An Interview with John Liontas

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*

Background

John I. Liontas, Ph.D., is an associate professor of foreign languages, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), and technology in education and second language acquisition (TESLA), and director and faculty of the TESLA doctoral program at the University of South Florida. He has over 30 years of K-20+ teaching experience and research in the United States and other countries, has held several academic faculty and administrative positions in higher education, and has taught a wide range of language and academic content courses. He has also directed, coordinated, and administered language and academic programs at various US institutions and sits on several local, state, regional, national, and international academic bodies as director, managing editor, chair, reviewer, evaluator, or appointed/elected member. He is an active member of several (inter)national learned societies and has participated as PI and Co-PI on several multimillion dollar funded projects.

Dr. Liontas is a distinguished thought leader, author, and practitioner in the fields of applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and ESL/EFL and the recipient of over two dozen local, state, regional, national, and international teaching awards and honors. He has delivered several keynote addresses/plenaries and conducted well over 300 presentations, lectures, and workshops at local, state, regional, and (inter)national conferences around the world, and has published textbooks and articles in the area of curriculum design and development, on writing and reading, on idiomaticity, on technology-based language instruction, and on interactive games and game approaches. He has a long-standing interest in idiomaticity and in its application in the second and foreign language classroom. He is presently involved in the design and production of a multimedia computer software program for learning English idioms called It's All Greek to Me! Learning English Idioms in Context. He is also the Editor-in-Chief of The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching (publishing Winter 2017 Online and as a 8 Volume Print Set, http://www.tesolencyclopedia.com).

What appears below is an interview with John Liontas (JL) conducted by Karim Sadeghi (KS).

KS: Thank you very much Dr. Liontas for so kindly accepting my invitation to take part in this interview despite your very busy schedule. Most of our readers would probably associate you with the journal that you edit, i.e., The Reading Matrix: An International Journal. I would first like to invite you to talk about your academic and professional life highlighting how and when you started developing an interest in SLA.

JL: First of all, thank you for having me. It is a sincere pleasure to spend some time with you today. As to your first question, I would say as early as the mid 1980s I had the opportunity to study *Germanistik* (German Studies) for my major and *Amerikanistik*/Philosophy (American Studies) for my bachelor's degree at the University of Siegen in Siegen, Germany. Back in those days, linguistic analyses, Chomskyan analysis included, were the order of the day and I became more and more intrigued by how languages can and do change over time. Engaging in both *synchronic* (a moment in time) and *diachronic* (development and evolution of a language through history) analyses of individual lexemes and the various inner changes a lexeme underwent in its stem, not including those to the prefixes or suffixes, was one of my favorite past times. I should add that my interest in historical linguistics was preceded by six years of *philology* (from the Greek φιλολογία (*philologia*); the study of ancient texts and documents dating back to antiquity) studies.

During those early years I studied the ancient texts of Greek antiquity. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were two of my favorite epic poems. The Greco-Roman world became for the longest time my home away from home, and I read nearly every classical text I could get my hands on in both Classical Greek and Latin. From the *Preclassical* to the *Classical* to the *Hellenistic* period, I read poetry, drama, tragedies, comedies, philosophical dialectics, and so much more. In those early years, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Homer, Herodotus and others were my best friends in a way and they kept feeding my intellect and in furthering my interest in the Hellenistic period, the Roman Age, Byzantine literature, and Modern Greek literature. From there I expanded my world into German studies, Middle High German, and New High German, dialectical studies included. Phonology, morphology, and syntax quickly picked my interest in European language studies. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, I completed advanced studies in Foreign Language Pedagogy (Master's degree) and Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (doctoral studies) in the US. *The rest is history,* as the saying goes, *ancient history* in my case.

KS: I understand you first majored in German and started teaching German and Spanish (and your earliest publications are on these languages also) at school before developing an interest in SLA. Could you talk about this change and why you didn't continue with German?

JL: It is true that I taught German from 1985 to 2005 and Spanish from 1989 to 1994 at the high school and middle school level. It is also true that in those early years of my career I also taught Modern Greek (1996-1999) and English Writing, Literature, and ESL (1997-1999) at the university and community college level. During those years I had the opportunity to serve as a foreign language teacher, instructor, lecturer, supervisor, and director. In all these professional capacities, I had the distinctive opportunity to experience first hand the many linguistic and sociocultural challenges students of second languages had with learning or acquiring the second language, pragmatic constraints notwithstanding. Naturally, all these experiences shaped my views of second language teaching and learning which explains why I decided to pursue advanced studies in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (SLAT) at the University of Arizona (1996-1999).

