

One-on-One: Interview with Alan Maley

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Alan Maley, known for his creativity in the ELT world, is a familiar name for those who have been in the field of English language teaching in India. He worked for the British Council as Regional Director and looked after the four southern states for four years from 1984 to 1988. Alan has the experience of serving as the President and Vice-President of the IATEFL, as an academic in the National University of Singapore and at Assumption University, Bangkok, and as a Series Editor for the Oxford University Press (OUP) Resource Books for Teachers series. Currently, he enjoys writing poetry and short stories and attending conferences as a resource person. In this interview with **Albert P'Rayan**, Alan Maley recalls his experience in Madras, talks about the importance of creativity for English language teachers and shares his views on methods, materials, professional development, etc.

Alan, you have worked over a quarter of a century with the British Council in different countries and have spent over four years (1984-1988) in India. How great was your experience in Madras, now known as Chennai?

I found my time in Madras both enjoyable and fascinating. The sheer range and variety of people I met and worked with was



enormously rewarding for me. And please do not forget that, as Director of the British Council in South India, I was also responsible for the Council's work, including its libraries, in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, as well as Tamil Nadu. We had a constant flow of distinguished visitors, which brought me into contact with their equally distinguished Indian counterparts – scientists like Francis Crick, politicians like Shirley Williams, artists like Stephen Cox, musicians like Patricia Rosario, writers like William Golding... And of course, many well-known figures from the ELT world, like Pit Corder, Gillian Brown, Charles Alderson and so on.

There was also always something interesting going on locally. There was Kalakshetra (Rukmini Devi was still alive at the

beginning of my stay). There was the annual Madras Music Festival. I also recall attending Krishnamurti's last talk at The Krishnamurti Foundation Gardens off Greenways Road. And, of course, there was all the colour and excitement of the many Hindu festivals – Deepavali, Holi, Pongal, Thaipusam, Navarathni and all the rest. Never a dull moment.

The ELT community in India has gained a lot from your service in India. What have you gained personally from your stay in India?

In personal terms, I came to appreciate Indian classical music and dance, both of which were entirely new to me. I also appreciated the opportunity to widen and deepen my enjoyment of Indian literature in English. I was fortunate to meet writers like Nissim Ezekiel, Vikram Seth, Arun Kolatkar and many others. This was also the exciting time Penguin India was establishing its list, headed by David Davidar – when new talents were being published for the first time.

In professional terms, India was quite different from anywhere else I had worked. I came to India from over 4 years in China, and the contrast could not have been sharper. I came to appreciate the complexity of the role and status of English in India in its relationship with the recent colonial past and with the Indian languages with which it co-habited, sometimes uncomfortably. If I learned anything, it was that there are no simple solutions to complex problems.

I was singularly fortunate to have had NS Prabhu as a colleague and to see his Bangalore Project at first hand. His departure from a linguistically-structured syllabus to a procedural syllabus based on a series of carefully staged tasks was a critical moment in the development of our current conceptions of ELT.

I was less fortunate with regard to David Horsburgh: he died a week or two after I arrived in Madras, so I never got to meet him. I did however subsequently visit Neel Bagh, his innovative school in rural Andhra more than once. This bold experiment, which flouted virtually every precept of institutional education was a real eye-opener. The school was open to all, irrespective of age. Classes were vertically structured as to age, not horizontally as in most systems of education, so in one class the ages could range from 5 to 50. There were no tests or exams and no punishments. There was a strong emphasis on the arts and on practical manual skills, with no gender bias – so girls learned motor mechanics and boys learned needlework... The school grew much of its own food. And Horsburgh would not employ trained teachers, claiming that he would have to un-train them before they were suited to work in Neel Bagh.

Subsequently, I was lucky to be able to recruit Robert Bellarmine from CIEFL (as was), and Shantakumari Rajan from Stella Maris College. Both were of inestimable value to me in making decisions about the British Council's possible contributions to the English teaching community.

Can I say that your stay in India was a rewarding experience for you both professionally and personally?

Yes, I think my stay in India gave me a number of invaluable things:

~ An enduring interest in the development of English as a language outside its metropolitan bases and implications for language teaching and education in general.

~ An interest in the rapidly evolving new literatures in English.

~ A commitment to finding appropriate ways to teach less privileged students.

~ A new confirmation of the value of literature as a language teaching resource.

~ Likewise for the importance of the arts, especially drama, in language teaching.

~ New insights into the value of creative writing as part of language learning.

It is interesting to know that David Horsburgh was not for employing trained teachers as he would have to un-train them before they were suited to work in Neel Bagh. Does it imply that it would be difficult for English language teachers who were taught English in a particular way to teach in a different way?

