

One-on-One: Interview with Richard Smith

Albert P'Rayan

Professor of English & Head, Higher Education,
KCG College of Technology, Chennai

Email: rayanal@yahoo.co.uk

Dr Richard Smith, Reader in ELT and Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick, UK, is well known for his achievements in putting ELT history 'on the map', as founder and curator of the Warwick ELT Archive (http://www.warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive), as the author of groundbreaking articles including 'Building Applied Linguistic Historiography' (Applied Linguistics 37/1), editor of a three-volume History of Language Learning and Teaching and founder / co-convenor of the AILA Research network on History of Language Learning and Teaching (<http://holt.net>). In this interview, Dr Smith shares his experience of how he became involved with ELT researchers and teachers in India, discusses the importance of action research, the need for continuing professional development, the relevance of Harold Palmer, and speaks about his passion for "developing the research field of History of ELT".

Richard, thank you for accepting my request to be interviewed for The Journal of English Language Teaching (India). You have already been introduced to the readers of the journal. You are well known in the ELT circles in India thanks to your work promoting ELT research, including teacher-research. Would you mind sharing how you first became



involved with teachers in India and outlining the kinds of things you've been involved in here?

Firstly, thank you very much for inviting me to be interviewed. I'm sure there are plenty of readers who haven't heard of me in fact, though you were kind enough to print my article about 'scientific' language teaching and Harold E. Palmer in the last issue of the journal. I've been really happy to visit India and become more involved with colleagues here over the last few years. My desire to do that began more than a decade ago when I was developing my interest in the history of global ELT and becoming more and more aware of the importance of India in that history. In fact, I now recall, it was closer to *two* decades ago that I invited Dr N.S. Prabhu to Tokyo to take part in some

ELT history-related events, including an event commemorating the 50th anniversary of Palmer's death which was organized by the Institute for Research in Language Teaching (IRLT). This interest in India began to be realized in a more concrete way when, around 2012, the British Council asked me to collaborate with Paul Gunashekar and Lina Mukhopadhyay at EFL-University on quite a large project surveying ELT research in India, and it's from then onwards, too, that I began to collaborate more with Rama Mathew at Delhi University, whom I'd already got to know through a research network I set up on Teaching English in Large Classes (bit.ly/telcnet-home). Happily, I was later able to bring Rama together with my colleague Annamaria Pinter in a very interesting project on teachers and children as co-researchers in Indian primary schools, and we also hosted one of Rama's PhD students at my university for a year.

My initial hope of collaborating specifically in the area of ELT historical research has also been developing slowly – colleagues at the University of Hyderabad (Sailaja Pingali and Sunita Mishra) have been active in this area and, again, we hosted a PhD student from there recently – Vennela Rayavarapu – whose research into 19th century textbooks in Madras Presidency has proved to be fascinating. Amol Padwad, Krishna Dixit and Atanu Bhattacharya are three more Indian scholars I've been developing ideas with in this area and I hope there'll be some kind of joint research project emerging from all this, since there's so much still to learn about the colonial as well as

post-Independence history of English teaching in India. Finally, I've been involved – with Amol – in getting the new British Council Aptis Action Research Mentoring Scheme off the ground in its first year, and that's kept me in contact with the practical concerns of Indian teachers and teacher educators. Last year, too, Gauhati University in Assam invited us to give a four-day workshop on Exploratory Action Research for teachers there, organized by Padmini Boruah. So, all in all, I can see that my heart keeps bringing me back to India and I hope I'll keep on coming back!

I am glad to hear that you love visiting India and working with ELT researchers in India. Richard, you are a well-known applied linguist, researcher and prolific writer. You have carried out numerous research projects in different parts of the world including India. What do you think is your major contribution to the field of English Language Teaching?

In practical terms, I'd like to think that I've acted as a kind of catalyst, helping to bring teachers and researchers together in various ways and helping teachers in some developing countries, specifically, to be more aware of what they *can* do to address their sometimes very difficult circumstances, develop themselves and feel more empowered. I hope this may have a lasting positive legacy in those teachers' lives – and, more and more, this gives me fulfillment in itself – but I think I've perhaps been working quite a lot 'behind the scenes' and not actually in a very 'well-known' way. Back in

the 1990s and 2000s I did get a little bit known for some contributions in the area of learner autonomy (and the idea that we should focus on teachers' autonomy as learners: 'teacher-learner autonomy', in other words teachers' ability to take control of their own development in cooperation with others), but that was something I was more involved with writing about some years ago, and not so much now. In the projects I've been involved with more recently, I think I've been putting this idea of teacher-learner autonomy into practice, and I'd like it to be thought that I at least helped in a general 'decentring' of ELT away from colonially inspired UK arrogance in the field – and this is a decolonising process I will continue working on! – via initiatives like 'teacher-research for difficult circumstances' (warwick.ac.uk/trdc), involving teachers researching their own practice and building appropriate solutions from the bottom up. However, I'll probably need to write a book about this for more people to benefit and know about it – I'd certainly like to do that when I can find the time! Oh, and I think I will be known for developing the research field of History of ELT, which I'm proud of.

