

## One-on-One: Interview with Robert Bellarmine

### Albert P'Rayan

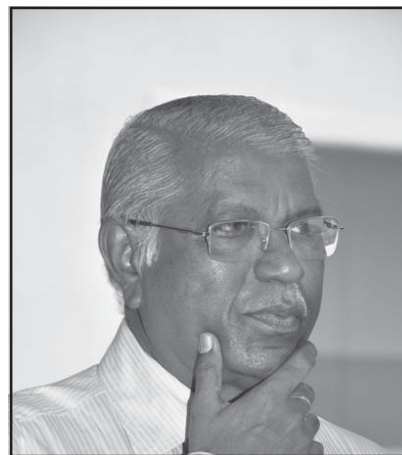
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**Robert Bellarmine**, an ELT expert, teacher educator, corporate trainer and author, is a well known and respected person in the ELT circle in India. In this interview with **Albert P'Rayan**, Mr Bellarmine shares his experience as British Council's Manager of English Studies programmes, his association with Alan Maley, former Regional Director, British Council, and his passion for teaching English to the disadvantaged, his thoughts on what ails English Language Teaching in India and his views on the changing role of teachers in the twenty-first century.

**Mr Bellarmine, many thanks for accepting my request to be interviewed for the *Journal of English Language Teaching*. During the past four decades, you have served as a teacher, corporate trainer, teacher educator, editor of textbook series, English Studies Officer, and Cambridge examiner and have captured the hearts and minds of many ELTians. Now, when you look back at your career, do you have a sense of satisfaction that you have achieved what you wanted to achieve?**

As a member of the staff of the CIEFL (now EFLU), and as ESO at the British Council Division, Chennai, between 1979 and 1997, I had spread the developments in the Communicative Language movement fairly



widely in South India. I'm particularly proud of the fact that when Dr N S Prabhu was diffusing the information about his supremely innovative idea of the Procedural Syllabus, especially the verification of his proposal in typical classrooms, I was able to support that innovation strongly. Inside CIEFL, surprisingly, there was strong opposition to his CTP (Communicational Teaching Project) from the first generation ELT specialists of India.

Another role I played at which I look back with a deep sense of satisfaction is the role I played as one of the managers of the CBSE's English Curriculum Renewal project. This satisfaction arises mainly out of the assistance I provided in identifying and selecting teachers in CBSE schools who had the specialists' potential to become syllabus writers, materials producers,

designers of testing and evaluation instruments, and teacher trainers.

Further, when a serious professional disagreement arose between the British specialists of the project and the Indian specialists in the CBSE Headquarters, regarding the need to include high literature for the learners in higher classes, I strongly supported the Indian standpoint. Although the ESOs were treated in this project only as project managers, and not as English Studies specialists, I stuck my neck out in this matter. Ultimately, the Indian standpoint in support of Literature in Language Teaching won.

Another achievement I recall is this. After Mr Alan Maley, the English Language Officer for India at that time, got the financial support of Britain's Overseas Development Administration (now Department for International Development or DFID) for ELT projects in South India, I had to ensure that the projects achieved their objectives and became sustainable. These projects involved writing new, communicative syllabuses, writing teaching and testing materials, training the teachers and finally the launching of the new curricula. The hosts of these projects were Anna University, Kerala University, Padmavathy Women's University, Tirupathy, Technical Teachers Training Institute, Chennai, Indian Institute of Science, and Osmania University.

I am pleased to record here that the project at Anna University achieved its objectives fully and was sustained for about twenty years. Besides, more than twenty local ELT specialists from the project institutions were

trained in the UK on short as well as long term courses in Applied Linguistics. Equally important, a reputable Indian publisher, Orient Longman (now Orient Blackswan) with Usha Aroor as its ELT Editor, did the excellent job of helping the teacher-turned-textbook writers to write ELT textbooks for Anna University and Padmavathy Women's University.

As an individual ELT specialist, I have authored a five book series titled *Millennium Grammar and Composition* for BPI Educational, Mumbai/Delhi, edited a twenty-two book series called *Hello English* targeted at English medium schools for Orient Blackswan, and co-edited *Teaching Literature in Indian Universities* for the British Council.