I suppose it does. But I think it goes beyond that. Most, if not all, formal teacher training aims to provide trainees with a toolkit of techniques and procedures which supposedly help them to operate as a teaching technician in the classroom. The emphasis is heavily weighted in favour of

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knowledge and skills for direct teaching. Horsburgh was less interested in these technicalities and more concerned that teachers should develop attitudes which would enable them to help facilitate the students' learning. This implies a much less direct teaching practice – an ability to observe learners as they learn and to intervene only minimally in the process. For this, it is easier to take sympathetically inclined novices than teachers whose attitudes have been hardened by traditional training.

Very recently, at an ELTAI conference in Cochin, when I mentioned your name to a group of English language teachers, an enthusiastic teacher said that he liked your poem “Teacher” and quoted the last four lines of the poem:

**“Maybe you should stick to language,
forget about anguish.**

You can't change the world.

But if I did that, I'd be a cheater, not a teacher.”

How important is it for a teacher of English to talk about global issues and human anguish in the English class?

I am pleasantly surprised that anyone should have read this poem, which prefaces the book I co-edited with Nik Peachey, *Global Issues in the Creative English Classroom*.

I wrote it because I do indeed believe language teachers are not just teachers of language. I think the notion of the language

teacher as some kind of technician is an impoverished view. My view is of the teacher as educator, which involves far more than instilling the mechanics of the language. Students learn from their teachers not just what they happen to be teaching. I think therefore that teachers have a duty to enter into genuine interaction with their students, and not to hide behind a screen of expertise.

I think too that in our contemporary world, replete with life-or-death issues, we again have a duty to inform our students of the reality of the world they will inhabit as adults. There has been, and continues to be, all too much ostrich-like behavior. Students are people just like the rest of us and are perfectly capable, indeed eager, to come to grips with live issues which concern them, when given the opportunity. Too much education results in a kind of infantilisation of the young. There is an abundant literature on the need for educational reform in this respect. For example John Holt's *How Children Fail*, Ken Robinson's *Creative Schools* and John Taylor Gatto's (2010) *Weapons of Mass Instruction* all make an impassioned plea for change.

I should also say that global issues offers one solution to a perennial problem in language teaching. This is the fact that language teaching does not have a ready-made content, like physics or history. A language is not a subject. Global Issues offers a compelling and relevant content from which language acquisition can flow.

Your recent book *Global Issues in the Creative English Classroom* which you

co-edited with Nik Peachey is in line with your thinking that global issues must be discussed in the English classroom. How is the response from the users of the book?

It is perhaps premature to ask as the book only came out earlier this year. There is, of course, already a strong current of interest in integrating global issues in our classroom teaching: through the pioneering work of Kip Cates and the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) Special Interest Group (SIG) on Global Issues, the Global Issues SIG in the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and the TESOL Social Responsibility Interest Section (SRIS).

We are hopeful, because our book is freely downloadable that many teachers will avail themselves of these resources.

As a creative writer you have written poems and published many books. How did you get interested in creative writing?

Interestingly enough, I think it was during my time in India that I began writing poetry and stories in earnest. India offered a favourable climate for literature, and an environment in which many people wrote poetry and stories. While in Madras I organized two short story competitions open to the public, both of which led to published collections of the winning entries. We also ran creative writing workshops from time to time – one very memorable one in collaboration with Alan Duff, my dear friend and co-writer, who is now sadly no more. All of this fueled my own interest in creative

writing. Indirectly it also led to the foundation of the *Asian Teacher-Writer Group*, which I set up in Bangkok with Tan Bee Tin (Burma) and Jayakaran Mukundan (Malaysia) and which ran for 12 years with workshops in Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Nepal and Indonesia and which also led to published collections of teachers' work. So thank you Madras for getting me going on that.

Alan, in the book *Creativity in English Language Teaching* which you co-edited with Nik Peachey, you state that “creativity is an endangered species in the current model of education, which is increasingly subject to institutional, curricular and assessment constraints”. Can't a teacher who is not creative be a successful teacher?

Much depends on how you define 'creative', which turns out to be more complicated than it might seem. Many people still think of creativity as the preserve of a particularly gifted creative elite. The creativity displayed by geniuses is called H (Historical) creativity and refers to acts of creation which have never been done before. P (Personal creativity) refers to creative acts which a given individual has never done before (even if many others have done them previously). Personal creativity can take many different forms and may be exhibited in quite small ways – being more inventive in cooking a dish, finding a quicker way to get to work, making up a joke, etc. all would qualify. So teachers should not feel that they have to display the kind of creativity associated with genius. They can be more creative in quite small ways.

