

## One-on-One: Interview with David Nunan

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Professor David Nunan needs no introduction. Every ELT professional across the globe and most English language teachers and teacher trainees in countries where English is either the second or foreign language must have known something about Dr David Nunan, a well-known applied linguist, English language educator and author. In this interview with Albert P'Rayan, Dr Nunan talks about his successful textbook series *Go For It*, how he got interested in English language education, his teaching career, how his approach to teaching evolved over the years, his contribution to TESOL as the President of the association, importance of professional development for teachers of English, etc.

**A few days ago, I happened to interact with a group of ELT practitioners and research scholars. I told them that I was planning to interview you for the Journal of English Language Teaching (India). Out of curiosity, when I asked them whether they had used your books, they started mentioning some titles. When I asked them whether they had any questions which I could include it in the set of interview questions, one of them mentioned the textbook series *Go For It*.**



**It is the world's most successful textbook series. Over three billion copies must have been sold by now. Can you share with us the success story of *Go For It*?**

The success of *Go For It* took everyone by surprise, including the publishers. It was a combination of luck, timing, and a series that was a combination of traditional pedagogy with innovative features that drew on my own research into learner-centered instruction and task-based learning. Innovative features include an analytic syllabus, collaborative learning, a focus on learning processes, and a reflective approach to learning. The two basic language syllabus types are synthetic syllabuses and analytic syllabuses. A synthetic syllabus takes as its point of departure lists of discrete phonological,

lexical and grammatical items. The analytic approach takes as its point of departure an inventory of tasks – the things that people do with language in everyday life. Another feature of the series is collaborative learning, in which the focus is on learners working in groups learning experientially rather than on the teacher transmitting knowledge. In addition to having language content goals, the series also has learning process goals. For example, in a reading task in which learners have to scan for specific information, the reading strategy of scanning is explicitly taught to the learners and consciously applied to the reading process. An important learning strategy is reflecting, that is giving learners opportunities to reflect on their learning, evaluating what tasks and language items have been mastered, how well they have been mastered, and what needs more practice.

**Professor Nunan, you have written articles and books almost on all areas in the field of English language education. How did you get interested in English language education?**

I began my teaching career in an inner city high school in Sydney Australia. I was trained as a teacher of literature, although I also studied linguistics as an undergraduate. I thought I would be teaching literature, but the vast majority of my students were immigrants and refugees who spoke little English. In order to teach literature, I first had to teach my students English, so like many English language teachers, I ‘fell into’ teaching English as a

second language and then fell in love with the subject.

**Do you think only teachers with considerable experience can be successful ESL/EFL materials writers?**

I do believe this. All of the best ideas in my textbooks have come from my experience as a classroom practitioner. So, yes, I believe that considerable experience is necessary to be a successful ESL/EFL materials writer. However, it is not sufficient. Relatively few highly experienced teachers are successful writers. Textbook writing requires highly specialized skills such as conducting needs analyses, syllabus design, that is, selecting and sequencing linguistic and experiential content, methodology, that is creating tasks, exercises and activities that are creative, engaging, and appropriate for the targeted learners, and assessment and evaluating.

**You have taught English for many years in different countries. What is your most rewarding teaching experience?**

My most rewarding teaching moments occur when I have tangible evidence that my learners have developed their communication skills as a result of the structured learning opportunities that I have created for the learners. While the relationship between teaching and learning is complex and indirect, the right type of teaching (creating opportunities for learning rather than trying to drill your knowledge into the heads of the learners) does result in learning. Recently, I was in Australia giving seminars to a class of Masters students, a number of whom came from

China. They told me that they had learned English in school as a result of studying *Go For It*. I replied that although I was pleased that my materials helped them acquire English, it was their efforts that brought the learning about.

**Is it important to have a different approach to teaching ESL/EFL in different countries?**

The approach taken should always be appropriate to the context. The context will include the age and level of proficiency of the learners, the skill of the teacher, the cultural context, the instructional environment (class size, resources available etc.), the prior learning experiences of the learners, and individual learners' styles. No one approach will work for everyone in a particular country because learners are different and learn in different ways.