Both my major (L2 Pedagogical Theory and Program Administration: ESL, EFL, and FL curriculum development, skills development, testing and evaluation, educational technology, and CALL/CAI and multimedia materials development) and minor (CALL and Language, Literacy, and Culture) studies during my doctoral studies shaped and molded my views of language LEARNING and language USE in significant ways. Since 2005 I have been involved in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Second Languages) and have held academic positions as TESOL Program Coordinator at SUNY Fredonia (State University of New York; 2005-2010) and USF Polytechnic (University of South Florida; 2010-2012) and more recently as the Director of Technology in Education and Second Language Acquisition (TESLA) Doctoral Program (University of South Florida; 2014-present).

So no, I would not call this a "change". If anything, I see this as a natural progression of my own interests in first and second language studies since my early teenage years. You may refer to it as the "evolution" of John Liontas as a language professional who did not mind "wearing many hats" over the years. And I do not mean this literally, of course!

KS: Could you talk more about your scholarly products? Please tell us how many publications you have and what the major focuses of these publications have been. How do you compare your first and last publications in terms of focus and topics covered?

JL: Are you trying to embarrass me here, Karim? My father always advised me to let others sing my praises. There is really no need to "toot my own horn" here as my publication record is well documented. Just google my name and you are likely to come across my published academic work though I must note here that much of my early-published work is not available on the Internet. Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Internet (with a capital "I") was not what it is today. As a matter of fact, it did not even exist back then, and Google, as a search engine, was not even invented yet. In those BG years (before Google), there were actual print publications. Seeing your name in print was a really "big deal".

In 1990, I had the great honor to see my very first publication [Liontas, J. I. (1990). Proficiency-based German curricula: Whither in the 1990s? *Schatzkammer, 16*(2), 37-50)]. Good luck trying to locate that article on Google! As the title indicates, the article dealt with curricular issues affecting German programs in the US. It addressed a practitioner's views on the need to develop curricula that are proficiency-based in accordance with learner needs and interests, a view I continue to maintain and defend, if need be, to this day. Even today, curricular considerations are of paramount importance and their implementation across the curriculum is

a long and arduous task not too many are willing to undertake, yet doing so we must, at least those of us charged with such responsibility for program development. In the end, it is the curriculum that is enacted in the language classroom that matters the most, not the one that is collecting dust on a lonely shelf long forgotten it was there in the first place.

As to my last publication, I have several book chapters and encyclopedic articles that are in print as we conduct this interview. So I would not wish to foreshadow what is yet to come. But let me highlight briefly my 2015 article [Liontas, J. I. (2015). Developing idiomatic competence in the ESOL classroom: A pragmatic account. *TESOL Journal, 6*(4), 621-658.] that was published in the *TESOL Journal*. The article's Abstract is easily accessible online

(http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/tesj.2015.6.issue-4/issuetoc).

A quick perusal of the Abstract alone informs the reader of the article's key tenets: advancing an integrated theoretical and methodological framework for developing idiomatic competence in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL); defining *idiomatic competence*; advocating for learning idioms in an explicit and systematic way befitting natural use; comprehending and producing idioms effectively and appropriately in actual context-sensitive social situations; avoiding violating the conventions of social appropriacy; helping readers to reexamine their contexts of teaching and pedagogical practices; achieving social immediacy for idiom instruction; maximizing the conditions for optimal idiom learning both inside and outside the language class; and, finally, practicing and testing idiomatic competence across the curriculum, even at the tertiary level.

Naturally, these nine tenets build on previous theoretical constructs and empirical findings on idioms, and I am honored to have had the opportunity to add my views to this important discussion that is still impacting second language learners the world over. But I better stop here before I overstay my welcome.

KS: Which one of your works you have enjoyed the most? Which one of your books/articles you think is more seminal compared to others? Which one has been welcomed the most by the readers? Which area of your work would you like to spend more time on and why?

JL: Wow! In all sincerity, Karim, that is a most difficult question for anyone to answer completely and honestly. It is akin to asking me which child do I love most. *I love them all equally,* of course! Each and every one of them (my books and articles) was written at a time when the topic of discussion was most acute. Because of my diverse research interests in SLA; bilingualism/multilingualism/ multiculturalism; applied linguistics; theoretical approaches to ESL, second/foreign language curriculum design, program design and pedagogy, and language proficiency assessment (for English and for many other languages); current ESL/L2 pedagogy, teacher training/education and program administration; development of figurative competence; interlanguage pragmatics; and L2 reading/ writing and CAI/CALL technology as applied to ESL, second/foreign language teaching, materials design, and development, since 1990, I have been fortunate to write on a variety of topics reflecting my aforementioned research interests. Each contribution attempts to add to the discussion in an effort to push the profession forward. It is up to the readers to decide which one publication impacts their thinking and research efforts the most. I am not trying to be diplomatic here; it is a sincere response to a question that is truly difficult to answer without marginalizing one publication over another. I hope you will accept this elaboration as my final answer to your question here.

