
INTERVIEW

In Conversation with Z.N. Patil

Shree Deepa

Z.N. Patil, a former Professor at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad has worked in English language and literature for nearly five decades. He was deputed by the Government of India to the Institute for International Relations, Hanoi, Vietnam (1999 to 2002) to develop spoken communication skills of prospective diplomats. From 2003 to 2006, he served as a Senior English Language adviser in Japan. znpatil@gmail.com

Shree Deepa (SD): Dr Patil, you have a long experience teaching English at different levels. Do you think there is a difference between teaching children and teaching adults?

Z.N. Patil (ZNP): That's a very significant question. Children are usually happy when their classes are like family chats—informal and friendly. In the beginning, they are unhappy and reluctant to go to school because they find their classes threatening and frozen. Children love games, as they arouse curiosity. Our schools are as formal and antiseptic as our college classes.

We fail to realize that children's minds are relatively fresh, clean slates. They are mentally and physically active and want to experiment with language but need to gain experience in how people use language and how language functions. Unlike adults, they are conceptually, culturally, and experientially raw. This difference determines the nature of teaching-learning materials, teaching approaches, methods, and strategies. Tetsuko Kuroyanagi's *Toto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window* is one good example of how children learn, how they should be taught and under what conditions.

In Mulk Raj Anand's *The Lost Child*, a small boy goes to a village fair with his parents and gets lost. A stranger offers this boy sweets, balloons,

a garland of flowers, and a ride on the merry-go-round to pacify him, but nothing pacifies the boy. The stranger represents a teacher and the lost child a learner. A teacher may try to satisfy the auditory (the snake charmer's music), visual (the colourful balloons), kinaesthetic (a ride on the merry-go-round), olfactory (a garland of flowers), and gustatory (sweets) learning styles; but more important than all these attractions is the teacher's love, concern, and encouragement.

SD: I would like to know the differences between how you taught English when you began teaching and now.

ZNP: I began my teaching career in 1974. I was given a couple of novels and plays, a collection of short stories, an anthology of poems and a grammar book to teach different classes. I glossed vocabulary and lectured on plots, etc. I sermonized to obedient students who listened to me motionless. I did all the talking for them and dictated notes because I was an 'authority' in class. The textbook was sacrosanct. I held it close to my heart, tacitly requesting this anchor to keep my boat on the seashore and prevent it from going astray into the turbulent sea of the classroom. I was not wholly wrong in my perception of the textbook as a scripture because it instilled confidence in me as a teacher and made my students comfortable. I followed the sequence of lessons quite religiously as if any deviation was a breach of pedagogical conduct.

My students hardly raised questions, and I never encouraged them to interrogate. My priority in literature classes was to enable students to appreciate literary works while in language classes I focused on spelling, grammar, and vocabulary accuracy. I inherited the pedagogy of my teachers, who would untiringly correct my linguistic errors, and I was grateful to them for that. When I started teaching, I stepped into my teachers' shoes and corrected my students' mistakes untiringly.

However, I realized that my priorities were problematic because the more I rectified their errors, the more diffident my students felt. As a result, there was a shift from accuracy-confidence-fluency-appropriateness to confidence-fluency-appropriateness-accuracy. Thus, accuracy took a back seat as I encouraged them to explain things for themselves instead of explaining things to them. I pushed myself into the background, changing the teacher-centric class to learner-centric. I began to administer brainstorming, problem-solving, information gap, and opinion-gap tasks, and I could see a change in the sociology of my

classrooms. When I started my career, I was a text-bound teacher; in the second half, I started using support materials and became a relatively text-free teacher. My institute, which later became a central university, played a crucial role in these shifts, allowing me to design my courses, select teaching materials and assess students through project work and oral presentations.

SD: Do you think technological advances have changed the role and nature of teaching in India?

ZNP: Covid-19 has proved the pervasiveness of technology. The world has shrunk to the size of a laptop computer, a tablet, or even a tiny mobile handset. Space and time are no barriers. If Einstein were alive today, he would explain his earth-shaking equation: *e (energy) is equal to m (mass) c square (speed of light)* as *e (education) is equal to m (mobile) c square (speed of the Internet)*! Similarly, some enthusiasts claim technology is the panacea for all maladies, such as low attendance, increasing grade repetition, and poor learning outcomes. However, a judicious use can make technology a supplement but can hardly be a substitute. I am reminded of what Charlie Chaplin says in his animated and igniting speech in *The Great Dictator*: *Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want; more than machinery, we need humanity; more than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness; we are not machine men with machine minds and machine hearts; we think too much and feel too little.*

SD: English language teaching practices have changed over the years. Where do you see the discipline of ELT going in the next decade or so?