You have worked as an English language teacher in France and Japan and as a teacher educator you have been involved in various projects in different parts of the world. How have these international experiences helped you in your career?

I did spend a long time in Japan – thirteen years – at the outset of my career, and that experience is really what 'formed' me as a teacher, as a teacher educator and as

someone contributing to the field of ELT more generally. I'd already developed a strong interest in other languages and cultures – the relatively short time I spent in France was connected with my first degree studies in the field of French language and literature – and it was primarily my interest in Japanese culture that took me to Japan straight after I graduated. But while I was there I developed an intrinsic interest in ELT methodology and applied linguistics, came back to do my MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading and later started and eventually completed a PhD in that field, focusing on historical research, at Edinburgh. In 2000 I moved back to the UK, to take up my current post at the University of Warwick, where I mainly teach postgraduate students – teachers and prospective teachers coming from all over the world, many from Asia, East Asia in particular. I think my interest in other cultures and languages and my experience in Japan have been vital to the kind of teacher educator and researcher I am today in many ways. I became quite well-integrated with Japanese culture and society, learning the language – the spoken language at least! – and working very closely with Japanese colleagues. The sometimes quite difficult, long-term experience of managing to adjust to Japanese society has helped me, I think, to understand and generally get on quite well with people from other Asian countries as well as to understand what it feels like to be an 'outsider'. I also started off my career as a teacher in secondary schools (in both France and Japan) and later was a teacher educator

for Japanese students preparing to teach in public schools. That meant I had to throw away some preconceptions about communicative language teaching being the only possible method and I had to recognise the constraints that mainstream teachers face around the world – so I’ve always, since then, been most interested in the issues facing bilingual (aka ‘non-native speaker’) teachers in public education systems, in large classes, in quite ‘difficult circumstances’ according to Michael West’s formulation, and my experience made me sceptical about the validity of ready-made, pre-packaged solutions coming from ‘inner circle’ (e.g., UK and US) contexts.

As you said earlier, ‘Teacher-Research’ is an area of interest you’ve been putting a lot of energy into recently. You have worked on projects in this area in Chile, Peru, India and Nepal and you have just brought out the book A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research(available online via the British Council) as well as, last year, the co-edited books Teacher-Researchers in Action and Teaching in Low-resource Classrooms: Voices of Experience. What are you hoping to achieve with these projects, and why do you feel “teacher-research” is so important?

The projects you mention have been supported by the British Council, and I’ve been involved in advising about how they can be structured and how the mentoring can go on (because I think most teachers really do need a mentor to support them during a teacher-research project). This

most recent book (*A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*) is one I’m really proud of because it puts all the experience Paula Rebolledo (my co-author) and I have gained about how to support teachers to research issues that concern them, for professional development, into what we think – and teachers have told us – is a very reader-friendly, colourful, down-to-earth format. We wanted to ‘demystify’ research because a problem we’ve found is that teachers often have an idea of research being for academics and not really for them, whereas we *know* it can be useful for teachers to engage in small-scale research into the problems and puzzles facing them. During five years of experience in the Chilean Champion Teachers programme, in particular, we’ve found ways, firstly, of presenting teacher-research in a way which makes it seem feasible and useful and, secondly, of adapting conventional ‘action research’ to make it more exploratory and gradual. In my own career, at different times, I’ve found it useful to gather feedback and other data from students to explore an issue and develop my teaching on that basis, and I’ve encouraged student-teachers to engage in small-scale research studies while they’re doing teaching practice because I think it’s an autonomy-oriented way of doing teacher education (developing their capacity to learn for themselves as teachers into the future). It’s only over the last five or so years, with these British Council projects, that I’ve been able to take these ideas to in-service teachers and modify them on that basis, and it has proven useful and, in some ways very transformative for the teachers involved. I

think this comes through strongly in another collection, called *Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research*, which I edited with Paula and with Deborah Bullock. Again, this is available for free download from the British Council TeachingEnglish website.

What challenges do you face as a facilitator of such teacher research projects?