As to the area of work I would like to spend more time on, where do I begin? So much to do, so little time in which to get everything done, right? I so wished I could extend the 24-hour

clock to include more daylight… I will even take nightlight, as many a night I find myself burning the midnight oil just so I can take care of all the things I am involved in, from supervising doctoral theses to writing new academic pieces to spearheading international projects. I know I am not unique in this but time is a commodity in short supply, at least for me.

All things being equal, I would like to spend more time on projects that have wide international appeal. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching* (TESOL/Wiley, forthcoming November 2017) is one such international mega project and one I am most proud of because of all the things thousands of colleagues across the world were able to accomplish in a single reference product. That is, to *explore the theoretical and practical aspects of English language instruction by providing an essential, go-to reference resource for educators, professionals, researchers, and students worldwide.* That in and of itself is a goal worth pursuing in the years ahead. I look forward to the opportunity to carve some more time for projects such as this in the years ahead. And yes, a lot more time to spend with my family!

KS: Your most recent publication is a forthcoming Wiley title, The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, very different in nature from all other available encyclopedias. Please elaborate on this project and mention some of the differences yours has with other encyclopedias as well as telling us why you think this will be a major contribution to TESOL field.

JL: Thank you for the nice compliment, Karim, but the real credit needs to go to all the contributors who expressed themselves willing to offer their ideas and research findings in this 8 volume print set. I only served as the Editor-in-Chief of this work, a distinct honor that is truly second to none.

When I first conceptualized and developed the idea for this project back in March 2012, I was driven by the desire to make this reference work different from all other encyclopedias available on the market today. I am sure each encyclopedia tries to stand unique among its peers. I wanted nothing less for *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*. Working closely with an international team of editors and advisory board members, I wanted this encyclopedia to serve as indispensable professional resource for all ELT/ESL practitioners everywhere. But, as I am sure you know well, saying so does not make it so!

At the risk of sounding like a salesman here, I wanted this encyclopedia to be practical in nature and of immediate benefit to its readers. To accomplish this goal, those of us involved in this project, and there were many, had to make sure that this encyclopedia not only addresses the theoretical aspects of English language instruction but, more importantly, the practical aspects of it as well. Because the core readership of *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching* will be scholars, graduate and undergraduate students, and English language teachers, each entry had to be written in a simple and straightforward style that directly speaks to this aspiration. In turn, each entry had to display a keen awareness of related topics and the approach of other disciplines to the same subject area. Beyond that, readers should be able to discern easily the critical links among theory, research, and practice.

But to accomplish this end, that is, to achieve ultimate effectiveness of presentation of ideas and implications for English language teaching, each 3000-word entry also had to have a distinct *modus operandi* of material exposition. I believe we met this goal head on when in the summer of 2012 I first proposed to TESOL International Association and Wiley that each entry follows a distinct three-section organization: *Framing the Issue* (the topic under examination with succinct operational definitions and explanations where warranted), *Making the Case* (a brief discussion of key theoretical and/or research considerations and findings), and *Pedagogical Implications* (time-tested practical applications, guidelines, and/or recommendations that practitioners can employ

immediately with their students). The first two sections combined were to comprise the first half of an entry's length with the remaining length dedicated to the practical nature of the entry.

As you can surmise, it is this distinct division of material presentation that makes this encyclopedia unique among its peers. I cannot tell you how proud we all are to see this project finally completed after all this time. Unparalleled in scope and publishing online and as an 8 volume print set, we now have more than 780 entries written by leading practitioners and scholars from around the globe. The encyclopedia is arranged thematically and entries are ordered A-Z within 14 themes ranging from *Teaching English as an International Language to Teaching Skills (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing, Grammar, Vocabulary, Technology) and Pronunciation* to *Assessment and Evaluation* to *Teacher Training and Professional Development*, to mention but a few critical themes here. And as I have written in the *Preface* of *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching,* my hope remains that "all those involved in English language teaching far and wide will hopefully find among the volumes the topics and themes they most desire to understand, grapple with, or apply in their own local context, thereby making the encyclopedia a most valuable and indispensible professional resource that shall not ever collect dust on a lonely shelf or even remain for long periods of time a frozen screen long forgotten to be reanimated."