**You are one among those who promoted Plain English in India. What was the need for a Plain English Movement in India? How successful were you in promoting it?**

As for my achievements while at the BC, I recall with a great sense of pride what I did for Plain English. In that period of time, even the British Applied Linguists did not embrace it as something with serious implications for Applied Linguistics, Communication Studies and Good Governance. As a result, the English Studies policy of the British Council did not recognize Plain English experts in the UK as experts to be invited to host countries like India.

However, my own analysis of the English language used in India showed clearly that there was an urgent need for a Plain English

Movement in the country. So with great temerity, I proposed to the Specialist Tours Department of the British Council Headquarters, London, for their support for workshops in Plain English in South India. As one of India's widely acknowledged journalists and the founder of the Clear English India Movement, Jyoti Sanyal, later confirmed in his book *Indlish*, my hunch about this need was correct. And the programme I planned with Martin Cutts as the leader of workshops in Plain English was warmly embraced by famous institutions such as the LIC and the National Law School, Bangalore.

**A couple of months ago, I interviewed Alan Maley (Director of the British Council in South India, 1984-1988) for the *Journal of English Language Teaching*. When I asked him what he had gained personally from his stay in India, he said, "...I was lucky to be able to recruit Robert Bellarmine from CIEFL (as was), ...(He was) inestimable value to me in making decisions about the British Council's possible contributions to the English teaching community..." How important was your association with Alan Maley?**

My association with Alan Maley is something which I really treasure. It brought about important changes in my career, and introduced into my personal life an extraordinarily warm-hearted person. I'm particularly proud of my association with Alan, as he is the most prolific and globally acknowledged author and editor of ELT books for the learner.

Within a year after I joined the BC, he helped

me learn the peculiarities the business communication required by the Council. For instance, one of the secrets of achieving brevity, as he taught me, is to keep certain things for the letters and the others that involve strengthening relationship for official dinners and face-to-face meetings.

By the way, many of the British Council (BC) contacts I know from not only English Studies but also other disciplines such as Cultural Affairs and Science and Technology still remember Alan as the most hospitable of the BC Directors for South India. Another sterling quality of Alan is his love and appreciation for, both English Literature and the English Language.

**Could you please share with us about your contributions, as English Studies Officer, to the English teaching community in India?**

To turn to my own contributions as ESO at Chennai, my job was to organize lectures and workshops by specialist literature teachers, creative writers, and critics from the UK, on the one hand, and ELT specialists on the other.

The most warmly appreciated of my services was the organization of the visit of the Nobel Laureate, Sir William Golding, to the region. Thanks to the great teachers of English Literature such as Prof. C. D. Narasimhaiah, Golding had been widely read by the teachers, their students and adult readers outside the academia. One of the things which I vividly recall in this connection happened when I accompanied Golding to Dharwad, Karnataka, for his reading sessions at Dharwad University. To see him

face to face and to attend his programme, a group of young men had travelled in a bullock cart from a village more than twenty-five kilometres from Dharwad. What gave me most satisfaction on this programme was Golding's own appreciation of the deep and wide knowledge of his works among the South Indian audiences, the sharp and perceptive critical observation of the teachers of his novels, and the personal admiration they all showed in seeing him at close quarters.

As for the ELT programmes, the leaders and promoters of the Communicative Language Teaching from Britain such as Henry Widdowson and Christopher Brumfit, and the Father of Modern English Language Testing, Prof Alan Davies, were brought to South India, as the local ELT experts and classroom practitioners were keen to interact with them.

One of the noteworthy outcomes of the local ELT experts' interaction with the British experts visiting the region, and their training in the UK universities was the formation of Teacher Development Groups (TDGs) in South India. The most active of them, highly appreciated by the British specialists, was the TDG called ELT Community based in Bangalore led by Dr Esther Ramani and ably supported by Dr Barbara Naidu, Dr Jaya Gowri, and Dr C L N Prakash.

Outside ODA projects referred to above, I was able to send about seventy-five local ELT teachers and teacher trainers from this region for one year long courses in ELT and Applied Linguistics to world famous universities such as University of

Edinburgh, University of Lancaster, University of Reading and University of London.