ZNP: University English Departments and other agencies created a myth that English was a privileged language. This is like the myth the legal profession has created that legal language has to be what it is like today. The myth germinated in 1835 in Macaulay's *Minute*. Lord Bentinck perpetuated the myth that Indian literature stood no comparison with English literature and that Indian languages were deficient and starved of nuances that the English language was endowed with. Those involved in teaching and learning the English language felt that they were a privileged group. The patronising Western reading of the East and the condescending Eastern perception of the West contributed to the hegemony. The invisible hands of linguistic imperialism, such as testing and certifying agencies and publishing houses, tacitly consolidated this myth. This snobbery persists even today. Fortunately, the myth is being

shattered. The National Education Policy 2020 has started promoting Indian languages. Linguists all over say there is nothing special about English; it is just one of the thousands of languages. This plummeting language status has implications for teaching, learning, and using English.

Teaching English will be different from what it is today because the paradigms are changing. First, we believe that English is no longer exclusive to the so-called native speakers; it is our language too. Secondly, non-native speakers modify the language to suit communicative needs. These changes are necessary to enable the English language to perform culture-specific speech acts, which cannot be adequately explained using a monolithic pragmatic framework. English has changed at phonological, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic levels. The new formal properties and functional roles of English have pedagogical implications. Thirdly, the inadequacy of the traditional West-centric parameters of pragmatics has changed the perception of non-native varieties of English. English is no longer perceived as a monolith. We no longer talk of 'English' but 'Englishes'. This paradigm of de-constructionist acceptance of the plurality of the English language impacts research, training, materials production, teaching, testing and evaluation. Fourthly, initially these varieties were considered deficient, non-standard, and even sub-standard. This attitude of rejection slowly changed to an attitude of acceptance, legitimization, and equalization. This new perception impacts the choice of variety and the choice of teaching materials. Fifthly, the reciprocal approach to the notion of intelligibility is another step towards equalization and democratisation of the varieties of English (native and non-native), which has significant ramifications for language education. Sixthly, recruiting English teachers from India and the Philippines to teach English to speakers of other languages in West Asian and Southeast-Asian countries has enhanced the legitimacy of non-native varieties. This changing scenario has influenced language education policies and practices across the globe. Seventhly, the preference for culturally suitable, locally produced teaching materials results from the constantly questioned and challenged hegemony of English and the assumed superiority of imported pedagogical materials.

SD: How has research in the English language changed in India?

ZNP: Research is largely going through a pathetic phase. Standards

are crumbling. I supervised twenty-four PhD theses and ten MPhil dissertations and evaluated over fifty theses submitted to Indian and foreign universities. I have noticed a steady decline in the quality of research. Plagiarism, duplication, chaotic organization, shabby presentation, and poor language are some maladies that have steadily infected research. If I were to design a graph indicating originality, impeccable language, cohesive and coherent organization, and perfect presentation, it would show a steady deterioration over the last couple of decades. Part of the onus for this decline lies with the University Grants Commission. When a research degree is obligatory for a teaching job, people resort to shortcuts and unfair practices.

The job of a research supervisor is to mentor the researcher, give them some explorable ideas and discuss how to make an original contribution to existing knowledge. But sadly, this job is reduced to proofreading and almost rewriting the thesis. I will appreciate it if we spend our resources judiciously on improving the conditions of primary education. We are a developing country and cannot afford the luxury of squandering our resources on trivial research, leading to abortive outcomes. I feel disgusted when I come to know that several people are working on the same topics, such as *developing speaking skills among Telugu learners*, *developing speaking skills among Marathi learners*, *developing speaking skills among Tamil learners*, etc. Does this mean that Telugu, Marathi, and Tamil learners inhabit the Moon, Mars, and Saturn, respectively? Some years ago, I heard of a research scandal. Some researchers had carried out almost identical research on a commerce topic such as “transportation of banana in THIS district” and “transportation of banana in THAT district”. Transport facilities, the size of the bananas and transport costs are similar; just the districts are different! Some institutes churn out thesis after thesis on pragmatic analysis of novelists. The analytical parameters remain the same, only the novelists change. Having expressed my opinion quite frankly and blatantly, I believe that there are oases in the desert, and there is a ray of light at the end of the tunnel.

SD: What is your perspective on the role of other languages in the repertoire of an Indian student? How do you see them—as assets or hurdles?

ZNP: That’s an excellent question. People usually speak about regional languages in negative terms. They maintain that regional languages,

mother tongues, and first languages interfere in second or foreign language learning. 'Interference' is a negative word. These people consider regional languages an obstacle, a hindrance—linguistic untouchables or *shudras* to be avoided. Recently, a school in a metropolitan city in Maharashtra issued a *fatwa* that anyone who spoke in their mother tongue, even outside the class, would be punished or fined. Fortunately, some parents opposed this discriminatory decision, and the school had to withdraw the *fatwa*. This is an example of linguistic apartheid. Some people think that regional languages should be ghettoed (inside families, localities, villages, etc.) and not allowed shoulder-to-shoulder with the upper-caste language 'English'.