One way of making small changes in one's teaching is to 'do the opposite' from what you normally do. (This heuristic was proposed long ago by John Fanselow in his book *Breaking Rules*.) Doing the opposite of course presupposes that we know what we habitually do. So the first step is to become aware of our unconscious habits. In order to break a habit, we have to know what habits we have. Just a simple example, we may be in the habit of asking a question and expecting an immediate answer. Once we are aware of this, we can change by allowing more thinking time before an answer is given. This is a very small creative step but can have disproportionately large effects. Fanselow's latest book, *Small Changes in Teaching: Big Changes in Learning*, elaborates on this idea.

So part of my answer is that teachers can be creative in quite small ways. But let me also answer the question which I think may be lurking behind your question, which I think goes something like this: 'If teachers are properly trained and work hard to comply with what the system requires, why do they need to be creative?' or perhaps slightly unfairly, 'Surely it's OK to be boring as long as I'm doing my job?' In responding to this, we need to realise the key role which teachers play in their students' learning. Recent research by John Hattie in his 2008 book *Visible Learning* shows that the teacher's personality and the way they go about their work far outweighs any other factor in the teaching-learning equation. So it's not just what you do. It's the way that you do it. We can all, I am sure, think of

teachers who could turn the most interesting activity to dust, and others who could magically transform even the dullest material into gold. I would suggest that we need to devote a good deal more attention than we currently do in training programmes to fostering the teacher qualities which learners respond to. There are a couple of chapters in our forthcoming book (*Creativity in the Language Classroom: From inspiration to implementation*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) which make some concrete suggestions about how this might be done.

In an article on creativity which you co-authored with Rod Bolitho, you state that the “notion of creativity comprises core ideas such as ‘making something new’, ‘perceiving old things in new ways’, ‘finding new connections’, or ‘evoking pleasurable surprise’ (Maley 2003).” Are these ideas applicable to ELT?

Absolutely. Take a look at the British Council collection you mentioned above, or Chaz Pugliese’s (2010) *Being Creative*. Or my forthcoming book: Alan Maley (2018) *50 Creative Ideas for Language Teachers*. CUP, and many others. These are not whimsical fantasies, they offer practical activities which teachers can use and adapt in their classrooms.

You started the group called *The C group: Creativity for Change in Language Education*? Could you please share the objectives and activities of the group?

If readers want to see these in detail, it is better to visit the C Group website. ([http://](http://www.thecreativitygroup.weebly.com)

www.thecreativitygroup.weebly.com) But in brief, here is what we aimed to do at the outset. We felt that teachers are increasingly under pressure to conform to externally-prescribed regulations in the service of a concept of education based on tightly prescribed curricula and syllabuses, course materials which leave little room for independent action by the teacher, and on high-stakes testing. We knew that there were many teachers whose creativity was being strait-jacketed by this. So our aim was to bring together like-minded teachers from across the world who would unite in offering an alternative view of what education can be like.

You served as President and Vice-President of the prestigious teacher association IATEFL. What do you think is your major contribution to the IATEFL?

I think the things I would remember most are two:

One would be the extension of IATEFL Associations in the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. We were able to set up English teacher associations linked to IATEFL in Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia (as was) and Hungary. And this network of associations is still developing and expanding. I think this was a unique moment where political and pedagogical change crossed paths.

The other is the setting up of the Wider Membership Scheme in collaboration with

Ray Tongue. The idea was to offer membership of IATEFL to teachers overseas who would not otherwise have been able to afford it. We managed to raise a start-up fund with contributions from publishers and others, which made it possible to launch the scheme.

In what ways can teacher associations contribute to the members' professional development?

I believe that, in essence, professional development has to be personal to the teacher. However, Teacher Associations can provide valuable support to teachers, especially those working in remote areas or 'in difficult circumstances' (Michael West). They can serve as an information resource to help teachers keep up to date with what is going on in the profession. They can help bring teachers together either physically through conferences and workshops or virtually through webinars, or through newsletters, etc. for interaction on issues of mutual interest. (The Special Interest Groups – SIGs -which are now a feature of most teacher associations are particularly active in doing this.) Above all they can create a sense of professional solidarity, through the realization that we are not alone in facing problems and that we can deal with them through a shared sense of community.

How important is continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers of English?

How can teachers *not* continue to develop? The world changes. We have to adapt to change – not necessarily always to welcome

it but to assess how it affects our own lives and practices.

Alan, you have won many awards. In 2012 you were given the ELTons Lifetime Achievement Award. How significant is the award to you?

