

Dialogues: English Studies in India

Veena Kapur | veenakapur821@gmail.com

Veena Kapur is an Associate Professor at Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest are language teaching, technology-based language teaching and women's studies. Kapur has collaborated with Tata McGraw Hill, Access and Bookline publishers to produce resource books. She is a Delhi University Gold Medalist, having stood first in the M. Ed. examination.

Dialogues: English Studies in India

New Delhi: Aakaar Publications. (Paperback 200 pages;
Hardcover 208 pages)

Rachna Sethi & A. L. Khanna (Eds.) (2019).

ISBN-13 : 978-9350026267 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by: Veena Kapur



Dialogues: English Studies in India, edited by Sethi and Khanna, highlights important concerns about the changing paradigms of English language teaching in India and how it has affected its curricula and pedagogy. Interestingly, the book is in the form of interviews, in which both the interviewer and interviewee are teachers of the English language and literature. As both of them attempt to negotiate their thoughts and ideas, gently sparring with each other, the reader is given an entry into the private, interactive space of an interview. Through conversational

interactions, they explore the "policy and practice of English studies".

The interview/dialogue, as a literary format, if tapped with finesse, has within it the potential for exploring, opening up, and debating complex ideas and issues, "speaking directly to the reader", while consciously refraining "from giving a guided tour to the reader". This genre is ideal for presenting multiple perspectives on a topic, leaving the readers to draw their conclusions. In the introductory chapter of the book, Sethi and Khanna, the editors, deliberate on the Socratic

method of the dialogue and its essence—presenting the dialectic rather than a singularity of view. The present volume does not completely follow in the footsteps of the “Socratic method”, but discussions and concerns around the English language and literature form its crux. The book is divided into four sections—(Re)defining English studies; Pedagogical challenges; Professional development of teachers; and Future directions.

“English is not just a language in India; it is a dream that we sell to many people in this country”, states Professor Trivedi at the outset of the first chapter in the first section, setting the tone for the section and the entire book. The statement holds within it the duality of the English language—its aspirational value and also its major role in India's ongoing language debate. The teacher takes on the role of a pedlar of dreams, while the student is the dreamer. In this context, Trivedi with his “revolutionary syllabus”, brought a major paradigm shift in the teaching of English, opening up a plethora of options and possibilities. The syllabus changed its path—from teaching English literature to teaching literature in English. Through questioning, the interviewer and interviewee explore the changing mandate for English departments in India and how the inclusion of diverse, translated literature from within and outside India, from folk traditions and cultural studies, can at the same time be engaging but with a downside to it. Paranjpe and Prasad focus their attention on the position of English in the globalized world today, and argue that courses in English should be taught through modules such as “Communication English” and “English for Special Purposes”, and not just using “hoary literature”. Travelling from discussions on revisions of the

syllabus and fluid space of the discipline, Devadawson, brings the focus back to the student in the classroom— “the keystone in the academic arch will be and always has been the student in the classroom”.

“*Pedagogical Challenges*”, the second section, transports the reader into the Indian second language classroom and its pedagogical concerns and challenges. Agnihotri's interview serves as a platform for the reader to understand the intricacies of the Indian language classroom and the challenges posed by its inherent multilingualism. He focuses on the natural fluidity of languages that forms the basis of multilingualism, further adding that it is essential that multilingualism as a concept and as a resource become an integral part of teacher training programmes so that teachers become equipped to tap this rich resource. The interviews of Rimli Bhattacharya, Gil Harris, and Dee Broughton focus on pedagogical concerns related to textbooks and their compilation, the need to incorporate diversity and creativity in writing assignments and training students in writing, and the lack of space in our educational system for these. Van Tilburg highlights how students prefer being tested on their reading and writing skills, rather than on their speaking skills. She further observes that even in writing, the focus is not on writing as a process, but as a product that needs to be submitted.

The third section, “*Professional Development of Teachers*” concentrates on how continuous professional development is at the heart of not only enhancing teacher competency but creating a teaching-learning ethos that is at once dynamic, invigorating and effective. The views of N. S. Prabhu, Rod Bolitho,

Rama Mathew and Shobha Sinha coalesce to provide a road map for fostering the teacher's professional growth. Each of the interviews addresses diverse aspects of language teaching—reflection, teaching outcomes, assessment and interaction amongst peers—all essential for effective teaching and development. Prabhu's focus is on the role of the teacher and how it can be supported by trainers/professionals to ensure professional growth. Bolitho, with his vast experience of teacher training, discusses Continuing Professional Development (CPD) within a particular framework of viewpoint, perception gap, the impact of observers' presence and feedback. Rama Mathew's interview centres on the different facets of assessment and its importance in teacher training. Shobha Sinha emphasizes that an enabling context and dialogue are essential for effective CPD.

The fourth and final section of the book, "*Future Directions*", reflects and takes us back to the first section, where the definition of English studies in India had been redefined and expanded. This section suggests potential areas for inclusion after the "de-canonization" was started in the 1980s. Raj Kumar suggests that Dalit studies and Disability studies need to be included within the ambit of English studies. Bhaduri discusses the de-canonization of English Studies in JNU, and how thirty years later the radical syllabus is now perceived as humble and humdrum. He visualizes learning that includes "the disruptive, subversive inclusion of the profane and the popular in the classroom", and how media studies need to become an integral part of that space.

The discussions of the future will be incomplete if while living in a technology-driven world, we do not

discuss its impact on pedagogy. The present volume pays a tribute to the impact of technology on the English language classroom. Syal discusses the pervasive presence of technology in the classroom, and how it transforms the role of the teacher from that of a director of activities to one of a facilitator. The teacher needs to feel an ease and facility in using web tools, while also being able to critique their fundamental premise. Sharma discusses the creation of optimum conditions for student learning in a blended classroom, where there has been a significant change in the teacher's role—from "the sage on the stage to guide on the side." The book concludes with Richard Allen's interview that takes the reader from the confines of the Indian language classroom to include larger global concerns of blended learning as off-campus learning. His examples of technology-assisted learning in English studies include those that have been carried out in the Open University of the United Kingdom, computer-based assistants for language learning and online conferences for creative writing.

The conversations in the entire volume are enlightening, never losing pace and impact. One reason is that the interviewee is a seasoned academician, but the interviewer is also no novice but an academic in their own right. The questions asked and the way the dialogue is steered shows an erudite mind that questions, reflects and deliberates on what is being said, tempering it with their experience. Each section combines to create a rich reading experience for the academician, the scholar and the student.

The style of the dialogue used in the present volume takes the reader back to another book, written at a different

time and with different objectives. The book is titled *Reconsidering English Studies in Indian Higher Education*, by Gupta, Allen, Chatterji, and Chaudhari. Published in 2015, it examines the past, present and future of English Studies in India. The second section of this book also effectively employs the dialogic mode rather than the monovocal commentary.

The exploration of diverse perspectives of English studies makes the present volume valuable for academics, students and researchers. The book covers a vast range of English studies, analysing the discipline in the classrooms in the light of social imperatives of globalization, multilingualism, digital literacy and pedagogical concerns.