

## One-on-One: Interview with Jack C Richards

### Albert P'Rayan

Professor of English, KCG College of Technology, Chennai

E-mail : rayanal@yahoo.co.uk

**Jack C. Richards** is a well-known name in English Language Teaching (ELT). Everyone who has specialized in ELT or has some knowledge in the field must have read at least one or two books written by Dr Richards. An authority on English-language acquisition, teacher training, and materials design, Richards has many successful publications to his credit. Some of his books are New Interchange Series, Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, and Curriculum Development in Language Teaching. In this One-on-One with **Albert P'Rayan**, Richards responds to questions on his experience as a teacher and ELT materials designer, twenty-first century skills, native-speakerism, specialization in literature versus specialization in language teaching, culture, action research, and so on.

[APR – Albert P' Rayan; JCR – Jack C Richards]

**APR:** Professor Richards, many thanks for accepting my request to be interviewed for the *Journal of English Language Teaching*, published by the English Language Teachers' Association of India (ELTAI). Let me ask you my first question. You have visited India and interacted with teachers of English in the country. What is your impression of English language teaching in India?



**Jack C. Richards**

**JCR:** I have only visited India once recently, and did not have the opportunity to learn much from my limited contact with the participants at the conference. What I did learn was the high level of professional interest and motivation among the teachers I met, who are very keen to interact and exchange views with visiting specialists such as myself. I got the impression of a dynamic professional community of ELT specialists who are committed to providing a quality teaching and learning environment for their students.

**APR:** You have taught in different countries including Brazil, Canada, Singapore and Hong Kong. What is your most memorable teaching experience? Why?

**JCR:** *Perhaps my experience over many years teaching both full time and more recently as a visiting professor at the Regional Language Centre in Singapore - the teachers who take courses at RELC come from 10 different countries and bring a wealth of experience with them, providing a rich and fascinating learning community.*

**APR:** How important was it for you to understand the culture of a country when you taught at universities in different countries?

**JCR:** *Culture is a very broad term which can be interpreted in different ways. What is most relevant to my experience is what can be called the “cultures of teaching and learning”, which provide the context in which teachers operate. These often have quite distinct dimensions in different countries, and this can be seen in the assumptions about teaching and learning that teachers operate within, in how they see their roles and identity in the classroom as well as the local constraints that shape their teaching practice and which create different possibilities or limitations for teaching and learning.*

**APR:** How useful is a specialization in literature, for teaching English?

**JCR:** *A knowledge of literature is essential for a teacher of literature, but has little relevance to language teaching. In the same way a specialization in linguistics or applied linguistics would not be a good basis for the teaching of literature. The core subject matter of language teaching is knowledge of the English language, second language learning*

*theory, and language teaching pedagogy, and as fascinating as literature is, it adds little to our understanding of language teaching.*

**APR:** You are an internationally recognized authority on ELT materials design. The coursebooks you have authored are used in various countries. I have used the *Interchange* series (CUP) in India. How important is it for an ELT coursebook writer to know the target audience and their cultural background?

**JCR:** *International courses such as Interchange are not designed for a specific context or audience, and are used in countries with very diverse cultural backgrounds, such as China, India, Mexico, the US and Brazil, for example. In using them in a specific context, the teacher will need to adapt and localize the course, adding and supplementing it to make it more suitable for the local context.*

**APR:** Coursebooks prepared by experts who are not exposed to the local culture are used in different countries. Don't you think that it is important for native teachers and materials designers to prepare coursebooks for the local students?

**JCR:** *There is of course, room for both. In some contexts, students may prefer internationally produced materials since they may offer resources not provided by locally produced materials. However, ideally, locally produced materials with the same quality and standards as international materials will often be better suited to students' needs.*

**APR:** Communication, Collaboration,

Creativity and Critical Thinking, known as 4C's, are considered 21st century skills and essential to prepare students for the workforce. Do you think it is important to incorporate these skills into English coursebooks?

**JCR:** *Few would disagree with this.*

**APR:** Could you please give your views on the importance of these four skills?

**JCR:** *My difficulty with concepts such as these is that they are so general as to be almost meaningless. They are the kinds of words the planners and politicians like to use and the 4 C's make for a catchy slogan. However, they need to be operationalized in quite specific and practical ways before they can be seriously evaluated.*

**APR:** Should all English language teachers be trained to become materials writers? Will it help teachers to become more effective in the English classroom?