The main challenge for me has been finding the time to devote myself adequately to these projects as well as my more academic interest in history of language teaching and my teaching at Warwick, administrative involvements, and of course my family! I think I'm just about managing but sometimes it's tough, and tiring! Two things are worth saying here, though. As I said near the beginning of our interview, I do genuinely find it fulfilling to experience the change in mindset – towards a more empowered state – which you can often see in teachers researching their practice for the first time and sometimes seeing things from a completely new point of view, more from students' side, for example. I think teachers often start to acquire new energy from this, and that's what's happening to me, too, through my own involvement. And, secondly, there's a big time effort at the beginning of mentoring teacher-research, or doing mentor-mentoring as I've been doing, because there are a lot of unfamiliar things for participants to learn and try out – but as participants get more engaged they take on more and more of the responsibility themselves, motivation becomes more

intrinsic, and extra time-burden is compensated for by the benefits accruing. Again, this happens to me as much as it does to the mentors and to the teachers they're mentoring. The whole area of mentoring teacher-research is one that has come to fascinate me more and more these days – there are certainly challenges but they can be overcome through experience. I recommend the British Council's AARMS (Aptis Action Research Mentoring Scheme) opportunity in India for people who feel they would like to take the plunge and try to mentor a group of teachers to do teacher-research.

Let's move on to professional development more broadly. You have been coordinator or co-convenor of various professional groups including IATEFL Research SIG, the AILA (International Association of Applied Linguistics) Research Network on Learner Autonomy, and AILA Research Network on History of Language Learning and Teaching. Why have you devoted so much time to such professional associations?

I was very involved in such groups from very early in my career and have remained involved throughout it, I think basically because they meet my interest in bringing people together to learn from one another in a relatively democratic kind of way; but, also, because I've benefitted a lot personally and professionally from being so involved in them. Before all of those you've mentioned, during my 'formative years' in Japan I was a founder-member of the JALT-

Gunma committee, programme chair of JALT-Tokyo when I moved to Tokyo; and I founded JALT's Learner Development SIG with a focus on learner autonomy in 1993. I also participated in various groups of Japanese secondary school teachers, including IRLT – the association founded originally by Harold E. Palmer in 1923. Then after I got back to England I was newsletter editor for IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG before those you've mentioned. As I've said, teacher associations (TAs) and more specific interest groupings of teachers have been important to me as a support in my own career and I believe they're worth supporting in turn, and celebrating. I'm turning more attention to this idea of celebration more recently, via things like writing a history of IATEFL for its 50th anniversary in 2016, and promoting the idea of teacher associations as bodies which can promote relevant ELT research.

How important is professional development for teachers of English? In what ways can teachers develop themselves professionally?

I would say they can do so by joining and participating actively in a TA or teacher club – or setting one of these up if there isn't one locally – somewhere they can share problems and issues outside their own institution, though sometimes it is possible to set up a discussion group for like-minded colleagues within an institution. I've found it's important to find some kind of way to step outside your own teaching, your own problems, and see them from a different perspective. Otherwise they can become too

much of a burden. Some teachers may find they can get this kind of perspective on their own – or they may develop that capacity, finding ways to be reflective or to research what's going on. But for many people – perhaps most people – that capacity doesn't come naturally; it develops through interaction with others. For me that's professional development – not necessarily learning specific new things all the time but developing a capacity (maybe we could even call it 'teacher-learner autonomy!') to step back and feel in control, instead of becoming burned-out!

It is said that in some countries professional development is not the felt need of the English language teachers. It is forced on them. When you deal with such teachers how do you motivate them to give importance to their professional development?

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink! If it's thirsty, though, it will drink. If teachers aren't thirsty for what's on offer it might be that what's offered is the wrong kind of drink, or doesn't look like the right kind of drink, so they're suspicious of it. Best to find out what they want to drink – and try to provide that! Showing people that there is relative advantage in something new, relative to what they have now, is the only way to 'make' them change. But 'making' people change isn't possible. It has to be something they want themselves. And it's my job as a teacher educator to find out what that is – it's not their fault if they don't see value in things I bring from the outside. And they might be right to be suspicious!

Many teachers of English find teaching interesting but research intimidating or at least not very relevant. Do you think it is important for all teachers to be involved in some sort of action research?

I think teachers are right to find that academic research is not very relevant to them – I agree that a lot of the research that goes on is not done for teachers but for the benefit of the academic community. I actually think we need to shift the research landscape towards ELT research which not only addresses teachers' real concerns but also *involves* them as agents in some way, for example in setting the research agenda or engaging in data analysis. Of course, this includes forms of teacher-research like Exploratory Action Research but also something else I've been trying to promote, which is teacher associations taking on research into their members' concerns as a collective project ('TA-research' as Harry Kuchah and I have been calling this). In short, I think we need a radical reappraisal of the purposes of research. From this perspective, professional researchers need to find ways of engaging teachers more in research, and perhaps this will go some way towards overcoming the intimidation teachers can feel. To answer the second part of your question, though, no, I don't think all teachers should engage in action research, but I hope they will have the opportunity to see what it can be like in practice. If they're forced to do it or told what to research it's not teacher-initiated any more, it doesn't engage teacher-learner autonomy, and it's no longer 'teacher-

research' but, instead, something imposed.

