

# Interview

## Face to Face with K.N. Anandan

*P.K. Jayaraj*

*Dr. Anandan is a Chomskyan linguist turned ELT practitioner. He conceived Second Language Acquisition Programme (SLAP) which brought about a shift from the skill based and fragmentary teaching of structures and vocabulary to a more holistic approach, giving primacy to language acquisition. His book **Chomskyan Revolution in Linguistics** won him the Kerala Sahitya Academy Endowment Award in 2006. His second book **Tuition to Intuition** introduces his vision of second language pedagogy.*

**P. K. Jayaraj (PKJ):** You began your career as a school teacher in a remote, rural village of Kerala, and later became the headmaster in the same school. Could you tell us briefly about your background, your areas of academic interest, and what led you to become an educational activist?

**K. N. Anandan (KNA):** I began my career in 1969, as a headmaster. When I started teaching and observing classes, I became disillusioned with the teaching-learning process. I decided to exercise my freedom to do something different. I started devising new classroom processes for teaching science and languages. I improvised cost-effective lab equipment and apparatus, and encouraged students to learn science by doing. When I look back I feel that I always had a lens of my own.

**PKJ:** What led you to get interested in language pedagogy?

**KNA:** In those years, my interest in language pedagogy was partially due to my ego as a person who could use English to teach English. In spite of the enormous time I spent on teaching structural patterns with the help of teaching aids, I realized that children were not doing well. My initial enthusiasm in working as a headmaster started waning because of the boring bureaucracy. I got myself enrolled in the Post-Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of English (PGCTE) at CIEFL (now EFLU), and later for the Post-Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) and M.Litt. My life on the campus changed my outlook towards teaching

and learning of English. I was lucky to get Prof Jayaseelan, a renowned Chomskyan linguist as my research guide for M.Litt. and Ph.D. Having studied Chomsky, I became more and more sceptical about the entire field of ELT, which I thought was erected on 'dubious' claims. I was also wondering why the ELT scholars were grossly ignoring Chomsky.

I left the campus. "What next?", this question intrigued me. Would I be satisfied with being a mere theoretical linguist? Could Chomsky help the rural and poor children of Kerala learn English better? Deriving insights from Chomsky, I started developing and trying out several pedagogic models for teaching English. The first model, ACE (Acquiring Competence in English), was tried out in schools. In ACE, the major input for the learners was interaction between two teachers based on selected pictures. Eventually, children also started participating in the interaction. As an innovative pedagogic model, ACE received a lot of media coverage.

**PKJ:** The language pedagogy you advocate has been widely discussed within and outside Kerala. What inspired you to become a strong promoter of this pedagogy?

**KNA:** I was convinced that Chomsky could be translated into classroom processes. He was the only linguist who claimed that man had an innate language system. When I was appointed consultant of the District Primary Education Program (DPEP) Kerala, I got a platform to put my practical model of Chomsky before a wider audience. It was then that I conceived the Second Language Acquisition Programme

(SLAP), which materialized a shift from the skill-based and fragmentary teaching of structures and vocabulary, to a more holistic approach, giving primacy to language acquisition. SLAP faced a lot of resistance. In the place of textbooks, I had conceived an evolving text book (ETB), in which the individual learner was the creator of the textbook. There was a major hurdle before me. Who could help me to take my vision to the field? Through a series of workshops, a team emerged that was convinced about the rationale for rejecting ELT practices. SLAP was finally in the field!

**PKJ:** I think it was perhaps during the days of DPEP that there was a shift in the language pedagogy, from teaching English with letters and sounds, to teaching with a language discourse. In other words, there was an emphasis on a holistic approach to language teaching. Could you explain, with a few details, the salient features of the discourse pedagogy?

**KNA:** There was a shift in language pedagogy in the late 1990s. But the ELT circles in India said, “It is not possible in the second language context”. My experiences led me to sharpening the classroom processes and eventually Discourse Oriented Pedagogy took shape. I continued my field research on language pedagogy from 2000 to 2005. I developed several pedagogic models, such as RACE (Rapid Acquisition of Competence in English), REAP (Rapid English Acquisition Programme), and FACE (Facilitating Acquisition of Competence in English). Two powerful pedagogic tools were used in all these programmes—the first was the use of narratives as a major input, and the second was code-switching for beginners. These programmes were tried out in hundreds of schools across the state, and in all of them they were able to bring about tangible changes in the performance of the learners.

