

## Book Review

### Second Language Pedagogy

N.S. Prabhu

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**What is so great about this book?** It describes fully the principles and beliefs that led to (a) a totally new kind of syllabus called **Procedural Syllabus**, (b) revolutionary classroom procedures called **tasks**, and (c) an excellently articulated taxonomy of tasks, all these constituting a remarkably new EFL/ELT approach called Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). It has mothered a rich crop of tasks and guidelines for adopting them published world-wide in books such as Jane Willis' **Framework for Task-based Learning** (Longman Pearson Education: 1996), Rod Ellis's **Task Based Language Learning and Teaching** (OUP: 2003), David Nunan's **Task-Based Language Teaching** (CUP: 2004) and Dave Willis & Jane Willis' **Doing Task-based Teaching** (OUP: 2007).

While even Krashen's **Natural Approach** was brushed aside as the old Direct Method in new garbs, Prabhu's project has been praised as **the first effort in conceiving and conducting a genuinely new approach**. This accolade comes not only from the great ELT historian, Tony Howatt but also from several globally leading ELT/EFL experts.

It is worth noting that it was in low-resourced, non-English medium schools in

Bangalore and Tamil Nadu that the author and his team ventured to carry out the project. Incidentally, with great scientific temper and admirable intellectual honesty, Prabhu names this exploration a "search", not "research".

**How to get the best out of the book?** First, some of the background knowledge the author assumes, concepts and phrases may pose a challenge to some readers. Immediately they should realize that the book is a gold mine, use the appropriate websites and overcome the challenge.

Second, the notes at the end of each chapter are different from the common, skippable "foot notes". Prabhu's notes are essential parts of the chapters. For, they anticipate criticisms and answer them; they cite additional evidence in support of the project team's beliefs, perceptions, principles, and hypotheses; and they offer important clarifications.

Third, the appendices are as important as the main body of the book. For example, one appendix is a useful, British Council sponsored report evaluating the project. Another is a set of transcriptions of two project lessons. Yet another lists and explains all the eighteen task-types developed for the project.

Fourth, when you come to the lesson transcripts, adapt your reading style. Visualize the teacher, the task and the learners, and animate the interaction between them, as though the transcripts

were film scripts. Otherwise, you will miss the unique flavour of CTP lessons.

**Contents of the book: Chapter One.** Titled “The context”, this chapter marshals the criticisms against the ELT methodology in vogue at the time called the **Structural-Oral-Situational (SOS) Approach**. It clarifies that the project attempted to develop a new methodology. It explains why the project avoided using artificially formed “control” and “experimental” groups of learners. It justifies the project’s avoidance of “playing games” and “having fun” as in some weak versions of Communicative Approach to Language Teaching. For, the Indian educational tradition is to use “serious”, “cognitive” content in all classes. It upholds the point that the project’s key principle is that learners’ *target language ability “develops in direct relation to (their) communicational effort”*.

**Chapter Two:** Titled “The Project”, this chapter gives an account of (a) the initial perceptions of the project team in the preparatory seminars; (b) its ultimate discovery of the Procedural Syllabus and the **communicational** teaching procedure; (c) the project’s specialist and non-specialist teachers; (d) the pre-tasks and tasks; (e) the project teachers’ intuitive language control in the classroom; (f) the annual review seminars; and (g) the evaluation of the project by two British experts.

Understandably, the initial perception of the project team was the ELT theory of the SOS approach. For, it was an innovation introduced with enormous support from

Indian and British governments. Besides, it had been in practice for about thirty years. So, the project team began with the old beliefs: that the aim of teaching English was to construct the grammar of the language in the learner; that to achieve this, grammatical structures and vocabulary should be graded in a syllabus; that to help the learning of these language forms, they should be (a) presented in situations, and (b) practised repeatedly, orally and chorally.

However, in the early seventies onwards, the winds of change in UK, USA and Canada started blowing gently over India. They became strong in the seminars organized at the Regional Institute of English, Bangalore, in 1978 and 1979, which were led by Keith Johnson, Prabhu, and DJ Carroll. At these seminars, two years of experimental teaching in a few schools in Bangalore was subjected to an incisive examination. It was realized that (a) explicit attention to grammatical structure did not construct any grammatical competence; (b) “meaningful” practice (as opposed to “meaning-focused” communication) using situationalization only **appeared** to bring meaning into teaching; (c) the notion of “social appropriacy” recommended by Western specialists’ early versions of Communicative Approach to Language Teaching did not help the development of communicative competence.

What finally the project group came to perceive was that only **meaning-focused, problem-solving** activities led to grammar construction, though it was unpredictable, unconscious, and incidental.

By the way, this is why, Prabhu and his team called their teaching “**communicational**” teaching. Though some specialists call Prabhu’s CTP just a version of Communicative Approach to Language Teaching, it is worth remembering that Prabhu’s labelling is more accurate and marks its uniqueness.

**Chapter 3:** Titling this chapter “Teaching”, the author discusses further the insights the project team gained in the third, fourth and fifth years of the project. More specifically, he discusses (a) the “reasoning-gap” activity, considered most important of the three types of “gap” activities; (b) the common pattern of a lesson consisting of tasks and pre-tasks; (c) how the pre-task did not linguistically prepare the learners as misunderstood by some experts; (d) how the criterion of a good task as posing “reasonable challenge” to the learner is important for the development of linguistic competence; (e) how the teachers “controlled ... their language in more or less the same way as an adult does in speaking to a child”; (f) an interesting difference between “repetition” and “recurrence” of language items, and the latter’s contribution to language development; (g) the interesting distinction between “production”, “borrowing” and “reproduction” in the way learners manage their classroom communication; and (h) finally, how teachers’ correction of learners’ linguistic errors was “incidental”, not “systematic” or “focused”.

