be taken to the zoo in such a way that some of the pictures were of a single animal, and other pictures were of two animals. And sometimes the instruction would say, "take the hippopotamus to the zoo", and sometimes it would be "take the hippopotamuses to the zoo". And they had to listen carefully in order to identify whether it was singular or whether it was plural. This is a grammatical feature. It's also a grammatical feature that is difficult for Japanese people, because Japanese plurality is not made by adding a feature to the noun in this particular way. And she was able to show that through repeating these tasks several times, they were able to identify the difference between singular and plural. In other words, they were learning grammar, and they were learning it incidentally, without any explicit direct instruction from her.

This is a very good example of a low level of English proficiency and with children. What about when dealing with adults and people with a higher level of proficiency? Does it work as well as with the children, or are there other issues that adults might have?

Because they have already learned their own language, because they might have learned a second language in a very different circumstance, grammar-based for many of them.

Do we see any differences here between the children and the adults?

- There are differences between children and adults. I mean, children are probably better equipped to learn in this rather natural, incidental way. Adults are probably less equipped to deal with learning incidentally, learning implicitly. But it doesn't mean that adults can't do it. And there is plenty of evidence to suggest that adults can pick up the language in much the same way as children pick up the language through being exposed to input in the language, and through opportunities to try to interact in the language. The difference really lies in the rate of learning that children are probably better equipped to learn incidentally, rapidly, particularly vocabulary, but also grammar. Adults probably, because they are more inclined to apply more intentional, explicit learning strategies, probably do not acquire incidentally, implicitly, as rapidly as children.
- My own position has been that the process of getting started in learning a language ought to be this implicit, incidental learning process. And that would be true of children and adults. But with adults, I would probably want to supplement the task-based approach

that they experience inside the classroom with opportunities for more explicit learning. And this can be done in a variety of ways. One might be to delay the explicit teaching process until learners have at last got used to the idea of processing input in the language, being able to understand it, and being ready to start saying something. Maybe that might be the time when one can introduce a more explicit approach.

- I've also suggested that with adult learners, the two things could carry on side by side. I personally think that the classroom should be used as a place for incidental implicit learning, but there can be activities that they carry out outside the classroom that can involve a much more explicit learning process.
- I don't think you'll be able to stop adults from approaching the language through explicit learning. I don't think we should try to stop them doing that. I think that what we need to do is to make them aware that if that's all they do, as you originally suggested, they may not actually be able to end up communicating with any degree of confidence and fluency in the language. And that is why they need to experience the process of learning to interact through trying to interact.

I think quite a lot of people believe that task-based learning is just not interested in grammar and it pushes grammar aside and doesn't integrate it. But from what you're saying here, the two things can go side by side and develop together if necessary.

- Well, that's one way of dealing with the grammar versus no grammar issue, is to think of a sort of modular program, one of which would be impurely task-based and the other of which would have a more explicit language learning component. But it's actually wrong to assume that task-based language teaching has no grammar. There are various ways in which learners' attention on grammar can be focused.
- Let me go back again to the Shintani study. Remember that she embedded the issue of singular versus plural into her task-based approach and sometimes asking an instruction in the singular, sometimes in the plural. And she found various ways of focusing their attention on the difference between the singular and the plural in the context of doing the task, not by stopping them and telling them how to make nouns singular and plural, but embedding it into the actual flesh and blood of the task, so to speak. So she would say, "Okay, take the squirrel to the zoo" and the students would look puzzled and she would say, "Squirrel, squirrel, squirrel". And then one of them would say in Japanese, "One" and she would say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah". And another time she would say, "Take the

squirrels to the zoo" and they would look puzzled and she would say, "SquirrelS, squirrelS" etc., helping them to notice the S-morpheme at the end of the noun, etc., and they would still look puzzled, and she would say, "Two, two" and she would hold up her hand to show two fingers, etc. In other words, she was doing an enormous amount to make them pay attention to the difference between the singular noun and the plural noun, and that is what good teachers do.

- Now, embedded in task-based language teaching is the idea that through various ways you do focus learners' attention on grammatical features while they are actually in the process of trying to communicate.

So, as you have said, there is a lot of work for the teacher. It requires a lot of thinking as to how to deliver the content so that the task is successful. What are the other issues, fears or misconceptions that teachers have when they hear about task-based teaching?

- You said it would need a lot of thinking in order to do what Shintani did. I think you're wrong. I mean, Shintani had a lot of skills as a natural teacher, and she didn't think about what she was going to do in advance. She just simply responded to what she could see about the children's comprehension as she gave an instruction, and then she responded to that.
- Now, I think we all have that ability that when we are communicating with someone, if we say something that they don't understand, we can see it on their face, and we proceed to find ways to help them understand, and we do this naturally. This is part of the communicative competence that we have developed, the ability to help people understand when they have problems in understanding.

What about other misconceptions or fears that teachers might have? Because we do not see task-based teaching and learning all that often, or as often as we would like to see it, thinking about the product, the final product. So, what is it that prevents more teachers from implementing this in their classes?