Regional languages are a help rather than a hindrance. Yes, they do interfere, but they also intervene. 'Intervention' is a positive word. Interference happens due to dissimilarities between the mother tongue and the other tongue, which in the present case is English. When we conduct a comparative analysis of two languages, we find similarities and differences between them. These similarities and dissimilarities can form a basis for language teaching and learning. More comparative studies should be done to teach English more effectively. I am happy that the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the use, preservation, and promotion of our languages as mediums of instruction.

The above discussion has implications for the use of bilingual dictionaries and translation. Languages carry culture-specific concepts. Children may face experiential, cultural, and conceptual difficulties when they encounter certain alien concepts. Translation can be used in such cases. Our languages are resources. If we do not promote or use them as a medium of instruction or everyday communication, a day may come when our posterity will say, like Elizabeth Doolittle, the flower girl in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, says to Higgins, *I have forgotten my language, and can speak nothing but yours.*

SD: Do you think a colonial mindset persists in Indian ELT?

ZNP: Despite the changing paradigms, the colonial mindset persists. Let me briefly talk about its manifestations. First, youngsters take a qualifying test for jobs abroad. Foreign agencies hire Indian examiners to conduct these tests; some examiners show a colonial mindset, believing they are the chosen ones. Two, they try to approximate the so-called native speaker accent. They do not realize that the Received Pronunciation of English is

spoken by a negligible minority. The BBC accent is non-existent because the BBC news readers, with different accents, come from different parts of Britain. Many English teachers show a schizophrenic attitude when they cannot speak the so-called Received Pronunciation but expect their students to speak it. Raja Rao, an Indian English novelist, rightly says in his novel *Kanthapura's* preface that we should not speak like them (native-English speakers). He adds that English is not the language of our emotional make-up; it is the language of our intellectual make-up. Such teachers remind me of Professor Henry Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, who says that based on accent, he can place any man within six miles, even within two miles, sometimes within two streets! We are surrounded by Higginsees who maintain that the kerbstone English of their students will keep them in the gutter to the end of their days. These split-personality teachers convert their students, to use Higgin's words—incarnate insults to the English language—to mindless apes. Three, in articles published in quality journals, Indian scholars are not cited—even where the article is written by Indian scholars. They believe that citing Indian scholars will lead to a loss of credibility. Four, when two concurrent presentations are happening during a conference and one of the two presenters is a lesser scholar but a native speaker, and the other one is a scholar of international standing and a competent non-native speaker of the English language, at least some attendees would attend the former presentation just because the presenter is a "native speaker". Thus, biases in favour of native speakers and against non-native speakers prevail everywhere, and at all levels, and quite surprisingly, these biases prevail among Indian scholars more than among British, American, and Australian scholars. Five, many students are familiar with the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Noam Chomsky, Michael Halliday, to mention a few, but very little about Panini, Bhartrihari, Patanjali, or the educational contributions of J. Krishnamurthy, Vivekanand, Aurobindo, Sindhutai Ambike, Gijubhai Badheka, Sane Guruji, and Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. Part of the blame lies with the syllabus framers and members of the Board of Studies of our universities. Many of them neither read our educationists nor include books written by our great minds. How can we complain about Western scholars not including Indian thinkers in their books? A book such as *Fifty Great Modern Thinkers on Education: From Piaget to the Present*, edited by Joy A. Palmer, does not include even one Indian educational thinker. Six, many administrators, parents and teachers believe that students who study in English medium schools are

superior to those who study in regional language medium schools. They do not seem to know the simple educational principle of Bhartrihari—“whether you fill a pitcher from a well or from an ocean, it can only hold water according to its capacity.”

We are no longer a British colony, but mentally, we still retain the legacy of linguistic slavery. Our blind emulation of the native speaker, our attitude towards our learners, their errors, and the English language showcase the colonial hangover. Over the years, I have observed that many teachers are tormentors using texts and tests as tools of torment and students are tormented. The textbooks are drab and age-inappropriate, and most of our tests end up exposing the ignorance of our learners and hurting their self-esteem.

My views and conclusions result from interacting with thousands of teachers, recording their attitudes and opinions, and hearing their questions. These views may be unpalatable to some. These are my opinions; others need not necessarily agree with them. However, other scholars may hold similar views. The similarities may be coincidental. The views I have expressed here are a tiny tip of the iceberg of the distilled essence of my teaching-learning experiences gathered over nearly five decades. I am not, to use Iago’s words about Cassio in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, “an arithmetician” or “a mere theoretic,” and my observations are not “mere prattle without practice”.

SD: Substantiating your views on language with statements from literature shatters the notion that language and literature are two islands. How do you respond to this?

ZNP: I have always believed that content and code, matter, and manner, subject and style are organically inseparable. They are in complementary and not contrastive relationships. The animosity between literature and language departments results from a misconception.

SD: I cannot agree more, Dr. Patil. Thank you for sharing your views.

ZNP: Thank you, Shree Deepa, for asking very pointed, pertinent, probing, and revealing questions. It is an art to provide relevant answers, but it is a greater art and skill to ask good questions.

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