

# Interview

## Geetha Durairajan (GD) and Deepesh Chandrasekharan talk to N. S. Prabhu (NSP)

Dr. N. S. Prabhu is well known in the field of English Language Teaching as the author of the book *Second Language Pedagogy*, and more importantly, as the person who conceptualized the widely used approach "task based teaching". He has worked at the British Council and the National University of Singapore. For most of us, he is the doyen of ELT in India.

**GD:** Good morning, Dr. Prabhu. We are very happy that you have agreed to be interviewed by us. Let me begin with a very basic question. Many years ago, you were one of the people who had very clear views on what language is, and how it can be learnt, and how it can be taught. This is with reference to your Bangalore Project. Today, in 2018, what are your views on what is language first of all, and then, what is language learning for you?

**NSP:** The Bangalore Project, as I see it now, was a kind of halfway house to where I think I am today. If I were to sort of identify two or three stages or points in where I have arrived in my thinking, the Bangalore Project was definitely a prominent one, in that I was able to try out there a growing feeling I had at the time that we can achieve better results by letting language learning happen than by attempting to cause it. We can let it happen by identifying and creating conditions that might be most favourable to its happening, and I saw the most favourable condition as one where the learner's mind is focused on meaning, content, knowledge, not the language itself. It is as though one is saying that a language is best learnt by the learner when it is least pointedly taught by the teacher. Instead, the classroom activity leads to an effort by the learner to make sense of a piece of language in order to get to a piece of

meaning, which is precisely the point of such activity. That was the idea. The Bangalore Project was an attempt to try this out, and the way to get the learner's mind to focus on meaning was what I called task-based teaching. When there is a challenge to the mind in terms of meaning—a puzzle, something to be found out, a problem to be solved—then the mind is on that problem. And there is a sort of natural desire to solve the problem, partly to show that you can solve it, especially in young people but also at all ages. I want to solve the problem if I think I can and even more so if I think the other fellow cannot. It is a legitimate source of enhancing learners' effort. The learner's effort to understand brings about a kind of "intensive exposure" (I am coining this term), that is to say, focus the mind on the meaning, and in the process more sense is made of the language; and the more you do that, the better the learning. So that was the idea.

**GD:** You said the Bangalore project was a sort of a half-way house to where you are today. So, what are your views today on what language learning is? Are they the same? Would it be different? For example, in the Bangalore Project, at that point, probably because it was at a time when the structural approach was in vogue, there was this focus that the forms of language need to be learnt. Have you changed from that

argument that language learning is learning of form?

**NSP:** It was a big change to move away from the Structural Approach in the context of the RIE (Regional Institute of English, South India, in Bangalore), because the RIE was the direct successor to the MELT (Madras English Language Teaching) Campaign, which saw the first large scale implementation of the Structural Approach in India. Indeed, the first structural syllabus in the world, written by Dr. Jean Forrester, a British lady who was Principal of a Teacher Training College in Madras, was published in the official Fort St. George Gazette of Madras Presidency in 1952. The Structural Approach also loomed large in the Central Institute of English, which came up in Hyderabad in 1958 and in the state-level ELTIs (English Language Teaching Institutes) that followed. However, I wasn't particularly thinking of questioning the value of that approach while setting up the Bangalore Project. I was interested in seeing how far I can go with my line of thinking that form is best learnt when the mind is on meaning. It so happened that the director of the RIE at the time, Victor Devasundaram, was a close friend of mine and had something of a personal faith in me, as it were, and we spent several evenings talking about it and he said: "Why don't you set it up here?" So, it happened there.

**GD:** If we go back to the argument that we should let the learning of a language happen and not cause it to happen from the outside, how can we get this learning to happen? What should happen to English language teaching?