**In the same interview, Alan Maley said that he 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.” You have known NS Prabhu for many years and you have also discussed his work in many forums. Though Prabhu is well known outside India for his task-based approach, his contributions are not much recognized in India. Have we failed to honour our own hero?**

True, we in India have miserably failed to honour our greatest thinker and practitioner in ELT. But this failure cannot be simply brushed aside with the biblical “this-Jesus-son-of-Joseph-the-carpenter” aside.

It is extremely important for the nation and individual professionals to perceive what this failure exposes. They are the fundamental fault lines in our profession's practice, especially at the research and teacher training levels, in institutions such as the EFLU (English & Foreign Languages University), Regional Institutes of English, English Language Institutes, and ELT departments in our Universities, overall, in our ELT academic culture.

For example, for lack of the academic culture of “Publish or Perish”, important primary

sources on Dr Prabhu's concepts and the conduct of the five year long classroom implementation of his Communicational Teaching Practice (CTP) in the real classrooms in Bangalore, Madras and Cudalore, such as his book *Second Language Pedagogy* (1984) and secondary sources of great quality by ELT thinkers in the UK, Canada, and USA, have not been studied, discussed and critiqued, as much as they are outside India. How many seminars on his contributions do you think have been conducted at EFLU, since his Bangalore Project began in 1979? How many teacher trainers and research guides in India have spread messages, in fact, superlative praise, like the following?

"It starts from a 'strong' interpretation of the communicative approach which means ...that children follow a communication syllabus, not a language one. Bangalore has set the context for one of the most interesting arguments of the eighties." (*My emphasis*) (Antony Howatt 1984)

"One of the earliest curricular applications of TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching) to appear in the literature was the Bangalore project." (**Emphasis mine**) (David Nunan 2004)

Secondly, most of the senior, first generation ELT experts in India based at CIEFL, RIEs, and ELTIs did not even understand the fact that Prabhu actually adopted the *purpose* of their Structural Approach (SA), namely constructing in the learners' mind the grammatical structures of the target language. He rejected only the graded structural *syllabus* and the non-

communicative *method* SA deployed for this purpose.

Thirdly, in India, the State governments that claimed to incorporate the Procedural Syllabus in their ELT practice merely used the term "task" or "activities" in their syllabuses and textbooks.

Finally, the seminars and conferences based in Indian universities and tertiary institutions have not drawn participants' attention to the Bangalore Project by setting up (a) any in-depth quiz on Prabhu's book and the newsletters of RIE, Bangalore, that contain rich materials on the whole project, (b) competitions to bring out local ELT scholars' knowledge of the project and its stellar outcomes, and (c) activities like mock debates among experts to explicate the ideas in Prabhu's and his critics' publications.

**The recently concluded ELTAI international conference at Kochi had the theme "English Language Acquisition: Western Theories and Eastern Practices". The need for Indianising English language teaching was stressed by some speakers. Does it make sense to you? What is your take on "Indianising ELT"?**

I do not understand what the users of the phrase "Indianising ELT" meant when they used it at the Cochin conference or when my contemporaries used it on earlier occasions.

Suppose they meant "localising" or "contextualising" the thought content of their lessons or "situationalising" the structures and vocabulary items in their language classrooms. Then, this is what

good language teachers do all over the world. So what is “Indian” about it?

Suppose they imply a kind of (a) long term patronage or practice as in “Indian mysticism”, (b) original discovery or invention as in “Indian medicine”, (c) preponderant use of distinct characteristics, as in “Indian English”, “Indian dance”, “Indian music”, “Indian architecture” or “Indian culture”. Then Indian ELT as practised in our schools and colleges, in my considered opinion, does not really qualify for this sort of “parochial” or “sectarian” GI (Geographical Identification).

**You were trained by Professor Alan Davies, known as the Father of Language Testing, and you, in turn, have trained over a hundred English language examiners for British Council. What do you think are the characteristics of an effective English language examiner?**

There are three sets of characteristics essential to an effective English language examiner. In fact, any examiner! The first is the professional set. “Validity” and “reliability” being the most fundamental of them, an examiner’s marking has to be always “valid” and “reliable”.

