

One-on-One: Interview with Susan Hillyard

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In this series of interviews, called One-on-One, Albert P'Rayan speaks to globally recognized English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals. Those who have been interviewed earlier include Nik Peachey, Stephen Krashen, Scott Thornbury, Nicky Hockly, David Nunan and Alan Malley. For this issue of the *Journal of English Language Teaching (India)*, the interviewer spoke to Susan Hillyard, a well-known ELT professional and expert in drama techniques. Susan Hillyard talks about her professional journey, importance of CPD, drama education, her books *English through Drama* and *Global Issues*, etc.

Susan, you have over four decades of experience in the field of language teaching in seventeen countries across the globe. Besides being a teacher, you have also played many other roles such as teacher trainer, workshop facilitator, researcher, author and on-line tutor. It must have been a great professional journey for you. What keeps you going?

Yes, Albert, I've had a long and varied career so far and I'm now embarking on a new venture, designing, building and moderating on several on-line courses for teachers' professional development needs on a global



scale. I would say that the great professional and personal journey that I've enjoyed, always moving, meeting wonderful teachers and students from more than 32 nationalities in 17 very different countries is what has kept me going and avoided any sense of burnout. Not only the travelling to worlds far apart but the changes in myself I've had to make in order to adapt to such diverse cultures has kept me juggling my habits, mores and values. It was hard, for example, in Singapore to adjust to the incredible mix of Indian, Chinese and Malay life styles and yet keep my own identity intact. All in all, I would say it has fired up a passion to climb on to the never ending spiral of lifelong learning. I feel that, although I should have retired by now, I will never be able to abandon my search for the ever advancing key to the perfect methodology for teaching English across the world.

Is there any perfect methodology for teaching English?

No, I'm sure there's not, as each teacher is different and each student or class is different but I think I've been seeking my perfect personal pedagogy where I could feel certain that my students were actually learning and enjoying that process at the same time. Once you find a flexible methodology that you, personally, can adapt after reflecting on needs then you feel that you are on the exciting journey that you want to be on!

How important is professional development for teachers of English in countries where English is spoken as a second/foreign language?

I believe it is vital for every teacher and, in reality, for every worker as we live in the midst of exponential change in rather troubling times. The only solution is continuing education for all but I believe as teachers of the global language we must update on a routine basis. Professional development opportunities for all teachers of English must be two-pronged and built-in by the authorities not just tagged on as an afterthought or reluctantly dropped in at the beginning of the school year or hosted for a few days in the holidays. I say two-pronged meaning that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) should offer a course on advanced language development for the teacher and also a course on trending issues in ELT which work on transformation and real change inside the classroom. The authorities, themselves, should act as

models to teachers by updating their skills as leaders too.

What are the professional development opportunities for teachers of English? In other words, in what ways can teachers develop themselves professionally?

These days the possibilities are endless and this can seem bewildering for many teachers. It used to be the case that teachers could attend face-to-face courses and conferences held in their own institutions or organised outside, often gathering teachers together from many different areas and cities and even countries. It's very complex as not all teachers feel they need to be updated and may feel that their institution is forcing change upon them so they may go in body but not in spirit. In contrast, other teachers may be hungry for PD opportunities but are excluded from face-to-face meetings as they work in rural areas and don't earn enough money to pay to travel or have spare time in their busy lives to do so.

This is now alleviated by the huge proliferation of PD products on offer on the internet, accessible by anyone, anywhere in the world as long as the teacher has an internet device of some kind and a good secure connection. There are MOOCs (Massive Open On-line Courses like Class Central, FutureLearn, Coursera) which come in very well designed instructional packages and are free; there is the free EVO (English Village On-line) conducted by volunteer experts every January and February; there are University on-line

courses, or at distance courses, of various durations and with medium to high costs; there are very short courses on a whole gamut of subjects with low to medium costs on sites like Udemy; there are a whole variety of private companies that are making the best use of LMSs (Learning Management Systems like Moodle, Blackboard, Adobe) to offer all kinds of help; then there are VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) in which groups can set up their own PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) with their own agenda and finally, in this long list, there exist a myriad of webinars offered freely by publishers, teacher associations, PD companies and individuals.

Do you think each educational institution should set up its own context related CPD plan?

Yes, institutions should set up their own context related CPD plan and that it should take into account what the teachers think they need and what the authorities think they need, be practical, inspiring and innovative bringing about change in the teachers' understanding of good practice. It needs to be implemented with the agreement of the whole body of the school and to be followed up stringently through constant feedback.

Now let us move from CPD to your area of interest and specialization, that is, 'Teaching English through drama'. You have been involved with 'Theatre in Education' troupes. How did you get interested in theatre and drama education?

I think it really began when I was tiny and my mother used to read me poems and stories which we then acted out at home. When I started primary school I was an avid reader and by the time I was eight I was invited by the teachers to tell my own original stories to their classes. My mother also sent me to ballet and tap classes, where I learned to perform on stage, thoroughly enjoying the experience of wearing beautiful costumes, putting on stage make-up and having an audience under my spell.