Of course, the jury is still out on whether we have accomplished the goals we set out to accomplish. And now you know why we say, *hope springs eternal.*

KS: Two of your foci in research have been idiomaticity and technology. Why do you think these are important in language teaching and learning and how should future research concentrate on these issues in AL?

JL: Now you are asking me about a research area I could easily write another encyclopedia. Perhaps that should become my next mega project, but I digress.

Let me put it this way: **ID-I-O-MA-TIC-I-TY** is much more than a specialized term comprised of 7 syllables and 12 characters. As I like to say, and you can quote me on that, "Idiomaticity is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." And as you chew on that trying to make heads or tails of my creative riddle here, I might add, I should also hasten to mention in this context an important observation made by Weinreich in 1969: "Idiomaticity is important for this reason, if for no other, that there is so much of it in every language."

Ask Pollio and his colleagues (1977) and they will tell you that we use about 4.08 idioms per minute. Ask Hoffman (1984) and that number jumps to 7000 idioms per week alone, a staggering number for sure regardless of how one defines "idioms". Idioms aside, we also have metaphors, similes, proverbs, metonymy, synecdoche, binomials/trinomials, abusio, meiosis, hyperbole, and another two dozen or so tropes of figurative language alone. And we have not even begun to scratch the surface yet. Let's not forget here the (restricted) collocations/habitual fixed collocations, fixed expressions, multi-word units/structures/fixed expressions, sayings, dead metaphors, social formulae (phrasal formulae), and so on.

In turn, I could also mention here prefabricated patterns (Hakuta, 1974), routine formulae (Coulmas, 1979), lexicalized stems (Pawley & Syder, 1983), lexical phrases (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992), Chunks (DeCook, 2000), formulaic sequences (Wray 2002; Schmitt, 2004), and so much more nomenclature that would literally make your head spin.

I submit to you that **Idiomaticity** is much like an iceberg floating quietly through the night. And yet, at any given time, only 10% of it is visible to the naked eye. The remaining 90% remains submerged. It is that 90% that needs to be illuminated for in that 90% we find all these terms dotting our academic and social language. Naturally, each one of the terms mentioned

above is subject to its own meaning, not uncommon in the literature on the subject. Thus, we come across a number of lexical perspectives on idiomaticity that are as distinct as the researchers laboring to define them, catalogue them, and understand their proper function in academic, social, and professional language across diverse contents and contexts displaying authentic language use.

Strutz (1996) said it best when he wrote, and I quote: "No one can be said to be really proficient in another language until he or she possesses and idiomatic control of it." And it is that "idiomatic use" that drives my own research agenda.

As I stated back in 1999:

> "Idiomatic use is the ability to use knowledge of idiomaticity to understand and produce appropriate and accurate idiomatic discourse in different sociolinguistic contexts in a manner similar to that of a native speaker."

I better stop here before I overstay my welcome again. I just realized I did not answer the second part of your question about technology and research. Let me briefly state that technology is redefining the ways in which we communicate, work, entertain, and learn. The "here and now" of the ESL, ELT, or ESP field will continue to expand its demands of us both as professionals or practitioners as new fields and skill sets are developed in *Cloud Computing, Big Data, Cybersecurity, Identity Theft, Robotics,* and *Artificial Intelligence.* Our language support systems (and the research agenda associated with these fields) have no choice but follow suit. The world of virtual and augmented reality is literally exploding all around us at a galloping pace never before seen.

From Sony's PlayStation VR to Samsung's Gear VR and all the other headsets in between, yesterday's stuff of science fiction is today's headgear and controllers in the hands of many waiting to be transposed at the touch of a click in immersive digital worlds that are hard to dress in words. Already some futurists proclaim that these digital worlds will change the world in ways we cannot even begin to imagine today. With them they bring new ways to define reality and a language all its own. By the 2030s, it is estimated, "virtual reality will begin to feel 100% real."

Filled with excitement and alluring opportunities, VR and AR technology is already significantly impacting Medical Care, Management of Chronic Conditions, and even Distributed Care Delivery. See-through OLED displays with touch-screen technology make the display of dynamic or interactive information on transparent surface glass a sci-fi reality. Use of holographic technologies, while still nascent for sure, are already leaving a critical imprint on medical diagnosis and treatment. With the bare touch of the finger, built-in camera-ready tablets and head-mounted displays designed in the shape of eyeglasses display and project critical doctor-patient information in synchronous virtual ways never before experienced. The surgeons and neurosurgeons of the future better be up to the challenge to see double in future surgeries, critical assistance from robotic arms and incubators notwithstanding.