It's always nice to get some kind of acknowledgement but I have never set much store by such outward trophies. The greatest reward is to see one's own students and colleagues taking off independently and developing in largely unanticipated ways. I love that.

Stephen Krashen in his book *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research* (2004) states that extensive reading helps learners develop their language competence. Do you share the same view?

I absolutely do agree with Krashen on this. Reading is a powerful way of acquiring, recycling, maintaining and extending the language being learned. There is plenty of research evidence to support this view, some of it presented in Krashen's book above, and in Day and Bamford's (1998) *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*.

From a personal point of view I can confirm the beneficial effects of reading as a way of keeping one's foreign languages in good order. I read regularly in three other languages and find that this really helps me to keep them fresh in my mind. I should add that I rarely, if ever use a dictionary. Not because I know all the words but because it does not matter if I don't know them all...

How does *The Extensive Reading Foundation* which you co-founded promote extensive reading among learners and teachers?

I am no longer closely involved with the *Extensive Reading Foundation*, except as an advisor. However, the *Foundation* continues to provide up-to-date information on research and on projects involving ER. It offers scholarship awards. It co-sponsors the annual *Language Learner Literature Awards* for newly published graded readers. It offers advice to teachers on how to get started with ER in their classes. And it has just run its fourth World Congress on ER. You can find full details of all of these and more by googling 'Extensive Reading Foundation'.

Let us move on to methods. Some language researchers and ELT professionals say that methods are dead and we are in the post-method era. Kumaravadivelu (2006) talks about facilitating “the growth and development of teachers’ own theory to practice” and “postmethod pedagogy”. What is your view on “dissatisfaction with methods” which is being discussed in many conferences these days?

I am suspicious of methods which appear to offer complete solutions to the business of learning a foreign language. The claim, stated or implied, that 'If you follow our method, your students will learn...XYZ.' is never truly sustainable. Such a conception of methodology rests on a supposed direct link between what is taught and what is

learned. It also pre-supposes that 'we' know what the learner needs to learn. I take a different view, which prioritises the learners' own learning pathways towards greater proficiency in the language. This is not something with predictable outcomes, and requires of the teacher a state of preparedness for the unpredictable and a willingness and capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. Many teachers are not comfortable with this and prefer the spurious sense of security provided by a method. But we need to become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

I would prefer us to speak of principles rather than methods. What are the underlying, key things a teacher needs to do? In my reduced version, these are: to have a rough idea of where they want the learners to go and a flexible set of ways of getting there, to pay attention to what is really happening, to listen to what students say, to acknowledge the presence of the learners as individuals, to present achievable challenges, to offer support when needed – and otherwise to stay out of the learners' way so they can get on with the business of learning. If that is the post-method condition, then I am in it.

You have a very radical view on methods. Commenting on teachers who “prefer the spurious sense of security provided by a method” you said that “we need to become comfortable with being uncomfortable”. In the Indian context, is it possible for an ordinary teacher to become comfortable with being uncomfortable?

If course, it is possible. But in any context, Indian or not, it is never easy. To develop the confidence needed to deal with any unpredictable situation, to shed the comfortable protection of a set of stock responses, is never going to be easy. I think we are only at the beginning of an understanding of how we might help teachers develop spontaneous reactions to an unfolding scenario, minute by minute. One interesting project, developed by Peter Lutzker with Steiner School teachers in Germany was to give them training as clowns. (Not circus clowns but theatre clowns in the tradition of Lecocq in France). Lutzker shows how clowns and

teachers have a lot in common, and how clowning training can have a profound effect on the personality and practice of teachers. His 2007 book, *The Art of Foreign Language Teaching*, describes this project in detail.

Alan, thank you so much for taking the time to answer all my questions. I am sure the readers of the Journal of English Language Teaching (India) and others will find the interview very useful.

Thank you for asking me all these questions. It is always good to re-examine one's past, which inevitably leads to re-considering one's present. So thank you.

Dear member,

Have you used any of the following digital platforms (or any other also), for promoting online discussions among your students?

Course Management systems

Moodle, Edmodo, Collaborize classroom

Social networking / Discussion sites

Ning, Facebook, Google+, Google groups and Yahoo groups.

Online Discussion Apps.

Collaborize classroom and Subtext

If yes, please send your paper, giving an account of your experiences in using them . and also with what effect, to <eltai_india@yahoo.co.in> cc to

Dr. Xavier Pradeepsingh at pradheepxing@gmail.co

All selected papers will be given cash awards and also published in our E Journal— Journal of Technology for ELT (Impact factor:4.530)

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