When I decided to become a teacher I gained a place to read Dramatic Arts at Warwick University and I completed the four-year full-time degree course to start my career in teaching Drama in a secondary school in Coventry, UK. I pioneered a course teaching English through Drama in the remedial section of a huge comprehensive school to students with learning difficulties and found that I could reach these students more effectively with this methodology. Three years later I started my travels around the world teaching English through Drama and Literature in Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Spain and finally settling down in Argentina.

As a teacher trainer and workshop facilitator, do you think drama techniques can be used effectively to teach English as a second and foreign language? Do teachers show interest in drama techniques?

I firmly believe that all teachers of English should learn to teach the language through applying Drama techniques to their work in the classroom. It works at any age and

level, with any ability and with any culture. Teachers react in different ways to this suggestion. Some believe that it is a recipe for chaos and not all their students will participate and maybe that they themselves are not capable of doing it. Those teachers are usually the ones who confuse Theatre with Drama; they think the School Play or the School Concert is Drama. However, those other teachers who study Educational Drama, often because they want to change the dynamics of their classrooms and find a way to reach all their students soon realise the great benefits, not only to their students but to themselves.

More and more teachers around the globe are beginning to see that Drama can transform students' attitudes so that learning English becomes a challenge and a joy.

How can drama transform students' attitudes towards learning English?

It's quite magical! The roles in the classroom change considerably making the students believe that they really matter. Once this is established their self esteem, confidence and worth as learners is raised. This is fundamental to change attitudes and to motivate students to be inspired to come to class, to be engaged fully in the work of the class and to leave the room feeling fulfilled. Paradoxically, in putting on the Drama mask the students can use the language much more effectively and understand who they are as language learners.

Drama techniques may not work with all teachers and learners because all are not

interested in drama and all do not possess the talents/skills for it. In a mixed-ability class, is it wise to use drama techniques?

Speaking from 46 years of experience in five very different countries I can say that everybody has the skills to teach and learn through Drama. It is merely an extension of childhood play which schools tend to kill in children by making them conform to what schools think is good for their learning, namely sitting still in rows, not communicating and not moving about. Drama is actually the perfect learning medium for mixed-ability classes especially those classes which work on inclusion. This is because Drama deals with the whole development of the growing learner in a holistic way.

As a teacher of English, have you been influenced by any teaching methodology?

It was John Dewey's Philosophy of Education, the Montessori Method, Lev Vygotsky's theories, Ivan Illich's Deschooling and Dorothy Heathcote's Educational Drama that inspired me the most. Even at University, in the late 60s, we were taught that we were "facilitators of learning situations" and that learning by doing was the only way people learn anything; everything has to be experiential and to start with the learner at the centre of the process, not the teacher or the syllabus or the curriculum.

You must be familiar with Scott Thornbury's 'Dogme' method. Have you tried to teach any group of students without published materials (newspaper

articles, textbooks, etc.) What is your take on “Dogme” approach? Is your English through Drama similar to this approach?

Now, Albert, that’s a very insightful question. I am familiar with it and, in fact, I have read a lot about it and always felt it was very akin to my take on English through Drama. The main difference is that Drama is far more structured as it has evolved into a discipline in its own right and has embedded in it a very clear philosophy of education which can, like dogme, be interpreted in many ways. I have never been able to use a textbook **only** to teach English; I’ve always had to supplement it using the students’ own experiences, tapping into prior knowledge, using authentic materials, realia and stories. I believe dogme is losing ground while Drama is gaining ground!

You say that you use students’ own experiences, authentic materials, realia and stories in the classroom. It means that you are for Dogme approach. Why do you say dogme is losing ground?

No, I’m not convinced of the dogme approach as I believe many good teachers were always supplementing their course books and believing that the thing that mattered most in classrooms was the relationship with students being at the centre. Dogme was a label that Scott and Luke put on it, I believe, to direct teachers away from the “industrial” use of coursebooks/technology which often alienate students and demotivate them. There is much debate surrounding the interpretation of the dogme approach and no real structure for it whereas Drama is

highly disciplined creativity. Of course, I am totally biased in my opinion!

Let’s not get into controversy. Let’s move on to the online course ‘Teaching English through Drama’ that you are running. What are the salient features of the course?

The course is designed as a quality professional development experience for teachers who want change in their classrooms, who want to motivate their pupils, inspire in them a love of the language and who want to teach effectively and happily. It lasts for 6 weeks only and comprises reflective questions posted in separate forums for teachers to respond to before downloading the handouts which they study before the live webinar each week. It is a practical course based on sound theory explained in the book. After the live webinar there are videos, articles and readings to support that week’s topic and the teachers respond to guiding questions to debate the merits with each other relating their experiences in their own contexts. Each week closes with an evaluation form for the teachers to complete on-line. I answer the teachers’ comments in the reflective question forums with a personalised video tutorial to make the whole experience more like a face-to-face course and the teachers really appreciate that.

The topics covered are: Drama as Education; Classroom Management Skills; Breathing, Body and Brain Gym exercises; Pronunciation and Voice Exercises;

Concentration and Relaxation Games; Fluency Exercises. My motto is “Avoid dropout and Burnout!” and I emphasise the speaking skills over all other skills.

