

Meet the speakers

Plenary speaker: David Crystal

Interview with Professor David Crystal

by Paulina Christiaens (BELTA Editor)



Thank you, professor Crystal, for accepting our invitation and becoming the plenary speaker at our 5th anniversary BELTA Day - it is an honour and enormous pleasure.

I would like to start this interview with the very beginning of your career path. What made you decide to be involved in the English language and all its aspects?

Professor Crystal: First, a general curiosity about languages and why they are different, arising from growing up in a bilingual community (North Wales). Later, a fascination with English literature, and a desire to be a writer. The combination of these two interests led me to look for a degree course that balanced language and literature, and I found this in the English Department at University College London. It was the range of the linguistic side of the subject - phonetics, place-names, the history of the language, stylistics, and much more - along with the brilliance of my teachers, especially Randolph Quirk, that convinced me that this was the subject for me.

What challenges did you encounter as a teacher and lecturer that teachers nowadays do not face? Or maybe they still do?

Professor Crystal: I began my teaching career in linguistics when the subject was in its university infancy, and there were few precedents to advise anyone how to teach the subject, and no introductory textbooks at all. Today, there are dozens of courses and books. The challenge now is perhaps the opposite: how to choose! *During the last 20 years the approach of teaching English as*

a foreign language has been evolving and developing in new directions. What changes do you consider as the most significant ones? And, in which direction is ELT heading?

Professor Crystal: Well, I am not a teacher, in the usual EFL sense, so I don't have a real sense of the success or otherwise of new approaches in the classroom. I have never had the experience of teaching the language to learners. My role has always been in relation to teacher-training, either at postgraduate or diploma level in university or through in-service courses around the world. And there I see a significant move over the past couple of decades towards a more confident professionalism. Professionalism, to my mind, has to have a foundation in knowledge - which in my case means a sophisticated awareness of the English language, in all its forms and uses, and especially about its changing character in the light of global and digital influences. These forces will only increase, as time goes by, so keeping up with their linguistic effects is probably the main challenge facing teachers who want to maintain an up-to-date professional outlook.

Do you think that there is a growing discrepancy between what a textbook says and how the 'street' talks?

Professor Crystal: I don't know about 'growing'. There has always been a discrepancy. This became very clear back in the 1960s when the first really detailed surveys of conversational English took place. When Derek Davy and I wrote a book called

Advanced Conversational English (1975), the title was ironic. All we meant was 'normal conversational English' - but this was so far removed from the kind of dialogues that were routine in teaching materials in those days that whenever I talked about its features in lectures, teachers would tell me that this was 'really advanced' stuff. Things have moved on greatly. Many textbooks now include material on varieties of English that are much closer to natural everyday conversation (in the street and on the Internet) than ever before. Note I say 'include'. Formal varieties of English are as important today as they ever were. It isn't a question of one variety replacing another, but of the learner coming to appreciate their different roles and to develop a clear sense of their appropriateness.

The English language is constantly changing. What can ESL teachers do to keep up to date and how can they evaluate what to focus on while teaching, for example, pronunciation?

Professor Crystal: Yes, there is always change, but we mustn't exaggerate it. Most of the language stays the same, from one generation to the next. Vocabulary is obviously the area where there is most change. But if we compare the English grammar of today with that of a century ago it is very largely the same. And if we listen to the earliest recordings of spoken English - such as Florence Nightingale talking in the 1890s (available online), we hear a conservative but perfectly familiar Received Pronunciation. So the problem is not as great as it is sometimes thought to be. The main focus, to my mind, should be on the evolving varieties of global English, which should permeate work on listening and reading comprehension. I don't see much need to alter practices in teaching production, other than perhaps to develop a more flexible sense of what counts as 'correct', in the light of current change.

But when it comes to comprehension, then surely everything changes, as students are having to cope all the time with global linguistic variation through their own personal mobility, the multicultural societies in which they live, and the Internet (where they spend a great deal of their time outside the classroom). An experience of global linguistic variation in English isn't something that should be postponed to a late place in a syllabus. It should be there from the outset.

In your book from 1997 "English as a global language" you provide the readers with a definition of pragmatics. Allow me to quote: "Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (p.301) Is there anything in this definition that you would change, or add now?

Professor Crystal: My current definition is almost the same: 'the study of the choices people make in their use of language, the reasons for those choices, and the effects that those choices convey'. Nothing is more important than a pragmatic perspective, as it provides what is missing in traditional descriptive accounts: an explanation. Why do people use one form - a particular word, grammatical construction, intonation pattern... - rather than another? Pragmatics aims to answer this question. I find that students value this perspective, as it gives them *reasons* for usage, and a deeper sense of 'how the language works'.

And lastly, what advice would you give to the new ESL teachers who are standing just on the threshold of their professional career?

Professor Crystal: Never forget or underestimate the profound significance of your achievement in becoming an ESL teacher. I don't know of any more challenging intellectual task than getting to grips with language, as it enters into every domain of human experience, and there is nothing to match its behavioural scope - 40+ sounds organized into several hundred syllable types, which combine into tens of thousands of words, which are organized into sentence patterns constrained by several thousand rules and tendencies, which are then used in an indefinitely wide range of discourse situations, enabling people to interact, work, think, and play and, in short, grow as human beings. The language teacher, along with the interpreter and translator, has the hugely difficult job of instilling all of this into the minds of learners, listeners, and readers. It is simultaneously the most fearsome and the most rewarding challenge, and it is a challenge that is

met every day in classrooms all over the world. I've observed the sense of achievement and delight that everyone feels when learners make progress in their new language. And as the scientific basis of the profession is still in its early years, there is plenty of scope for teachers to do research, develop original ideas, put them into practice, and write them up (either in traditional formats or online) for publication. I just wish that those in government who hold the purse-strings would recognise the nature of their achievement and appreciate the fundamental role that teachers play in enabling everyone (including the purse-string-holders themselves) to grow in a world where English is such an important means of giving countries and organizations an international presence, and individuals a better quality of life - and increase salaries accordingly!