- I think there are a number of reasons why implementing task-based language teaching can be problematic. One is undoubtedly context. The teachers themselves may never have learned through task-based language teaching. They may have learned in a much more traditional way, and then through the opportunity to communicate in English, gradually develop communicative ability. So, they may feel that "if I learned this way, my

students should learn this way as well”, and this may be why they might be reluctant to move away from a more structural, grammar-based type of approach to language teaching.

- Another reason why they may find it difficult to do so is because structural-based teaching tends to give the teacher much more control over what is going on inside the classroom, particularly if it's quite a large classroom, which involves putting students into pairs and groups, because many tasks do involve putting students into pairs and groups, and therefore there is a potential loss of control, keeping children quiet while they are doing tasks, stopping them from using their L1 [first language], etc. These are noted problems about task-based language teaching. I mean, I think there are solutions to that, but the solutions do require effective teacher training about how to implement tasks in classrooms to ensure their maximal effect, etc. So, that's the second reason.
- I think the third reason is examinations, maybe less so in Hong Kong, but certainly in the Chinese mainland, where the examinations tend to still be very often quite formal, testing grammar, testing vocabulary knowledge, etc., rather than simply attesting language use and the ability to communicate in writing, in reading, in all the skills. So, those are three reasons why task-based language teaching. I can give you a fourth.
- The fourth is undoubtedly publishers. Publishers want to sell books, and if you wanted to design a book that was entirely task-based, you would need to write a proposal, give examples about what you wanted to do, and send it to the publisher. The publisher would look at it and they would take it around their teachers, and they would say, "Could you use these materials?" Now, the teachers are not used to task-based language teaching. They do not understand its rationale, and therefore, they might say no, because it's very different from what they did. So, the publisher sends a "No, we can't publish it." And so, what happens is that we get the same type of book published again and again, with new pictures and a few different types of topics and activities, but essentially endless repetition of a much more structural approach to language teaching.

So, as you've mentioned, AI can be a very powerful tool. How can we actually use AI as teachers in the language classroom?

- I think AI is very useful for teachers in a number of ways and can also be a way of maximizing practice for the actual learners inside the classroom. To start with the first, how can it help teachers? Well, it can help teachers actually to develop to generate the

tasks that they would like to use with their students in the classroom. AI will not only come up with a suggestion for a task, but it will actually develop the actual materials that you need for the task. In fact, AI can also generate complete lesson plans for how to use a particular task. This will require some skill on the part of the teacher, because AI will only work effectively if you know how to prompt it effectively. And therefore, increasingly part of teacher education ought to be preparing teachers to construct prompts, which they can use in AI in order to generate the kinds of materials that they actually want.

- Moving to your second question, how can it actually help learners inside the classroom? Well, AI can function as an AI agent, which students can interact with. Much of task-based language teaching does center around interactive tasks performed in pairs, or sometimes in small groups, etc. And there are limitations as to how learners can interact successfully in pairs when they are in peer-to-peer interaction. They will be exposed to their own errors, for example, they may not be very good at providing feedback, etc.
- An AI agent can be programmed to respond to a learner in performing a particular task. And there are a number of recent articles that have been written that have documented the way in which an AI agent can be used to interact with the individual student. Of course, this doesn't actually require a classroom; it can be done outside the classroom. And therefore, it will be possible to provide learners with lots of opportunities to perform tasks with an AI agent outside the classroom.
- There are issues as to whether the AI agent can interact in a truly authentic way. And there is some evidence to say that there are limitations into what AI agents can do. But these limitations can be adjusted by instructing the AI agent to interact in the way in which you want it to interact. So, I think there's a lot of potential there, right?

Do you think there might also be an issue if we have a generation of students who have developed their language skills via interactions with avatars and then have to do face-to-face with real people? Do you think there might also be an issue there? As you mentioned before, a teacher, when teaching, is able to pick up on what is happening in the classroom and respond immediately as part of the communication as well. So, are we risking losing that element when our students learn via avatars?

- Well, we all know that AI and AI agents, what you're calling avatars, we're still in a very early period of what avatars can do in terms of their ability to behave interactionally, including all the nonverbal ways in which people interact when they are communicating,

etc. So as things stand at the moment, I think there are quite serious limitations. I think also if a human student is interacting with a non-human avatar, then that student knows that the avatar is non-human and that in itself is potentially going to affect how the communication takes place. So as things stand at the moment, I would probably say no, that AI agents cannot totally substitute for human agents in providing the very rich, verbal and nonverbal communication that is a future of interaction.

I also know that you've been studying non-native English speakers. What are the unique strengths and challenges that you see in a teacher who is also a learner of English and how does that impact their teaching?