How popular is the online course?

So far, I have trained over a hundred teachers from 23 countries in 4 iterations so I would say it’s been a huge success. I am doing three iterations per year, one in April, one in August and one in October in order to cater for the different school timetables in the world. The teachers who have been on the course have written rave reviews, saying I have transformed both their professional and their personal lives! Imagine the exciting intercultural exchanges that go on between Serbians, Pakistanis, Cypriots, Italians, Argentines, British, North Americans, Portuguese and Nepalese etc etc! I encourage a free exchange of opinions, ideas, materials, resources and experiences and it is this that sets the course apart from any other.

How popular is the resource book *English through Drama*?

So far, I cannot give you the actual statistics as I will be receiving them this month but I know that most of the participants on the courses have then gone out to buy the book or ordered it on-line. Teachers also buy the book at the exhibitions present at conferences where I deliver talks or workshops and do book signings. That’s very gratifying as writing books is a long hard, lonely process!

This is a quote from one of your

presentations: “It has become widely understood that effective language learning involves more than the four integrated skills of ELT. The missing link is the fifth dimensionthat of teaching thinking.” Does the term “teaching thinking” in the quote imply critical thinking? How do you teach critical thinking through drama?

There are many types of thinking skills which we can teach through drama exercises including analytical, critical and creative thinking skills. In fact, in drama we work with Bloom’s HOTS (the Higher Order Thinking Skills) more than with Bloom’s LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills). We do it by facilitating learning situations where the students are the protagonists in language games, role plays, improvisations and storydrama where they have to make quick decisions, represent attitudes, interpret characters, solve problems and involve themselves in conflict resolution. We work on the emotions to develop empathy alongside tolerance while through relaxation and concentration games we deal with anxiety control. We care about the well being of our students and encourage “noticing” and mindfulness of values, social justice and citizenship.

You are into online tutoring and webinaring. How effective is virtual teaching/learning in comparison with face-to-face classroom teaching/learning?

I was very sceptical about the effectiveness of on-line teaching and learning when it first

started but after teaching on-line for 12 years I have completely changed my mind. For older teens and adults who have the self discipline to do it regularly and not drop out it can be even better than face-to-face learning. The advantage of working at your own pace, in your own time, having so many options and not wasting time travelling and suffering transport inconveniences can never be matched by face-to-face courses. In addition, shy people can have a voice and respond better in writing than they would in a classroom situation: they have time to think, time to formulate their answers, redraft and really express themselves in a more comfortable way. In my courses there are a certain number of compulsory questions and a number of compulsory comments to be made on other participants' responses so the reflections are very rich and enriched through debate. Very often it is impossible to get that kind of discussion going in a LIVE classroom situation. I believe on-line learning and on-line teaching will become more and more popular in the future as technological tools improve and open more possibilities to make the University of Life a reality. That's not to say that real live teachers will be out of a job, particularly at younger ages.

Could you please share with me about your book *Global Issues* published by OUP?

Global Issues is a Resource Book for Teachers which offers a short introduction of the theory behind teaching global issues in English to foreign or second language learners worldwide. There are

more than a hundred classroom activities presented clearly under four headings: Awareness raising, Personal experiences, Major global issues and Using the arts. 21st century skills are stressed so that students learn to think critically, creatively and learn to do research and organise their learning in a more autonomous manner.

My first question to you was on your Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Your professional journey does inspire English language teachers who are familiar with your work. As a professional, what are your tips for an ordinary teacher to become a professional?

The first step is to see our work as noble and responsible and to realise that it is each person's individual duty to be accountable for their work inside the classroom. Then it's important to understand that we work better in groups, sharing and caring for each others' development and to seek out other like-minded teachers. Join a teachers' association; join a Special Interest Group (SIG); join a teachers' Facebook group; take an on-line course; find out about live conferences; start a network of teachers who really want to develop and have a rotating chairperson so the load is shared; subscribe to a teachers' journal; watch out for free webinars; start a "Tips for Teachers" course where each teacher in your school presents a lesson idea that worked well; start a "Teachers as Readers" group where you all read and discuss one methodology book per month; start a "Journal Writing" group

where you write a journal of classroom experiences and share them with each other; do peer observations and talk to each other about your findings; do an interschool debate/festival/exhibition.

There are so many possibilities I hardly know where to start!

Thank you, Susan, for sharing your experience with the readers of the Journal of English Language Teaching (India). I am sure, your experience in the field of English language teaching will inspire those who read the interview and will motivate them to become professionals.

I certainly hope so! I really believe we as

teachers can transform education, especially attitudes to language acquisition. We must be the change agents for a better future for all the students in our care. Once the teachers jump on the never ending spiral of lifelong learning they will act as models and inspire their students to love the language and to love learning.

Thank you so much, Albert, for this opportunity and hope you can get a strong professional development plan going with the readers of the Journal of English Language Teaching (India), in your institutions in your area, in your city, in your country or on a global scale!

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