**Do you teach ESL/EFL the way you taught the language almost 3 decades ago? How has the current theory of language teaching and research affected your approach to language teaching?**

When I started teaching (45 years ago, actually), audiolingualism was the dominant methodology. Based on behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics, most class time was devoted to various kinds of pattern drills designed to inculcate grammatical forms through a process of habit formation. Over the years, my approach to teaching evolved, and continues to evolve under the influence of my own research as well as the research of others, changing theoretical perspectives, and

reflecting on my own teaching practices. In terms my theory (and there is no 'current theory' – rather multiple theories), I have been greatly influenced by constructivist, experiential models of learning. I subscribe to a sociocultural rather than purely cognitivist view of learning, and in recent years have been influenced by complexity theory which provides an explanation for the fact that language learning and use outside the classroom is very different from language learning and use inside the classroom. .

**Who, according to you, is a successful teacher of English?**

The successful teacher is the one who has a detailed knowledge of his/her students: their needs and interests, their preferred ways of learning, the lives they lead outside of the classroom, their learning goals and life goals etc. and can incorporate these into their teaching. The successful teacher is passionate about teaching and cares for his/her students.

**You have been a renowned linguist, researcher, teacher, teacher educator, trainer, materials writer, conference presenter, ... How do you motivate yourself to continue to be a great achiever and contributor to the field of English language teaching?**

I love what I do. If you love what you do, and have curiosity you will always seek to improve what you do from teaching to research to writing. For me what I do is not a job, it's a vocation.

**You have served as the President of**

**TESOL. What is your major contribution to the organization?**

I was the first President to serve in the position from outside North America. I did so from Hong Kong where I lived and continue to live. As such, I worked hard to make TESOL a truly international association. I also tried to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners, arguing that classroom-oriented action research can enhance their own practice as well as providing insights into the classroom that are beyond the reach of academic researchers.

**How important is professional development for teachers of English?**

Career-long professional development is fundamental to anyone who calls themselves a professional. But the professional development has to be relevant to their needs as PR actioners and to the contexts in which they work.

**In what ways can teachers of English in developing countries develop themselves professionally?**

There is no one answer to this question. They can do it through in-service and award bearing courses offered either face-to-face or online, through the 'virtual' attendance at conferences such as IATEFL which is live streamed free of charge, through engaging in reflective practice and action research, and through many other means.

**These days, most learners in developed as well as developing countries have**

**access to the Internet and mobile technology? Will the fast-paced changes brought about by information and communication technology (ICT) promote learner autonomy in the future?**

Technology has changed every aspect of many peoples lives, and education is no exception. The Unترنت provides myriad learning opportunities for using and learning language, particularly outside the classroom, and this promotes autonomy because, by definition, learners have to function independently when they are working without a teacher.

**Will the role of English language teachers be redefined in the technology-driven modern world characterized by "informationalism" (Castells, 1996)**

Yes. It is not possible to teach online, or in the blended learning classroom without redefining one's roles and identity and developing new teaching skills.

**You must be one of the most sought after conference presenters. It is not practically possible for you to accept all the invitations. On what basis do you accept to be a resource person or presenter?**

This depends on whether I'm already committed. Often I'm asked to be a plenary or keynote speaker but have to decline because I'm already booked up. (My diary/planner for 2018 is already filling up.) Another consideration is the difficulty of getting to certain places. I have a number

of age-related medical issues which makes travel challenging.

**You have won numerous awards. For example, in 2003 you were ranked the 7<sup>th</sup> most influential Australian in Asia by Business Review Weekly and in 2005 you were named one among the top “50 Australians who matter”. How important are these awards to you?**

They are a recognition of, not only of my work, but of the importance of English language education by people from outside the field of education – from the business, media and political worlds. For this reason, I value them quite highly.

**Your contributions to and achievements in the field of English language education make people like me think that you don’t have time to relax at all. If at all you have free time, how do you spend the free time?**

I relax by outdoor exercise (I’m a keen runner and swimmer), painting, reading, listening to music, and, believe it or not,

through non-academic writing. I’ve written a travel book, (*Roadshow*) a memoir (*When Rupert Murdoch Came to Tea*) – available through amazon - and a book of short stories *Other Voices, Other Eyes* which will be published in August.

**What projects are you currently busy with?**

I’m writing a book on the history of my mother’s family who immigrated to Australia in the 1850s. Doing the research for this book was fascinating. I’m also busy with my work as a member of the Executive Committee of TIRF which I helped establish during my TESOL Presidential years (1998 – 2002), teaching online graduate courses for Anaheim University when I am Distinguished Research Professor, and doing consulting work for publishers and educational institutions.

**What is your message to the ELT community in India?**

If you love teaching, pursue it with passion. If you don’t, find yourself another career.