

Interview with K. Elango

Robert Bellarmine

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[Editor's Note: *The main purpose of the interview, according to the interviewer, was “to discover the role Motivation and/or Exposure have played in [Elango's] learning of English.” The interview questions were sent to the interviewee in advance and the questions as well as the interviewee's written responses have been reproduced here.]*

[RB: Robert Bellarmine; **KE:** K. Elango]

RB: All in all, what do you think has been the sole or most important factor in your learning of English: Motivation or Exposure? (You can choose both, if that's closer to reality.)

KE: *I need to begin from the beginning.*

English was introduced to me in my 6th standard, which was the practice then in Tami Nadu, but after a couple of years it became a part of the curriculum from 5th, and slightly later from 3rd onwards. English was one of the subjects along with four others – Tamil, Maths, Science, and History and Geography .Why we were made to study these subjects continuously till my SSLC, i.e. for 6 years, I have no answer even today. Even if it had to be explained then I don't think we would have understood at that age.

English was taught by subject teachers who

made no distinction between the language and the subjects they taught. Strangely, almost all those who taught me English were Maths teachers and I still remember one of the rare classes when grammar was taught – it was the usage of ‘will’ and ‘shall’. Although I am unable to recall the examples given, I raised a doubt about why we can't use ‘shall’ where ‘will’ is to be used and the response given was that I could use ‘will’ in 75 percent and ‘shall’ in 25 percent of the cases. And all they did was, with no exception, read out the texts and made us mark the answers for the questions given at the end of lessons and we were mandated to memorize them, mostly at exam times – quarterly, half-yearly and annual.

Added to all this, I presumed that Tamil was a universal language as everyone known to me used it for all purposes. No one knew English (looking back) in my village and it was a nil English setting.

[Aside: *I was born in Adikarapatti, Dharmapuri district, a village with about 300 houses and 1600 people. My place had a high school for about 20 nearby villages but no elementary school as the neighbouring village had one. The two tea stalls in my village got the only newspaper – Thina Thanthi – and*

the panchayat office radio bellowed Tamil songs and news from 4.30 to 8 pm, ending with the Tamil news, which elders in the village listened to and discussed, centring around Kamarajar and Periyar. We were not allowed to be part of it.

No house had any form of library (sadly, even today) (Dr. Kalam till his end was talking about the significance of home library), including the school and, in fact, we had an interesting practice of selling the textbooks immediately after the annual exams to our juniors and the proceeds were utilized to buy books from our seniors. If they were tattered, we would sell them off to shops, which were used for bundling the items bought from them.]

In short, there was no question of either motivation or exposure to any of us, so we never learnt English as there was no known purpose.

RB: What was the earliest time when you became aware of this?

KE: *I became aware of the need to learn English as I stumbled upon to join B.A. Ed. at the Regional College of Education, Mysore, in 1972. Before that I did my PUC in Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai, and was made to study all the subjects in English. The scenario was an extension of my school but the only difference was we had bazaar notes for all, including English. . . . we did not have*

many working days and I managed my college life with two words – “Yes, Sir”, when the attendance was taken and “No, Sir” when anything else was asked but there was not much need for it, as the class had 100 plus students. When I applied for B.A. Ed., I had to travel to Chennai to get the form filled in by my ‘contacts’, who were doing their degree courses.

Hardly did I realize I was applying for B.A. Literature programme, as I imagined that it was some kind of Arts course, having decided not to pursue science subjects. The shock came when I attended the first day's class and thought of discontinuing it the same day but what held me back was the stipend given to me – it was a merit scholarship for the 50 percent of the class, which was just Rs.75/- and that was more than enough for all the expenses.

The compelling reason for learning English was that most of my classmates spoke English, especially girls. In the first year I was more of an isolationist, as I did not have the language and did not do well in my studies and, consequently, lost my scholarship in the second year. So, the sense of shame and the loss of stipend made me realize that I needed to stay on course. The sound exposure to the language from my teachers, friends' circle and my study habit came to my rescue. I bought the Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, as suggested

by the teachers, which I used day in and day out. It was a sacred book for me. In short, to quote Pit Corder, there was a communicative compulsion and communicative environment for me to pick up English.

RB: Was the integrative aspect of motivation part of *your motivation*? In what ways did it originate? How has it been strengthened or weakened? “Machiavellian” motivation is the opposite of integrative motivation. For example, the Indian leaders of our struggle for independence learnt English to fight against the British, to argue with them, and in various ways, use English in their struggle for freedom. In some ways, was this one of the aspects of your motivation? Can you please explain and illustrate this?