**JCR:** *Yes, all teachers need to be able to develop classroom materials, since they are in the best position to know what interests their students and what their needs are. This does not necessarily mean that they need to write their own textbooks since textbook writing is a specialized activity that may not interest or be suitable for teachers unless they have had special training. However, developing, adapting and using classroom materials is a core competency for teachers.*

**APR:** What challenges do you face as an ELT materials writer?

**JCR:** *Each project has its own challenges. I*

*am currently general editor for a college English series for Chinese university students. This involves collaboration with a number of international writers as well as a team of Chinese consultants and advisors, so negotiating the expectations of all the stakeholders is a key issue in this project.*

**APR:** Will the role of English language teachers change because of integrating technology into language teaching? How should English language teachers of the 21st century prepare themselves to teach Gen-Z learners?

**JCR:** *Technology has transformed the learning landscape for learners as well as teachers. Technology, the media and the internet can provide a far richer input to learning than is available in the classroom, so today's teachers need to know how to draw on the affordances that technology can provide, as well as how to use the classroom as a preparation for out-of-class technology-mediated learning.*

**APR:** Of late, there is much emphasis on 'action research'. Do you think it is important for teachers to become researchers?

**JCR:** *When we talk about research we need to distinguish formal academic research, and classroom research (of which action research is one example). The goal of formal research is to add knowledge and to seek generalizable results. It requires special training, uses rigorous research methods and the results are not necessarily of practical application. Action research is teacher-*

*conducted research that seeks to clarify and resolve practical teaching issues and problems. It is built around normal classroom practice, addresses a local issue, and does not seek generalizability. Its goal is to improve teaching and learning, is conducted during normal teaching process, is small scale and problem-oriented, and is carried out by a single teacher or by a group of teachers.*

**APR:** How important is professional development for teachers of English? In what ways can ESL/EFL teachers develop themselves professionally in their own countries?

**JCR:** *Professional development is essential for all teachers, since not everything a teacher needs to know can be learned on one's initial teacher training. The field of language teaching changes, as do learners' and teachers' needs. The starting point for professional development is a review of one's own professional development and professional needs, and then developing an action plan to address one's professional needs.*

**APR:** Wherever English is taught as an ESL or EFL, western theories formulated/suggested by native speakers of English are in practice. You have also written the book *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Is it not important for local, non-native English language teaching experts to come up with their own theories? For example, NS Prabhu popularized Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in India.

**JCR:** *I think the assumption here is quite*

*incorrect. Many of the key advocates of current approaches in language teaching have been developed outside of the English-speaking world, by people such as Ortega (Spain), Van den Branden (Belgium), and Shehadeh (Iran). The major impetus in language teaching in many countries today is the Common European Framework of Reference, which as its name suggests is a European initiative.*

*Many people no longer find the distinction between "native speaker" and "non-native speaker" relevant. For example, over 40% of Singaporeans use English as their home language and are therefore "native speakers" by any definition. To avoid the charge of "native-speakerism", many people prefer to refer to "expert users of English" to describe speakers with "native-like" fluency in English. There are probably more of such speakers in India today than there are in the United Kingdom. To my mind, the important issue is not the origin or nationality of a theory but whether it is evidence-based and appropriate to context. Here, localized understandings may be more relevant than imported ones.*

**APR:** TESOL, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2016, honoured you as one of the fifty TESOL specialists worldwide. How significant is this recognition to you?

**JCR:** *This was an unexpected honour and one which both surprised and inspired me. It was wonderful to hear that my colleagues arrived at this assessment of my contributions to the field over the years.*

**APR:** Professor Richards, many thanks

again for the time you spent answering my questions. Finally, what is your message to young English language teachers in India?

**JCR:** Thank you. I would say to young

*teachers today: learn as much as you can, make use of what you know, and try your best to make a difference in whatever teaching situation you find yourself in.*

#### **Letter to the Editor**

Prof. Albert P'Rayan's article, **Learn, Relearn, Unlearn: Professional Development Opportunities through ELTAI**, published in the March–April 2019 issue of JELT, is very informative on the yeoman service being rendered by the ELTAI to the committed English teaching fraternity. It was an opportunity to remember its founder, the great educationist Padmashree S Natarajan, who planted the seeds of ELTAI, which has grown into a giant tree in the span of these fifty years under which thousands of English teachers are not only being sheltered but are enjoying the fruits of it through professional development. It is quite apt for all the members of ELTAI to read the article and for every English teacher in India on the eve of ELTAI's Golden Jubilee Annual and International Conference 2019.

In the same issue of the journal, Prof. S Mohanraj's guidance through his article, **To write or not to ... The art of writing a research paper**, on the basic and essential points to remember while writing a research paper is no doubt immensely helpful to researchers, particularly those who try to write a research paper for the first time, as many researchers find difficulty in understanding the difference between the title of a research paper and thesis on the same content. He has explained it in a simple way for better understanding along with all the essential things required to keep in mind to produce a qualitative research paper.

- **Dr Reddi Sekhar Reddy**, Associate Professor of English, Christ University, Bangalore.