

10 TENS QUESTIONS



for
Jack C.
Richards

You'd be hard pressed to find anyone in ELT with the depth and range of experience of this month's interviewee. Jack C. Richards is a home-grown talent, born in New Zealand, and in his more than 40 years in the industry, he has taught and presented in numerous countries, including Canada, Singapore and Hong Kong, and has written over 150 articles and books, among them *The Language Teaching Matrix* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (with Ted Rodgers, Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., 2014), and *Key Issues in Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Although he has retired from full-time work, he continues to teach at the University of Sydney and the Regional Language Centre Singapore and is a regular speaker at conferences around the world. It is a privilege to have him as our 10 Questions guest for this issue.

1. In a career spanning more than 40 years, you have undoubtedly seen numerous changes in the TESOL field. For you, what have been some of the most significant changes you have observed?

Well for one thing, the theoretical foundations of the profession have changed enormously as well as the requirements of those entering the field. English language teaching is no longer thought of as something that anyone who can speak English can do. It is now seen to require a specialised knowledge base, obtained through both academic study and practical experience, and it is a field of work where membership is based on entry requirements and standards.

Another source of change has been the result of the global spread of English and the emergence of English as the world's second language. 40 years ago the assumption was that teaching English was a politically neutral activity and acquiring it would bring untold blessings to those who succeeded in learning it. English was regarded as the property of the English-speaking world, particularly Britain and the US. Native-speakers of the language had special insights and superior knowledge about teaching it. And it was above all the vehicle for the expression of a rich and advanced culture or cultures, whose literary artifacts had universal value. This picture has changed somewhat today. Now that English is the language of globalisation, international communication, commerce and trade, the media and pop culture, different motivations for learning it come into play. English is no longer viewed as the property of the English-speaking world but is an international commodity that we refer to as World English or English as an International Language. The cultural values of Britain and the US are often seen as irrelevant to language teaching, except in situations where the learner has a pragmatic need for such information. The language teacher need no longer be an expert on British and American culture and a literature specialist as well.

Thirdly I think the location for the learning of English has moved beyond the classroom. Looking back to the pre-Internet days, the assumption was that the learning of English was dependent on improvement in classroom practices. The method was seen as central and the assumption was that effective learning was the result of micro-managing classroom processes based on the techniques prescribed in the method. However today most learners learn more from contacts with English beyond the classroom through the use of technology and the Internet and so the role of classroom teaching is often very different. It serves to prepare them for out of class learning, much of which they do independently.

2. Speaking personally, can you tell us about an 'a-ha' moment you had in your career?

A crucial event for me was the 1970 TESOL Convention in San Francisco, where I presented a paper on error analysis that caused quite a ripple at the event and 'launched' me into

the applied linguistics community and led to many conference invitations and publications. I was half-way through my PhD at the time so this was a major turning point for me. I wonder how my career would have developed had I not attended that conference.

3. If you were a careers advisor, what would you say to someone thinking of going into TESOL now?

I would advise them to decide what and where they would like to teach, to prepare themselves as thoroughly as possible and to aim to complete a master's degree in the field as soon as possible. I would encourage them not to avoid the tough courses and to make sure they had a good grounding in language assessment and in the use of technology. However I would also let them know that in many places ESL teachers face many difficulties in establishing a long-term career in the field, due to poor employment conditions and to the status of the teaching profession in some contexts.

4. As the author of numerous reference books and coursebooks, how have you seen the ELT publishing industry change over time? Do you have any advice for would-be writers wanting to find a way in?

There are very different factors involved in writing professional or academic books and in writing coursebooks and in both cases there are no easy routes to enter publishing. In the case of the former, many of the major publishers are reducing the number of academic titles they publish because they are often not particularly profitable. For example, a typical academic title that might be on the reading list of an MA course might not sell more than 10,000 copies during its lifetime. Some of course sell a lot more but many also sell a lot less. Writing books of this kind involves finding an area where a new book might be needed, submitting a proposal with sample chapters, and if the book is commissioned, working under the guidance of an editor to prepare the book for a particular market.

In the case of coursebooks, there is much less scope for authors than there was 40 years ago. Increasingly many publishers are doing away with the role of an author. Some publishers will not consider any unsolicited proposals from prospective authors. More commonly, a publisher identifies the need for a new book through market research and comes up with an initial concept for a course. A number of writers are then invited to submit sample materials and the most appropriate is chosen. It's not unusual for a team of writers to be commissioned to work on a course which consists of a number of levels and components. Increasingly the writers are freelancers who receive a fee rather than a royalty based on sales.