The second set of characteristics is managerial. For example, as for their availability for exam work, an effective examiner must be dependable. Their time management in conducting, say an interview for a spoken English test, as in IELTS or BEC, should be efficient and strictly according to test specifications.

The third set is ethical and moral. Ethical

is “objective” in that (a) these are imposed by the testing body and test administrators, and (b) examiners are supposed to follow these requirements as a group. Moral, on the contrary, is “subjective” in that it is followed in the personal sphere.

**Do you think that there is a changing role of teachers in the twenty-first century?**

Education in general has been influenced remarkably by the versatility of technology since the sixties of the twentieth century. As one of the presenters of a TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talk recently pointed out, pupils prefer a video lesson in their homes to the same teacher and the same lesson in the classroom. Therefore, in thousands of classrooms, the lessons on the computer, until recently taught in the classroom without the computer, are now assigned for viewing and re-viewing at home. In contrast, the traditional homework tasks are worked out in the classroom, with the help of the teachers and fellow learners.

Also, old Educational concepts such as “mastery learning” are reasserting themselves now, radically changing even the formation of learner groups according to the criterion of age.

Hopefully, the Global Education Commission of UNESCO headed by the former PM of Britain, Dr. Gordon Brown, as it has already revolutionised education in countries like Vietnam and Tunisia, will throw more light on the role of teachers of the twenty first century by 2030, the deadline for the Commission.

**I was fortunate to attend a few of your presentations. Once you used the terms *Happiness Habits, Self Development and Success Skills* and said that these skills should be incorporated into the curricula. Can you elaborate on these terms and the need for incorporating them into the curricula?**

As you know, one of the peculiarities of Language Teaching (LT) is that its thought content has often been chosen randomly. In the remote past, when Grammar Translation was in vogue, religious and literary writings were the thought content. Recently, Prabhu chose arithmetic and rational thought content. Many teachers teaching French and English as second languages in Canada have been using academic subjects e.g. geography, history, and science, as thought content. Most recently, the teachers who have contributed chapters of activities and ideas to that great book “Integrating global issues in the creative English language classroom: With reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals” edited by Alan Maley and Nik Peachey, and published by the British Council, have been using ideas of poverty alleviation, gender justice, world peace, and the like.

In the same way, thanks to the impact of self-development books on me, I occasionally used extracts from these books, and activities such as the ones involving timelines. Happiness being the universal human aspiration, books dealing with concepts of happiness and activities promoting happiness have also attracted my attention. In my corporate training, after I left the

British Council in 1997, I was using these thought contents in reading and writing activities, and in activities such as the ones included as tasks in books for TBLT (Task Based Language Teaching).

But this use of the techniques or texts dealing with Success Skills and Happiness Habits was infrequent, and limited to the periphery of my practice.

**“Teaching English to the disadvantaged” has been your passion for many years. You and Fr Peter Francis were involved in projects relating to this. How successful were these projects?**

My interest in TED (Teaching English to the Disadvantaged) arose very late in my professional life: a little more than three years before I left the BC. Earlier, I had realized that Prabhu’s innovation, which had been developed in schools where the largest majority of the socially, geographically and educationally disadvantaged children were concentrated, was essentially a kind of TED. But my aspiration was to make it fit the disadvantaged better, by re-orienting its thought content and “tasks” to Success Skills, i.e. to the needs of the disadvantaged.

With this aspiration, I conducted three seminars on TED, hoping that I could identify ELT workers (a) who had already tried out some ideas and techniques that could be amalgamated with Prabhu’s approach, and (b) who could form a team to carry out a TED project in a school. Stalwarts such as Dr Prabhu, Dr. K.C. Chellappan, Dr Webber from UK, Prof. Jacob Tharu, Dr Peter Francis S.J., and Dr.

Manmatha Kundu, participated in them. But the ideas and reports on their work presented in those seminars were not good enough, in my estimate, to enter into the design of TED as Fr. Peter Francis or I envisaged it.