**NSP:** What we do as teachers depends on how we conceptualize the learning process. If we see language learning as a matter of habit formation, then we get learners to repeat words

or sentences so that the correct pronunciation or grammatical pattern becomes the correct habit. If instead you see learning a new language as a kind of moving over from the known language, then you first discover, through contrastive analysis, what the differences are between the learner's mother-tongue and the language to be taught, and concentrate the learner's practice on those things which are different from the mother tongue. Or if you see language learning as a kind of learning-by-doing, that is rehearsing the use of given expressions, then you do "communicative" language teaching by getting learners to say such expressions in appropriately life-like contexts. You therefore have functional syllabuses, not structures, but functions in terms of what you are trying to achieve/do with the language. So it depends on how you visualize the learning process.

Now to answer your question, how do I now see the learning process myself? If you look at whatever has been possible to achieve with several of these pedagogic paradigms, as it were, the results show that there is a fundamental difference between the learning of the first language or mother tongue and the learning that results from these teaching approaches; and it is, once you begin to think about it, such a vast difference, such a fundamental difference, that you are forced to revisit past assumptions. What do I mean by fundamental? Look, the mother tongue is learnt unfailingly by every human child, regardless of what the language is or what the technological, civilizational or cultural level is, etc. It makes no difference. No child fails and if we ignore the literate skills, it is not possible to say that one child has learnt its mother tongue better than another child. Nobody fails and everybody succeeds equally. Put that way, you can see that it is almost an impossible thing. There is hardly any other thing one can say that of. And in contrast, we have all these teaching approaches that we have tried. Typically, the

results are varied, different degrees of dissatisfaction, etc. Many fail, some succeed better than others. Hardly anybody seems to succeed fully; typically the opposite of the mother tongue. Now, that is a big puzzle. And, since the Bangalore Project, the one piece of thinking that has occurred to me has to do with it. If we look at L2 being learnt without any teaching, when people migrate to a foreign country, when a child encounters two different languages inside and outside the home or even within the family, when schooling happens in a language other than the mother tongue, even for only some of the school subjects, the L2 that is learnt is, if not at the same level as the L1, always higher than we can expect from L2 classrooms. In all these L2-learning contexts, language is not the principle of organization and the teachers' and learners' minds are not focused on the language. Language learning is not planned or caused, but happens. So what I now think is that a language is best acquired in the process of making sense of meaning or content. When you try to understand something, your understanding carries with it automatically, the language in which it comes to you. That is to say, language encodes knowledge. It is a symbolic system that encodes meaning. Therefore, understanding any piece of knowledge is sorting out the code. Otherwise you don't understand it. So, the greater the effort and success in understanding the content, the more (or more thoroughly) you learn the language. People tend to think that, in mother tongue acquisition, the child's language learning begins at about its first birthday, when the first word is likely to be uttered, and the babbling that occurs earlier or later represents L1-learning through repetition and practice. I think it begins much, much earlier and silently, with the child beginning to make sense of this bewildering world, bit by bit, and goes on all the time over a year or so before enough has been learnt to produce a word. Then it takes another

couple of years to engage in verbal communication. And the learning is full-time, not one hour a day! So mother tongue knowledge is unique because getting to know a whole new world is unique. Knowledge of a second language begins to approach that level as the experience of understanding new things approaches that level.

**GD:** To take you further on this statement; you have put together and shown us the differences between the way L2 is taught and L1 is learnt, and spoken about how, when L2 is taught in the ways it generally is, the results are varied but fall far short of not only those of L1 learning, but even the levels reached in untaught L2 learning. Is this then an inevitable difference between taught and untaught language-learning, or do you see some way of closing or narrowing that gap? How would you want English to be taught today in Indian classrooms?

**NSP:** The aim would be to get the learners' minds occupied with understanding pieces of a new language with effort. The most favourable condition is when learners have a strong desire or great need to make sense of something in a language they don't know. This happens most clearly and completely for new-born children, who have to work out the world by working out the mother tongue. Something less intensive but similar in nature happens when adults have to live and get by in a new language environment, when young people taste the pleasure of stories, games or activities accessible in a new language, or when school subjects are taught in an L2. In all these cases, the effort is to acquire new knowledge by making sense of a new language. The result of such untaught L2 learning may be varied and below the level of L1 proficiency, but it is clearly and uniformly above the achievement of taught L2 acquisition.