KE: *Hardly was I aware of either the integrative or Machiavellian motivation. All I desired was just to be able to interact with my classmates, teachers and friends in English. I often wonder whether these are some fancied notions of the empty theoreticians. I have known many professors who have had impeccable English and never deviated from their Indianness – continued to eat idly and sambar, enjoyed Carnatic music, prayed to Indian gods and goddesses – Muruga, Ganesa, Venkatachalapathy, Durga, and so on. Integration was never on anyone’s mind.*

The most British among the Indians was our first prime minister and I don’t think even he

thought of integrating, despite all his connections, with the native culture. I guess, it is just a myth fashioned by the natives to create an ever-longing desire in us to integrate with them, knowing fully well about its non-achievability. It is like the American myth of a melting pot, which is now turned into a salad bowl, realizing integration is unachievable. Reflecting on it in today’s context, it appears to be merely a “Maya” or mirage. What will this achieve for us? I always want to remain an Indian and perhaps, integrate with the English teaching community nationally, if possible globally.

RB: In your high school and college days, what ELT methods did your teachers use? (Please note: Although the “Language through Literature Method” has not been as well known as the Grammar Translation, Structural, Direct, Communicative and Communicational methods, it was certainly recognized as a method by CIEFL.)

KE: *In hindsight, I don’t think any of my high school teachers had even an iota of an idea about teaching methods, approaches, techniques, strategies for English. The only method they followed was reading out the prescribed texts aloud, (I wonder how fluent and accurate they were), and getting us to memorize the answers. At the undergraduate level, though I had great teachers, I am not aware whether they followed any particular method. I love to check with my teacher, Prof.*

Suchita Medappa/Nagesh, who is quite active today in the ELT field.

RB: Can you recall the teachers, both in your school and college days, who contributed to the increase and decrease of your motivation? In what ways did they increase or decrease your motivation? Were the materials and techniques and personal rapport some of the aspects of what affected your motivation?

KE: *None from my school or Pachaiyappa's college did it collectively but the Regional College teachers did it. I don't think they had done anything explicitly but I watched them in action and in turn got motivated. I wonder whether others among my classmates got the same level of motivation, as I suspect that they did not make the kind of progress that I made.*

RB: Apart from the prescribed texts, what did you use as sources of your exposure to written English? To spoken English?

KE: *My major thrust was familiarizing myself with the prescribed textbooks, which was demanding enough, hence I rarely read anything other than them. But I used to spend some time everyday reading through English newspapers and magazines. Even today I am not much of a reader as I find it taxing. I did not make any attempt to improve my speaking or writing skills independently. I was exposed to proficient English in my*

classes and I carried out the assignments given to us and tried to speak some kind of English with my friends. I still remember one of the first few sentences I spoke – "Sleep is coming to me." I would say, my effort was to acquire the language naturally and holistically rather than the skill-based approach which we today swear by. I am in serious doubt, whether we have made some of our learners better speakers and some others better writers. Learners who gained some level of competence are able to perform equally well in all the four skills. We need to revisit the approach followed all over the world now.

RB: Approximately, from what age to what age do you think you learnt English, irrespective of the levels of mastery? Are you still learning it? During this period, have Motivation and Exposure played the same role with the same intensity and vivacity? Can you explain or illustrate it?

KE: *Perhaps when I was nineteen (the year I joined RCE, Mysore) or twenty, I started employing some form of English. Of course, I continue to learn every day and today I learnt 'aces the role of the antagonist'. But the difference seems to be that of not focusing on individual words in isolation but in their contexts. I strongly believe in what Canto said three thousand years ago, Know what you want to say and the words would follow. When I focus on the chunks of language or*

the ideas, expressions seem to stick on and become part of my mental lexicon. I have come across many learners with a good fund of vocabulary but unable to use them appropriately. Going by my experience I would restrict the use of books, which claim to teach vocabulary to the beginners, intermediate and advanced level learners. This straight-jacketing does not have to be authentic all the time. My daughter when she was just about 8 yrs old used the word 'remuneration' when she was talking to Fr. Peter. This surprised him, as well me, to hear an expression of this sort. We seem to be restricting our learners' natural learning capabilities by our approaches, at least in my case. When I joined RCE, I was thrown into the sea of words and I had the choice to choose what I wanted to learn. At my age and the kind of learner that I am now, I am no longer conscious of motivation and exposure.

RB: Pit Corder said, "Given motivation and exposure, second language learning is automatic." But I believe that given motivation, exposure is automatic and therefore second language learning is. In contrast, Dr N S Prabhu said in the eighties that the only thing we can be sure of in second language learning is Exposure, Exposure in an extended sense to include methods and materials. What do you think?

KE: *If exposure is so very significant, all my*

classmates in RCE should have acquired a commendable level of proficiency but which was not the case. And, having lived in Mysore for 4 years and Hyderabad for 2 years I remained unaffected by any of those local languages – What a shame! Exposure had no impact. African Americans even after 400 years continue to have their kind of English and pronunciation, despite being immersed in American English. NRIs I have interacted with have remained very Indian in their pronunciation and not any noticeable level of enhancement of English skills. The children of living legends, be they sports, literature, music, acting or any other domain, hardly exhibited the same level of the expertise of their parents, leave alone surpassing them. Arjun Tendulkar, Abhishek Bachchan, Kannadasan's sons or daughters, even one among them, despite exposure and motivation are unable to acquire any status.