**Chapter 4:** This chapter presents facts and views on another important aspect of the

experiment namely “learning in the classroom”. While performing the tasks, learners were engaged in an effort to “extract and express” meaning. In Prabhu’s terms, this is a kind of “intensive exposure”. One of the project hypotheses was that in this process, grammatical competence was developed, and, in course of time, elaborated. Prabhu claims that “... the internal system thus developed is far more complex than any theoretical grammar yet constructed by a linguist” or ‘pedagogic’ grammars.

Occasionally, learners asked for the pronunciation of certain words or questions on some aspects of grammar. These revealed moments of “language awareness”. But the project team avoided any focused attention to language awareness, because they believed that any attempt to increase language awareness directly would be **effort misdirected to symptoms rather than to causes**.

Interestingly, CTP ruled against group work, which was considered almost essential for all forms of CLT at that time. For, the project team strongly believed, as Krashen did, that the learners’ grammar could develop only in interactions with the teachers and texts, as they had superior language.

**Chapter 5:** This chapter discusses the implications of (i) the **syllabus** and (ii) the **materials** developed for the project. With great insight, Prabhu lists and explains four possible functions of syllabuses in general: (a) **their operational function**, when they describe what is to be done by way of

teaching; (b) **their illuminative function**, when they describe what is ultimately learnt; (c) their function as **instruments of organizational control**, when they are used as instruments of supervision and examination; and (d) their function as **documents for public scrutiny**.

Prabhu's Procedural Syllabus, as he clarifies more than once, played only the function of an operational construct. He claims that it can play the roles of an instrument of organizational control and as a document of public scrutiny. However, in his view, on his project it did not serve as the illuminative construct.

Moving on to the subject of Materials, the author claims that the tasks created for the project constitute a source book, rather than a course book. He believes that this is the strength of the project materials, as source books contribute to Teacher Development, unlike course books.

Finally, Prabhu addresses the question if CTP requires teachers with higher proficiency in English than the non-native speakers teaching English in India have. He argues that this is a groundless fear, as the non-specialist teachers on his project have demonstrated.

**The Final Chapter:** This short chapter discusses the implications of the project for pedagogic change. The most important point Prabhu makes here is the role "teachers' sense of plausibility" plays in educational change. A teacher's classroom technique may be influenced by the technique he/she was exposed to in his/her own student days,

by the initial teacher training, by the latest techniques presented in seminars and conferences, fellow teachers' ideas, and so on. But in his view, the teacher's sense of plausibility is the most influential factor. This is why "statutory implementation" of new methods cannot be effective, as teachers will adopt the new teaching routines as routines, and reject the important perceptions behind them.

In one of the most illuminative sections in this part of the book, Prabhu defines, classifies, and discusses teachers' practice of "eclecticism".

**A Significant Strength the Book Does Not Highlight Sufficiently:** In 1976, in his famous book, "*From Communication to Curriculum*", Douglas Barnes propounded his ground breaking thesis concerning "**the centrality of talk for active learning**". He expressed his idea in memorable phrases such as "learning floats on a sea of talk". Barnes did not mean **any** classroom talk but the dialogic forms of discourse between the teacher, the texts, and the learner which were "meaning-making" and "meaning-focused". This is exactly the kind of talk CTP learners engaged in. For, that alone led to, what Barnes called, "active knowledge". Barnes rejected the talks that teachers use for merely "transferring predetermined pieces of knowledge".

We should remember that Prabhu and his team rejected the SOS Approach's use of structural practice, mimicking to memorize structures, repeating mechanically or even "meaningfully" the specially written

“dialogues” or “the structure(s) for the day”. But CTP provided exclusively for the kind of “talk” Barnes discovered to lead truly to “active learning”. This being a significant strength of CTP, it is disappointing that an adequate discussion of this aspect has not been included in the book.

**Overall Value of the Book:** As I have mentioned above more than once, CTP’s Procedural Syllabus, its teaching technique called **Communicational Language Teaching**, and the constituents of the syllabus called tasks, and their definition are all genuine innovations. Prabhu’s

discussion of, among other things, the concepts of “the syllabus as an illuminative construct”, “eclecticism” and “teachers’ sense of plausibility” are excellent reconceptions and elaborations that are extremely enlightening. Further, the scientific temper and intellectual humility he infuses his discussions with are not commonly found in books of this sort in Humanities and Social Sciences.

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### ***Invitation to Contribute to a Discussion***

#### **How important is ‘teacher research’? Should all teachers be asked to conduct ‘teacher research’ / ‘action research’?**

*What is ‘teacher research’? Simon Borg, in his book Teacher Research in Language Teaching, uses the term “practitioner research” and defines it as “systematic inquiry by professionals in any discipline who are investigating their own practices”. How is it different from ‘action research’? Borg defines it as “a form of practitioner research which is characterized by particular procedures which broadly involve the introduction and evaluation of new practices [...]. Some definitions [...] stipulate that it should be collective or collaborative.”*

What is your view on the topic? Send in your views (250-300 words) to [jeltindia@gmail.com](mailto:jeltindia@gmail.com) by 31 March 2018. Selected entries will be published in the next issue of the journal.