*At this point, Dr Prabhu spoke at length describing a small project he had been involved in at RIE Bangalore in the 1990's. Based on a government decision, and on the request of Dr. Gayatri Devi, who was then the director of that Institute, he tried to get teachers to tell stories in English to students of classes 1, 2, 3 and 4 as a way of getting them to listen, understand and acquire the language. What is significant here is that for these children, the medium of instruction was their mother tongue. My question to him, at the end of this was:*

**GD:** You have been talking to us about storytelling as a pedagogic practice to enable students to engage with language in the lower classes and how you used stories in the Bangalore Project, but always as a puzzle where the story ends with a question for the child to answer. If we took this idea to higher classes, what would be other possible practices?

**NSP:** Every child loves to listen to stories (perhaps because they present new worlds to be comprehended), but the attraction seems to wear out for a majority of them within a few years. Those who retain the interest get hooked on story-book writers such as Enid Blyton, with big gains to their English language ability. I am sure millions of young people in the world have learnt a lot of English from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels, whose world is so vastly different. I think that young people are also attracted by problem-solving as a competitive activity, which was a major assumption in the Bangalore Project, where we used, besides stories leading to a mystery to be solved, various other "tasks", where a problem has to be comprehended (from a linguistic description) and a solution worked out.

I had discovered, while writing the book *English Through Reading* in the 1970's, that reading

comprehension work can use inferential questions at different levels of challenge, thus providing similar problem-solving with older learners. I believe now that this is a very desirable activity in L2 instruction (at about the secondary level), for three reasons. First, texts are not just sequences of sentences; they are structured entities of language and logic: chunks of knowledge, reasoning, facts and opinion, with open as well as implied meanings, references back and forth, and so on. Comprehending a piece of text therefore has a dimension of depth, from superficial/general to thorough/detailed. There can, as a result be comprehension questions at different levels of detail and depth, catering to learners of different levels of ability in a class. Second, being led to perceive the less obvious things in a text, such as suggestions, implications, internal cross references as well as logical relations such as cause-consequence, fact-conclusion, etc., brings about what I would call a more intensive contact with the language than a mere reading with a general understanding, with correspondingly greater value for language-acquisition. Third, such text-based work looks in line with past traditions of schooling and is fully respectable, instead of being threateningly innovative.

**GD:** Dr. Prabhu, what you are now saying, if I understood you correctly, is that instead of making reading easier for learners by explaining, paraphrasing, simplifying or summarizing texts through the "lecture method", teachers should make things more difficult by asking such inferential questions and asking learners to read, re-read, search, weigh and risk giving wrong answers, in the course of an "in-depth" reading. This will be a major change from present practice. What kind of training do you think our teachers will need?

**NSP:** The essence of task-based teaching is to get the learner to make an effort to comprehend. A task is successful when the learner manages to comprehend pieces of text a little more (or better) than he could before. Success in such an effort can result in raising both the confidence and (however slightly) the ability of the learner for the next effort, just as failure can be dispiriting. Therefore, the effort demanded should be neither too low nor too high. It is of course very difficult to judge the right level of effort, as difficult for a teacher as it would be for anybody else. But the teacher has an advantage. She is teaching the same set of learners repeatedly and can learn by trial and error, to judge their ability in relation to the effort called for by a task. Each error of judgement increases the chances of her judging better the next time, and each time she judges right, she becomes a little more confident and competent in making such judgements. The teacher, that is to say, trains herself in the course of her teaching, while the learners are getting used to such effort-making. And the teacher's training is not a one-time preparation for a career-long job, but a career-long process of professional growth from practicing the profession, as in other professions such as medicine or engineering.

**Dr. Geetha Durairajan** is a Professor, Department of Materials Development and Evaluation at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. She is the series editor for Cambridge University Press England's 'All About Language Teaching', and the author of its first book "Assessing Learners: A Pedagogic Resource".

*gdurairajan@gmail.com*

**Dr. Deepesh Chandrasekharan** (PhD in ELE, EFL-U) is currently the Executive Director of the CLIL@India project. He has taught at schools for eleven years and at the college level for three years.

*deepesh.chandrasekharan@gmail.com*

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