Discourse Oriented Pedagogy is built on the claim that a language cannot be acquired by simply learning the elements of the language,

and practising language skills. Since language exists only as meaningful discourses, both the input and output should be in the form of discourses. Textbooks do not have slots for practising language elements and vocabulary. Instead, they contain discourse tasks which take care of both language elements and skills.

**PKJ:** How did you begin implementing this pedagogy? Could you tell us the circumstances in which you began with it? What sort of challenges did you face? What was the reaction of the administrators, and the teaching community in particular?

**KAN:** In light of my experience in working on discourse pedagogy in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, I was invited to join the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Kerala, in 2006. It was also during this period that I was entrusted with the chairmanship of the English Focus Group of KCF (Kerala Curriculum Framework - 2007). As a forerunner of the curriculum and textbook revision in Kerala based on KCF, a programme called ACE (Acquisition of Competence in English) was conceived for SSA, and launched in 1300 schools in Kerala. The tryout experience of ACE gave a lot of vigour and momentum to the state team involved in the revision of English textbooks.

**PKJ:** Despite stiff resistance from all quarters, how did you manage to play a key role in the process of curriculum development and textbook preparation in Kerala?

**KNA:** The Kerala textbook writing team critically examined NCF 2005 and NCERT textbooks. Instead of the theme based approach followed in NCERT books, they decided to follow an issue-based approach. All the textbooks from classes 1 to 10 were organized around major social issues, which had local as well as global implications. At the secondary level, authentic texts were used, which gave a lot of importance to literature. Eminent linguists such as Prof Jayaseelan endorsed the pedagogy and worked with the team.

There was a lot of resistance, but it was not against English alone. Several quarters launched massive attacks against issue-based curriculum, and the critical approach it envisaged. The Government of Kerala democratically tackled the debate and the polemics that were generated in the state. However, since there was a highly motivated and convinced group of people working with me, I could face the criticism with ease. Besides, those who criticised were not ready for any intellectual debate; nor did they propose any alternatives.

**PKJ:** How far have your ideas been incorporated in the current English textbooks of the state level schools in Kerala? Are you happy with them?

**KNA:** I am happy with the textbooks, though there are certain areas that need to be revisited. In any case, no textbook should run for more than five years. Besides, I do not fully endorse top-driven models; models must be evolved at the bottom level with the ownership of the teachers, the people, and the community in general.

**PKJ:** In spite of an increasing acceptance of some of your ideas in the Kerala academia, there is a lot criticism of the books that have been produced under your guidance. You have been accused of idealism, and not understanding the reality of Kerala. How do you respond to these criticisms?

**KNA:** I have been criticized for being a dreamer and an idealist. In a democracy, anyone who initiates a change will be criticized. As I am a student of critical pedagogy, I think that even my models should be critically examined. At the same time, no one can ignore the changes that have been taking place in the field.

**PKJ:** Your popularity has led the Andhra Pradesh State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) to seek your guidance in preparing their English textbooks. Could you tell us the extent to which the curriculum development and textbook preparation teams

have accepted your theoretical understanding? Have you experienced any contextual constraints, or diluted your position?

**KNA:** I have worked for the curriculum and textbook revision of SCERT Andhra Pradesh, with experts such as Rama Kant Agnihotri and A. L. Khanna. I personally believe that the revised textbooks of Andhra Pradesh have moved away from skill-based pedagogy to discourse-based pedagogy.

**PKJ:** How do you wish to carry out your agenda at the national level?

**KNA:** There are a lot of challenges ahead of us. I understand that similar initiatives are taking place across the world. There are market-driven forces that work for corporate demands in education. There are also forces that promote linguistic imperialism. I join hands with all those who work against these forces.

**P. K. Jayaraj** is an ELT expert at the Regional Institute of English, South India, Bengaluru. He has contributed to the development of the state curriculum, and the production of text books in English for the States of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. He has published three books in English for Mathrubhoomi publications. They are: *Say What You Mean*, *Grammar and Grammar Wars*, and *When Words Bloom*.

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