If I venture to mention a couple of names, (I don't know whether they would agree with me) Dr. V. Murugan (one who edited Advanced Learners' Oxford English and Tamil Dictionary) and Dr. K. Chellappan . . . have turned out to be expert users of the language.

RB: In the ELT context, do you think creating, arousing and maintaining motivation is partly the responsibility of the classroom teacher(s)? What about syllabus writers, textbook writers, and question-

paper-setters? Alternatively, is it solely the responsibility of the learner and their parents? If motivation is of paramount importance, why haven't the editors of professional journals included a permanent section on it? Will ELTAI's *JELT* do this one day?

KE: *As Robin Sharma, the author of The Man Who Sold His Ferrari, has put it, motivation is something which is fleeting. I guess, as it is a thought or feeling it can't remain at the same level even in a single day – one hits highs and lows. I am not downplaying its significance but it is not of paramount importance. Although everyone – syllabus designers, textbook writers, question paper setters and parents, collectively – has a role to play, it is ultimately the teacher and the taught, who are vital for getting inspired and sustaining it to the extent possible.*

RB: Can English or any L2 be learnt without any motivation? Is such a situation imaginable or plausible?

KE: *Learning, be it language or content, is a complex process. Foregrounding motivation and exposure alone is similar to missing the wood for tress. Given the high level of motivation – many say it with a sigh, “if only I knew English...”, and the best exposure, if learners don't invest their time and energy, and more importantly, possess individual ability/skill/talent learning is almost impossible.*

Stephen Krashen's widely quoted concepts such as Affective Filter and $i+1$ (as if these are final words in language learning) appear to be weird to me (or am I weird?) as I sincerely believe that some of my best learning happened when my teachers were devils in the class. And, leave alone teachers to decide for the entire class, even a single learner on any given day may not be aware of his $i+1$. So instead of being blindfolded by theories of this kind, we need to investigate the learning processes based on our realities.

*Learning a language, or anything for that matter, even today resembles the proverbial story of 'The Elephant and Six Blind Men'. Although motivation and exposure are critical factors, there is more to it. Recently, a psychologist described the success mantra for any kind of learning as **grit**, i.e. passion and perseverance, and there are certain other factors, which could be culture-specific. When there are 37 percent of Indians who are bilinguals of whom 7 per cent are multilinguals, learning languages is in our DNA, so we need to tell the world how languages should be taught and learnt and not be eclipsed by the existing half truths.*

RB: On the theme of this interview, Motivation and/or Exposure, what are your final comments?

KE: *Learning English rather late in my life has just enabled me to acquire it only as a*

conscious competence and not an unconscious competence, which is required for automated or spontaneous use of the language. Further, having taught English for more than three decades at the tertiary level and conducted formal interviews for thousands of candidates, who were migrating from our country, I could state with certainty that rural learners, despite years of some kind of exposure and intense training some time, are unable to attain the proficiency level

of their urban counterparts in terms of fluency, pronunciation and range of vocabulary and grammatical items. Therefore, English or any language has to be taught early in life, as told by the Tamil poet Avvaiyar “ilamayil kal” (catch them young). No amount of English language teaching at the college level facilitates learners, even if highly motivated, to acquire it seamlessly. A few success stories cannot become the norm.

Letters to the Editor

Read almost all, but the one which left the mark on me was Ramani's paper [on teacher development]. What a keen observation has been done and organised in [a] perfect way. The eagerness of learning, the untouched, the guilt of [been] accepting new ideas and leaving the old one. Both physiological as well as psychological struggling of a teacher or apt to say new learner is truly [portrayed] very well.

Michelle Amol Kharbas, Sinhadgad Public School, Solapur, Maharashtra

[Received on 23rd August 2019 through WhatsApp from Prof. Dhanappa Metri, Solapur]

With interest, I read the article on 'Whither teacher development: Stubborn continuity or winds of change?' published in the [May-June 2019 issue of the] Journal. I would like to share my opinion.

1. Even now many attend the programme to get OD ['on duty' permission] from the college.
2. A few members try the new methodology but they are lagging behind in completing the syllabus.
3. As English is a helping subject, the respective HoDs object to our pedagogy and compel us to revert [to the usual routines].
4. Sometimes we need help in using technology, which is not available to us.
5. Digital learning is emphasized and that has stopped with uploading materials in the computer but no one seems to be serious about [it] as exams are being considered only on our text-based teaching.
7. Personally, I tried to introduce BEC [Business English Certificate] classes. Though it went on well for 3 years, I couldn't continue due to cost factor.

In short, I feel, unless the UGC insists on getting credits through value-added courses nothing can be done.

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[Received on 28th August 2019]