You are known as an authority on Harold E. Palmer (1877–1949) and on the history of ELT more generally. In the foreword to your book *The Writings of Harold E. Palmer An Overview* (1999), A. P. R. Howatt, who I understand was your PhD supervisor at the University of Edinburgh, states that “Harold E. Palmer did more than any other single individual to establish English language teaching (ELT) as an autonomous branch of language education in the first half of the twentieth century and to give it the ‘applied linguistic’ direction to which it has remained loyal ever since.” How relevant are Palmer and other pioneers like him in the 21st century ELT world?

It's a good question because history can so easily be seen as irrelevant in a forward-moving, dynamic field like ELT, when new problems are continuously presenting themselves. Times change, and new problems require new solutions – I don't want to be one of these people who say 'there's nothing new under the sun' or 'what goes around comes around' as if nothing changes – it does, of course! Having said that, I do think keeping what I call 'historical sense' alive is important as a basis for development of language teaching theory (H.H. Stern in his (1983) *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching* (OUP, 1983) said the same thing) – we need to know what's been tried in the past in order to at least try not to repeat the same mistakes but also to build on the good things that

have gone before. I think the main thing we gain, though, is a sense of perspective and an ability not to be deceived by the latest academic or commercial fashion – having a knowledge of the past helps build ‘teacher-learner autonomy’, in other words. I first saw that among teachers associated with IRLT in Japan.

What impact did your rediscovery of Palmer’s work have on you as a teacher educator and applied linguist?

It was quite profound. I was looking for ways to make my teacher education work in Japan suitable to the context – not simply imposing a weak version of the communicative approach, for example, but seeing what would work in the context of Japanese lower and upper secondary schools. And I started to come across the work of Harold Palmer, introduced to him by Japanese colleagues, and I learnt more and more about the extent of his contributions in Japan and the way he had adapted his assumptions in collaboration with Japanese teachers. So, my study of his work gave me a model of someone increasingly committed to issues of importance in teachers’ experience and at the same time someone who was always developing his thinking and thereby making more global contributions. Palmer was really an ‘action researcher’ himself, continually searching for new solutions. At the same time, as I wrote in my piece that you published in the last issue of this journal, he worked very much within a modernist, ‘scientific paradigm’, and studying his work and that of his contemporaries and

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successors in the immediate post-war period enabled me to see that as a paradigm and to see its limitations and that we are now moving beyond it into something new and more context-sensitive.

You have been an active researcher, prolific writer and passionate teacher educator. What do you do when you are not involved in any activities related to ELT, applied linguistics and professional development? Do you pursue any specific non-academic hobbies?

I think I spend quite a lot of time with and for my family, though of course they might disagree! These days it’s possible for a university teacher in the UK to do quite a lot of work at home – not teaching work but administrative and writing work – so that’s what I tend to do. I’m glad to have that flexibility to be with family in a home environment though it can be difficult to concentrate sometimes! Over the last few years I’ve been developing my musical interests and enjoy playing in a rock band with colleagues in the Centre for Applied Linguistics at Warwick. I’m on bass guitar!

Nice to hear that you are a guitarist. Last question. What is your message to the ELT community in India?

There are many pressing concerns in ELT in India and it’s not for me say how to address or resolve them - someone coming from outside like me can have no magic solutions (remember Prabhu’s article in *ELT Journal*, ‘There is no best method – why?’). However, I have found in my own career

that certain things can help – including active collaboration and discussion of issues with like-minded colleagues in a teacher association; engagement in not only reflecting and discussing but also researching one’s practice, that is, gathering some data (e.g. student reflections) and answering questions on that basis; and, finally, gaining a sense of history has proven its worth to me in giving a sense of perspective. Your autonomy and sense of self-worth as a teacher are very important – autonomy not in the sense of freedom alone but *ability* to plan and teach and develop oneself (‘teacher-learner autonomy’) according to students’ and your own needs. Finally, I suppose the main thing I’ve been suggesting in different ways

in this interview is that the best ideas on how to teach appropriately come from teachers themselves, and that we need to find ways to share more, and find ways to resist inappropriate impositions, for example by developing a better appreciation of history!

Thank you, Richard, for sharing your experience and ideas.

Thank you, Albert, for giving me this opportunity to share my thinking – it’s been an interesting experience to try to bring my thoughts together!

For further details of Richard Smith’s publications you can access his home page at: <http://warwick.ac.uk/richardcsmith>

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