- Well, this question really is getting at what is a particularly important issue, which is what differences are there in so-called “native speaking teachers” as opposed to “non-native speaking teachers”.
- Well, first of all, we need to recognize that this distinction between native speaker and non-native speaker is very challengeable these days and many people taking a more socio-political perspective on that distinction would argue that it is a fairly meaningless one. What is a native speaker? What is a non-native speaker? I think what is crucial is the extent to which the teacher is an expert and an expert in two things: An expert in this ability to communicate that I described earlier, to go back to Shintani, she had a natural ability to be able to communicate with these children. She wasn't a so-called native speaker. She was an expert inside that classroom. And of course, the other thing is not just being a sufficiently expert in interacting in the language, but also being an expert as a teacher and therefore knowing how to manage yourself with students in a classroom, whether it's a web-based classroom or whether it's a real classroom.
- So, I think that probably we need to perhaps stop talking about native speakers and non-native speakers and look instead at these two types of skills, the skill needed in order to be able to function as a teacher delivering, implementing a task and the actual teacher skills needed to be able to manage a class.

I think this is a very important point, especially for the majority of our students whose mother tongue might not be English.

- One other point, if I can. Generally speaking, the advantages of task-based language teaching are discussed in terms of their ability to develop an authentic ability to

communicate in the language by students. Task-based language teaching is very good for teachers too, including teachers who are still in the process of developing their expertise in using English inside the classroom. It's not only learners who learn through task-based language teaching, but it's teachers who learn as well.

What is it that teachers learn? Do tell us more about that.

- Well, teachers have the opportunity to proceduralize their knowledge of English. Their knowledge of English might still be very reliant on more declarative-type knowledge, so having to actually try to communicate in English is a way that will help them to proceduralize that more explicit knowledge that they already have. It's also a way of helping them to fine-tune their communicative abilities as they're teaching a class.

Is there anything else that you would like to clarify for our audience in terms of task-based teaching, learning, the role of the student, or the role of the teacher?

- Well, the one thing that we haven't really talked about is the structure of the task-based lesson. And typically, a task-based lesson does involve three stages: a pre-task stage, something you do before students perform the main task, then the performance of the main task, and then a post-task stage.
- And task-based language teaching is about task-based lessons consisting potentially of these three parts. And we've tended to focus on the performance of the main task and not talk about the pre-task stage, or the post-task stage. But there are lots of options and lots of possibilities that will help teachers to manage task-based language teaching in the pre-task and the post-task stages. But that would really need another interview.

Could you perhaps give us a very, very quick example, going back to the Japanese students, as to how the three phases were done in that class?

- She didn't actually use three phases. The three phases are not obligatory. The only thing that is obligatory in a task-based lesson is the main task stage. And she elected to do everything through the main task stage. But you look at older learners dealing with more complex types of tasks, and probably there is a need for a pre-task stage. One of the options available in the pre-task stage is to give the student the materials for the task and ask them to plan how they will communicate while they're doing the task. So, they can engage in what is called pre-task planning.

- And here's another use for AI, because if they want, they can look up language that they might want to use in the main task stage when they perform the task. So, pre-task planning has attracted a lot of research, including some of my own research, and is an effective way of preparing students to do the task.
- Notice it's not the same as pre-teaching the language, because you're not pre-teaching the language. You're giving the student the materials, and you're saying, "What language would you use in order to do this task? What would you want to say? What language would you choose in order to do it?" So, the language is coming from the student, or possibly from AI, through consulting AI. And I think that's very different from the teacher making predictions about what language would be needed to do the task, and then trying to pre-teach that language.

And then what happens after the main task?

- Well, after the main task, there is the post-task stage, and there are a whole variety of things that can be done after the post-task stage. For example, one quite effective activity would be to ask the students to prepare a transcript of what they said while they were doing the task, and then to look at the transcript and try to identify maybe particular errors that they made, and think about how they could correct those errors, etc. So, notice there is again the opportunity for more explicit language learning once the task has been completed.

Thank you for that clarification. For someone listening who might have had bad experiences learning a language in school, or who feels they're just not good at languages, what is the one piece of advice that you would give them? Where should they start?

- It sounds like me. I mean, I learned two languages at school. I learned French at school, and I learned German at school. And I've never learned to be a successful communicator in either of those languages. I have learned a third language, because I went to live in Spain for a while, and I learnt Spanish in bars and cafes, interacting with people. And I have much more procedural ability in Spanish than I do in French and German, despite the fact that for French and German, I spent five years learning them in classrooms. So, I think that gives you the answer, that basically, you have to get yourself into a situation where you have to communicate in the language.

So, students out there go to bars, go to cafes, and interact with people.

- Yes, although these days, it might also be possible to do it through the internet.

But it'd be more fun to go to the country.

- Well, not everybody wants to go to bars and cafes like I did.

Professor Ellis, thank you so much for your time. Thank you for all of this information about task-based teaching and language. Hopefully, we will see you again soon at Polyu. Thank you.

Thank you for joining us on exploring the humanities from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. For more episodes or information, visit our website or follow us on Spotify. Stay tuned for discussions with leading voices from the Faculty of Humanities and beyond.