Hand in hand, *Augmented Reality (AR)* and *Virtual Reality (VR)* technologies create digital interactive experiences for physical spaces that will attract, engage, communicate, and move people to act. These emerging types, architecture, and uses of AR and VR have long been a mainstay on the silver screen. In movies such as Minority Report and the Matrix, both AR and VR attain their greatest expression of movie magic. Though the devil is in the detail, I shall only mention here that 15 years after its release in 2002, the *Minority Report* movie is still making headlines today. Many are even wondering *How Facebook's Trending Topics is like Minority Report* and how it is beginning to manifest itself in real life.

For example, on June 2, 2011, *US News* reported, "Homeland Security is Getting in the Mind Business." On March 21, 2016, IEEE Spectrum reported that *"Minority Report Tech Meets the Operating Room."* And as recently as June 20 of this year, c/net editor Scott Stein conducted a podcast in which he investigated the tech *Minority Report got right and wrong 15 years on*. Now they are fast becoming part and parcel of our daily lives.

All the ways "Minority Report" predicted the future aside, AR and VR for Education are already feeling right at home. Both are revolutionary interfaces and both share many of the underlying technologies rich in features certain to continue to impact the learning environments in ways we have yet to fully conceive.

E-Learning through Virtual Reality in particular is revolutionizing the way we teach and the way our students learn and entertain themselves in our classrooms, museums, exploratoria, fairs, conference rooms, movie theaters, and even at home where imagination escapes reality at the flick of a finger to meet creativity, building new worlds of learning like never before.

Today and in the years ahead, changes in curricular offerings, technologies, and industry demands, from the simplest to the most complex, will continue to necessitate a widening scope of English language learning, as well as a renewed significance of more precise ESP nomenclature. Today's students playfully exploring the human body will soon grow to become tomorrow's general physicians and automotive designers. From Inception to Conception to Reality, *Immersion Learning and Gaming* is fast becoming the latest trend to cross the *red line.*

In close orchestration with Virtual Reality, the *New World of Media,* including Web 2.0 and Social Media technologies, will pressure future language course designs regardless of native language employed and regardless of language needs, goals and purposes, whether academic, professional, or scientific ones. Without exception, all of us will need to be able to handle learner needs analysis, syllabus design, materials writing or adaptation, and assessment and evaluation to meet specific industry-based demands. Language learners the world over will need to deal with matters of idiomaticity both in content and use as idiomatic language is omnipresent in the world's languages, English included. In analyzing the communication needs of our learners, we must equally analyze the very language learners will be asked to use in their daily encounters and the language-based products required of them.

All these efforts will leave a big imprint on all of us engaged in language teaching and technology. As the Chinese like to say, *may you live in interesting times!* I believe we do live in interesting times and these "times" are certain to become all the more interesting in the years ahead.

I better stop here before you show me the door.

KS: If you were given a second chance to live the life you have lived, would you choose to be a teacher trainer again or would you prefer to take a different path? Why? Is there anything you wish you could have accomplished in your life/career that you haven't so far? How successful have you been in your job as an applied linguist?

JL: Finally, an easy question I can answer most laconically here: **not one iota I would change.** Everything is as it should be! As to future, I let you know when I get there. And I mean this in a good way, as I always remind myself to follow the sage words of Lao Tzu who said:

Prepare for the difficult while it is still easy. Deal with the big while it is still small. Difficult undertakings have always started with what easy. Great undertakings always started with what is

small. Therefore the sage never strives for the great. And thereby the great is achieved. I will just leave it at that!

KS: Many thanks again Dr. Liontas for so humbly taking part in this interview. It is a great pleasure for me and the IJLTR readers to discover more about one of the young and vibrant scholars in TESOL. Your 71-page CV is really impressive and is clear evidence of your commitment to our profession. Is there anything else that you would like to add or share with our audience?

JL: You shower me with too many compliments here, Karim, thank you for your kind generosity. I am not so sure I deserve all this praise from you, but thank you just the same. You have been too gracious with me, thank you again!

Yes, there is "one more thing" (as Apple's CEO Steve Jobs always used to say) I would like to share with your journal's readership if I may. This fall, with your generous help, I shall guest edit a special *IJLTR* issue on *idiomaticity*. I am excited about the prospects and I am sure your readers will immensely enjoy reading the articles we selected for this upcoming *IJLTR* issue. It promises to be a *special* one, that much is certain!

Thank you again for allowing me to spend some time with you, much appreciated as always.

Onwards we go!