As for Fr. Peter's and my attempts in Olcott Memorial School in Beasant Nagar, Chennai, for two years, guiding the teachers of the lower elementary classes there, I must frankly say the following. For several reasons, our effort at making the project plan as a project plan, syllabus writing, lesson planning, and their introduction to the teachers was not adequate and therefore unsuccessful. We faced certain serious hurdles of academic freedom. For example, the school did not allow us to record the classroom interactions. In the second year, the new principal required the teachers to use the Structural Approach. At the personal level, for health and financial reasons, I was compelled to devote a lot of my time to teacher training and IELTS work.

In conclusion, the need, the scope and moral support for TED do exist in our country, in some parts of South America and in Australia, where Education for the Disadvantaged has been tried out in a few schools for the aborigines and ethnic minorities.

**What ails English language teaching in India? In your opinion, what measures should be taken to improve the teaching of English?**

In the ocean of Indian Education, I see the effective learning of English in about 20% of the private, English medium schools as a

beautiful coral island. In contrast, the learning of English in state-administered and state-aided mother tongue medium schools is a huge iceberg.

In my analysis, what ails ELT in India is the following set of factors. It is important to realize that while some factors are educational, some others are ethical, political, managerial and economic. Firstly, as pointed out by a Focus Group of the NCERT, requiring primary school teachers, whose proficiency in English is almost zero, to teach the language to children as early as in lower primary classes, is a serious problem.

Secondly, ELT trainers and researchers in institutions such as the EFLU and RIEs have failed in the last forty years by becoming passive spectators, by ceasing to be policy advisers, syllabus constructors, textbook writers and teacher trainers, though required by the laws of their societies framed at the time of their creation.

Thirdly, the government textbook societies, their materials writers, syllabus designers and producers of testing and evaluation tools, do not give sufficient time, guidance and specifications to fellow professionals as well as to themselves. This is mainly a managerial problem.

Fourthly, the production and sale of textbooks for government schools has become such an unethical business that good private publishers are totally denied the opportunity to write books for government schools. Even NCERT's own books, like their recently published history and social sciences books which are



excellent have been denied the opportunity to compete with the State Governments' textbooks.

Fifthly, India's budget for education, consequently the budget for ELT, is woefully small –often less than 2% of our GDP, as observed most recently by Bill Gates. This is most unfortunate. For, as pointed out by the former Education Minister of Tunisia, countries like Vietnam and Tunisia, whose budget allocations for Education increased to 20%, have improved the quality of their education, presumably including ELT, surpassing the quality of Education in the US and the UK.

Sixthly, perhaps most importantly, the tests and examinations deployed in State Government schools, colleges and technical institutions such as the Engineering colleges, are unforgivably mal-administrated. For example, in one State I know personally, in the exams for Class X, copying the question papers for English is being awarded 30% of the total marks allocated. The examiners I spoke to revealed that this is a long standing practice that arose from the oral instruction of an Education Minister.

Lastly, the media occasionally bring out articles critical of the failure of ELT in non-English medium schools. However, investigative journalism in India has not exposed the width and breadth of the unethical practices in Indian ELT or the damage this has done to the

country's economic and social development.

**You are proud of saying that you had a humble background and you studied in a Tamil-medium school. Though your first degree was in Chemistry, you are an effective communicator in English and you were able to become a very successful English language teacher, trainer and consultant. You also rose to the highest position an Indian in the British Council can aspire for. What is the secret of your success?**

First and foremost, God, rationalists may say Nature, blessed me with a good aptitude for language and learning. Second, I owe my success in learning English, to excellent teachers such as Mr. Bruno Villava Rayer of my high school. Third, with their sweat and sacrifice, my parents and my wife Jessie, enabled me to get my first degree and my PG qualifications in ELT from CIEFL and Edinburgh University, respectively. Fourth, poverty motivated me intensely (a) to migrate from my village, and (b) to develop myself linguistically, educationally, and intellectually. Fifth, for the success in my career, Dr. Nadkarni and Dr. Tickoo of the CIEFL, and Mr. Alan Maley and Dr N S Prabhu of the British Council, were chiefly responsible. Finally, to use a cliché, "last but not least", Lady Luck has been a factor I can't ignore.

**Thank you. That's very interesting and inspiring too.**