

An Interview with Professor Z.N. Patil

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Dr. Z. N. Patil is the President of ELTAI Pune Chapter. He has been teaching English language and literature for 46 years. He retired as Professor of English and Head of the Department of Training and Development, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India.

Professor Patil has to his credit 20 textbooks, 6 resource books and 80 articles published in national and international journals. He has travelled widely across the world to give keynote addresses and plenary talks at international conferences and to conduct workshops for students and teachers at several universities. He has also served as adviser, expert and consultant on government and other committees.

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[AP: Atul Patil; ZNP: Z. N. Patil]

AP: . . . Professor Patil, we would like to know something about your career and personality. May I ask you a few questions?

ZNP: Of course, Atul.

AP: Thank you. I would like to know about your schooling. Did you study in an English medium school?

ZNP: No, I didn't. I studied in a Marathi medium school and I don't regret that. In fact,



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I'm proud I studied in a Marathi medium school. I come from a tiny village. There was no English medium school there. Even today there is no English medium school there and I am not unhappy about that either. I studied in my village till class four. Then I studied in a municipal school in Amalner, a town in Jalgaon district in Maharashtra. I only started learning English when I was eleven years old. My first encounter with the English language was when I was in class five. But I studied all other school subjects through Marathi. Later, I studied my college subjects such as history, logic, psychology and philosophy through Marathi. However, I studied four languages in school and college – Marathi,

Hindi, a bit of Sanskrit and English.

Today, there are some English medium schools in Amalner. There is a rather abnormal craze for English medium schools all over the region / country, in fact.

AP: People think that only those boys and girls who study in English medium schools can master the English language. Do you subscribe to this view?

ZNP: *No, I don't. I am afraid I have a different opinion on this issue. It doesn't really matter whether you study in an English medium school or a regional language medium school. Your success in mastering the language depends on a couple of crucial factors. One, your teachers must be good. They need to have an excellent command of English. And they need to be patient and affectionate. If they are inspiring, that's a bonus. I was lucky to have great teachers. They were passionate about teaching. For them, teaching wasn't a profession; it was a passion. And secondly, a student must propel himself, motivate himself. That internal drive is very important. Luckily, I had that drive. I used to walk to my school and walk back home. My town school was six kilometres from my village. And this continued till my third year at college. So, every day I used to walk twelve kilometres and I did this from my class five to my second year BA, for ten years. You see, I had a dream, to speak and write English confidently, fluently, appropriately and accurately. I wanted to master this language. I was sort of... possessed. I was haunted in a positive sense.*

AP: Indeed, that's inspiring! You studied in a Marathi medium school; you walked

twelve kilometres a day right from class five till you finished college. How did you develop your English under such adverse circumstances?

ZNP: *As I told you, I walked to and from school and college every day for years on end. As I walked, I memorized little poems like 'Stopping by Woods' and 'Daffodils'. I would soliloquize conversations, practise accurate pronunciation of words, and so on. On Sundays, I walked to a farm and sat under a tree with a mirror in my hand and practised my /f/ and /v/, /w/ and /v/, and so on. I would make lists of words with these sounds in them and repeat them till my bilabial Marathi /ph/ and /vh/ became labiodental English /f/ and /v/. In a true sense, English literature and language had possessed me. I worked hard and never felt tired of working.*

AP: . . . you were a recipient of a British Council scholarship way back in the early 1990s. Where did you study and what?

ZNP: *Well, I was one of the four college / university teachers who were awarded this scholarship. I was selected from western India. There were three more teachers of English, one each from eastern, northern and southern India. Initially, the Council placed me in the linguistics department of the University of Edinburgh for MSc in linguistics, but when I went through the course outline, I found it rather too theoretical for my interest. I wanted to do a course which would help me in my everyday teaching of language and literature. So, I requested Ms Iola Wilson, a very affectionate and considerate officer in the British Council office in Edinburgh, to*

allow me to do MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from Moray House College of Education, which is now the education department of the University of Edinburgh. Without any fuss, the Council allowed me to do a Diploma and MA in TESOL. I was awarded an “A” for my Diploma and M A.

AP: That is certainly something! Getting an “A” at the postgraduate level from one of the most prestigious universities in Britain is a tall order. By the way, which aspects of the British education system impressed you?