5. It has often been said that there is a significant research-practice gap in this field – do you think this is still true and if so, how can we bridge that gap?

I think there will always be a divide between research and practice since researchers

and practitioners often have very different goals and needs. Researchers often pursue issues that they are interested in and that they feel will help establish their reputation as scholars and are often less interested in potential applications to teaching if any. However there is also a growing group of researchers who focus on teaching-related and teacher-education issues and their work often has implications for teaching. I think there is room for both approaches, since advances in knowledge often come from the first approach while changes in practice are often informed by the second approach.

6. There are many different varieties of English at work in the Asia-Pacific region (as anywhere). What does this mean for teachers (and teacher trainers) in the region, not only with regard to their learners, but also to themselves?

For teachers whose first language is not English, they need to decide what kind of spoken English they value and how English relates to the sense of their individual identity. These days there are many options, and teachers and learners have choices as to the kind of English they want to speak. Since in many contexts learners will be using English as a lingua franca there is less pressure to try to mimic ‘native-speaker’ accents and styles of speaking. When it comes to writing, however, there is an international standard that does not vary much from country to country. Depending on the teaching context, learners need to understand that there are many different Englishes and they will need to decide what an appropriate target is for them.

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7. You have worked extensively in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as around the world. Do you think the ELT ‘scene’ in our part of the world differs from its US and European counterparts? In what ways?

I have spent a great deal of time teaching and meeting teachers in many parts of the world in the last 30 years, though mainly in Latin America and Asia. There are different kinds

of ELT communities in these countries. One group are those with little training and who work in private institutes, using my textbooks in many cases. These are typically young people who see their ability to speak English as a resource that can help them develop a career. Many would have an intermediate-level command of English. They recognize their limitations, and in many cases are keen to develop themselves professionally. This is the work force that is responsible for teaching millions of learners worldwide. Another smaller group are those who work at universities and other kinds of institutions, who have TESOL qualifications and may be keen to go further with their academic studies.

In Australia and New Zealand we have a different demographic and there is a greater number of teachers with higher-level qualifications. Conferences of ELT professionals often have a more academic focus, since there are so many universities producing teacher-researchers with a solid grounding in research and current issues. There is less need for the kind of basic-level support that is still the focus of many professional events I participate in elsewhere.

8. Are you still involved in teaching?

Yes, I am one of those fortunate people who can choose how much teaching I want to do and where. This year for example I will be teaching graduate courses in Singapore and the Philippines as well as speaking at conferences and workshops in the UK, Qatar, Oman, Iran, Hong Kong, Thailand and elsewhere. I enjoy these opportunities since I meet fascinating people from many different backgrounds who all share a concern to improve standards of teaching and learning in the places where they live and work.

9. Are you working on any special projects at the moment? What's next for you?

Cambridge have just published my latest book – *Key Issues in Language Teaching* – an 800+-page overview of the field as I see it. I have two other projects with Cambridge to appear in 2017. One is a substantially revised version of my book *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*, and the other is *The Cambridge Guide to Learning Second Languages*, which Anne Burns and I have edited. I am currently planning a book on pre-service TESOL teacher education. I have also recently recorded a series of video talks that will be available throughout 2016 on the Cambridge English Teacher site.

10. What are some of your other interests?

About half of my time involves activities in music and the arts. In the music domain I sponsor a number of emerging musicians in both Australia and New Zealand, I co-sponsor a composer-in-residence program in Wellington, I am a patron of the Gisborne International Music Competition, and I organize some 10 concerts by young musicians each year in New Zealand. In the arts field I have a decorative arts gallery in the Tairāwhiti Museum in Gisborne New Zealand showing items from my art collection, and am also patron of a program for young Māori artists, also in Gisborne.

Jack Richards has had an active career in the Asia-Pacific region and is currently an honorary professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney. In 2011 he was awarded an honorary doctorate of literature by Victoria University, Wellington, for his services to education and the arts and in 2014 received the Award for Patronage from the Arts Foundation of New Zealand.

www.professorjackrichards.com

If you would like to write an article in Classroom Talk for the *English Australia Journal*, please contact:
classroomtalk@englishaustralia.com.au