ZNP: *I was impressed by the flexibility of the British education system. The ease with which my request for transfer from MSc linguistics course to MA TESOL course was handled impressed me. There was no official rigmarole. The other thing that impressed me was that there was little emphasis on memory tests. We did our projects, assignments and dissertations in a very non-threatening, homely setting. The third thing that impressed me was that our class was the world in miniature. My classmates came from Asia, Africa, and Europe, and studying with them, interacting with them, socializing with them was a very enriching experience*

AP: You did a diploma and an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. How did these degrees help you in your teaching?

ZNP: *I had done my first MA from University of Pune in 1974. It was a literature MA, although I did do one course in basics of linguistics such as phonology, morphology, grammar, and a bit of semantics. The British*

Council scholarship gave me an opportunity to specialize in English language teaching. I had already done a Postgraduate Certificate in the Teaching of English from Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (presently, English and Foreign Languages University), Hyderabad in 1982. The MA TESOL course offered me more insights and practical strategies which I began to use on my return from Edinburgh. I think the MA TESOL course enabled me to teach English language and literature more effectively and efficiently.

AP: What role did your English teachers play in shaping your career as an English language and literature scholar and teacher?

ZNP: *That’s a very important question. As I said earlier, right from my school days, I was lucky to have had great teachers. They encouraged me, motivated me, inspired me and helped me in every way. When I entered college, I had several excellent teachers. Notable among them are Professor Arun Mali, Professor R. V. Kulkarni and Professor L. G. Barve. Later, I came in contact with Professor S. Nagarajan, Professor Sudhakar Marathe, Professor Prakash Deshpande, Professor Sudhakar Pandey, and many other great scholars and teachers. In 1990-91, when I was doing an MA in TESOL in Edinburgh, I had another galaxy of great teachers such as Michael Wallace, Leslie Dickinson, David Carver, Rosemary Douglas, Robert Thornton, Patricia Arhens and a few more. You’ll find traces of my teachers’ influence on my English, my teaching and my personality. These mentors have left their indelible marks on me.*

AP: Are you in touch with your teachers in India and abroad?

ZNP: *Of course, I am. My teachers are my roots. How can one forget one's roots? I keep meeting my school teachers and high school teachers. They nourish me, nurture me even today. I keep meeting my college and university teachers I need their blessings. I am in contact with my Edinburgh University teachers as well. I went to Britain a few years ago During that visit, I met most of my Edinburgh teachers. We were together on the campus of the university for a couple of hours and shared those golden moments that we had spent together some twenty years ago. I felt blessed to spend some time in their auspicious company.*

AP: That's so nice of you, Professor Patil. . . Your attitude towards your teachers shows that a sapling may become a huge tree, but it cannot forget its roots because it is from its roots that it receives nourishment What would you say about "self-made" scholars? Do you consider yourself 'self-made'?

ZNP: *Honestly speaking, I do not believe that anyone can be self-made. All of us depend on others. . . . When I look into my past, I see myself as an uncouth village boy. I was a first generation learner. I can visualize my journey from being a village boy to being what you call "an internationally acclaimed scholar and speaker". During this journey, many angels and good fairies lent me a helping hand. When I sit back, I see a thousand and one smiling faces and helping hands that have made me what I am today. So, no, I am not a self-made man and I don't think anyone is or can be.*

AP: . . . you are one of the most sought after non-native speakers who are regularly invited to international conferences globally. . . . How did you scale these heights?

ZNP: *Well, thank you for your compliment, Atul. However, I don't know whether I am what your description suggests. Let me tell you Atul, I met, interacted with and heard great minds Being with these unassuming scholars has always been not only a learning experience, but also a very humbling experience. I am not a narcissist and megalomaniac and so I know my strengths as well as weaknesses. When I compare myself with such great minds, I feel I am a pygmy, a fledgling, a Lilliputian scholar. However, I have always believed that everyone is capable of scaling great heights provided three things happen: one, they get opportunities and make the most of these opportunities, make the best use of these opportunities; two, they exploit their potential to the fullest; and three, they don't grow complacent.*

AP: I couldn't agree more, Sir. . . . Can you share some of your Vietnamese and Japanese experiences of teaching English?

ZNP: *Certainly. Well, our Ministry of External Affairs . . . deputed me to Vietnam to develop the communication skills of prospective diplomats for three and a half years, from 1999 to 2002, . . . My job was to develop the spoken and written communication skills of future diplomats from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Rumania and other countries. I also taught at several universities in Hanoi. . . . As far as the learning of English is concerned, I can say that Vietnamese*

students are immensely motivated and hard working.

Then from 2003 to 2006 I worked as Senior English Language Adviser in Japan. Basically, my job was to enhance the teaching skills of Japanese teachers of English. Two crucial differences between Vietnamese and Japanese cultures are that the latter is a culture of silence and its language is beautifully vague and indirect. One can see the impact of this culture of indirectness and silence in an English class as well. Japanese students are rather inarticulate and believe in silent communion. Consequently, they seem to be slow in developing their communication skills in English. All the same, from my Japanese colleagues and students I learnt three things: one, that nothing is impossible; two, that all of us are capable of doing great things; and three, that there is no short cut to success and development.

. . . .

AP: You have been teaching English language and literature for nearly forty-four years now. Do you think the standards of teaching English have deteriorated over the years?

ZNP: Well, Atul, no and yes. No, because to some extent, mass education makes it appear so. The number of schools, colleges and universities has grown enormously in that time. As a result, the number of teachers has increased. So, the number of poor institutions, poor teachers and poor students has skyrocketed. Consequently, the standards of English language and literature teaching seem to be plummeting. And yes, the quality

of teaching has deteriorated and it continues to deteriorate, because despite use of technology and availability of facilities, you see a fall in quality of teaching; hundreds of thousands of teachers evince a reluctance to grow academically, to read good literature and innovate appropriate techniques. In the past, we didn't have all these gadgets or facilities, but we had great teachers, competent as well as fatherly and motherly teachers and that made a big difference.

AP: You referred to the use of technology in teaching and learning. Do you think technology invariably and necessarily improves the quality of teaching?

ZNP: Well, well! I have my own reservations about this issue. Technology is just a supplement; it's not a substitute for teaching. It cannot replace the human teacher. The most important factor, in my opinion, is the personality of the teacher, the enthusiasm, the motivation, the passion the teacher exudes and, most of all the language command. Technology, when placed in the hands of a poor teacher, leads to monotony and boredom. A judicious and wise use of technology is welcome. Excess is always bad. These days, teachers depend on technology so heavily that the element of surprise is gone, as has regard for competence. They sacrifice the element of enjoyment in teaching and learning by their excessive reliance on technology. In short, technology can facilitate teaching, but can lead to monotony if used excessively and unwisely. It's a boon in the hands of a good teacher, but a curse in the hands of a poor teacher. I have witnessed several technology-dominated yet intolerably boring performances.

AP: Now, we are eager to know what you think about higher education in India.

ZNP: *Well, I haven't been very happy with higher education in our country. In fact, the abysmal condition of higher education has been worrying educational policy makers, curriculum developers, syllabus designers and other stakeholders in the field. You know that few of our educational and research institutions figure in the global list of top institutions of higher education. This has been happening despite the fact that huge amounts of money are being spent on conferences, seminars, symposiums, workshops, courses of training and research. Many of these academic exercises are abortive and inconsequential because few innovative ideas are discussed, tried out or practised and discussions are hardly translated into execution. But I am not a pessimist. I do see a ray of light at the end of the tunnel. There are some good institutions. A few fruitful academic events are beginning to occur. Let's hope the much awaited new policy on education will flesh out some measure to remedy the situation.*

AP: Professor Patil, thank you for expressing your opinions on these important matters frankly. Now, I have one last question for you. Are you happy with the kind of research going on in English language and literature and in pedagogy?

ZNP: *Well, that's another area that has disillusioned me. The plight of research in this field is miserably dismal. Some of my*

colleagues have lost faith in research in our country. Until a couple of decades ago, obtaining a doctorate in English was a really tough task. Today, it's a different story altogether. Much of it is nothing but a rehash. Thanks to technology, duplication and plagiarism have become rampant. In many cases, the content of dissertations is shallow and its code or language is shabby. Let me cite an example from research in applied linguistics. One researcher does a pragmatic analysis of one novel by an author. Another researcher does a pragmatic analysis of another novel by the same author. The novels are different; yet the analysis is the same! When one author is done, they choose another author and do a 'similar' (a near synonym of 'identical') analysis, and there seems no end to this essential academic poverty. Interesting, isn't it? We are a developing country and cannot afford the luxury of 'spending' (a euphemism for 'squandering') enormous amounts of money, the tax payers' money, on abortive, petty, trivial and inconsequential research. However, this is not to say that the picture is absolutely bleak. I am not a nihilist. Some serious and meaningful research is going on in English literature, English language teaching and linguistics.

AP: Thank you very much, Professor Patil, for sparing time for this interview and for sharing your valuable views and experiences with us. It was a pleasure listening to you.

ZNP: *Well, I have enjoyed talking to you, too.*