

# The Origin and Growth of ELTAI – A Fascinating Story

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## Introduction

Our Association had a humble beginning and has grown into one of the largest professional associations of teachers in the world just like a tiny seed becoming in course of time a big banyan tree—from just six members, all belonging to one city, Madras (now Chennai) to about 4000 members and 60 chapters in different parts of our country. You may wonder how it had happened. Well, it is quite an interesting saga.

Our Founder, the Late Padmashree S. Natarajan, who began his professional life as a school teacher, rose to become the Vice-President of the World Confederation of Teachers' Organizations. With a grant of one lakh rupees for the Society for the Promotion of Education in India, he launched the publication of four journals: *Journal of English Language Teaching*, *The Mathematics Teacher*, *The Geography Teacher*, and *Experiments in Education* – only the first two have survived, though.

## Journal First, Association Later!

It is interesting to note that our Journal was started first and our Association much later. Why and how did it happen? The *Journal of English Language Teaching (JELT)*—the first of its kind in our country— was published in 1965. He really wanted to start a professional association of teachers of English but he knew that teachers would not join it paying subscription without an incentive. So he told teachers they would get a *free* copy of the Journal if they joined the English Language Teachers' Association once it was started.

The Journal provided an opportunity for teachers to get themselves acquainted with

research findings in teaching English and also share their experiences with others. He priced it at just a rupee per copy and almost single-handedly promoted its sale. He visited schools and colleges and requested them to subscribe to it. Only some subscribed out of regard for him, but he didn't give up. He did not have a typewriter nor anyone to assist him; in poor health and with failing eyesight but with a missionary zeal, he wrote letters by hand to the heads of a few well-known educational institutions in the State requesting them to subscribe to the journal and did the canvassing himself. There was also a paucity of articles for publication. He requested his close friends—one or two—to write almost for every issue. The point is the journal saw the light of the day only due to the persistent efforts of this old man. In the beginning, only a hundred copies were printed and, in fact, some remained unsold. But he didn't give up and soon the circulation went up. But unfortunately, it never went beyond 400 copies or so.

## ELTAI is born!

A few years later, in 1969, Mr. Natarajan started the Association. Six teachers including the writer who met at his residence discussed the importance of the professional development of teachers as a key factor in enhancing the standards of education in our country, when there were only trade unions of teachers concerned with working for the improvement of their service conditions. At our meeting, he mooted the idea of starting an association of teachers concerned with organizing professional development programmes for them. He said enrolment of members of the new association would be easier if we said all members of the Association would get a free copy of the Journal.

Thus, our Association came into being and we were able to enrol about 256 members.

### **Promoting ELTAI – New Strategies**

After the passing away of our Founder in 1974, a new team of office-bearers took over and decided to carry forward the good work initiated by him adopting certain new strategies. It was decided to conduct free workshops, seminars, and refresher courses for teachers of English. In these programmes the teachers were told about the benefits of joining ELTAI – a free copy of our bi-monthly Journal, opportunities provided for the improvement of their teaching competence, interacting with ELT professionals, and getting their papers published in our Journal.

Another strategy adopted was to provide cash awards for teachers undertaking action research and also for using ICT tools in teaching English. The allotment of some subsidised memberships offered by IATEFL to our members has also helped to enrol new members, besides familiarizing them with the work done by IATEFL. **Special Interest Groups** were also formed—e.g., English Literature SIG and Computer Technology SIG, Business English SIG. These have been running open access online journals, which may be accessed on our website [www.eltai.in](http://www.eltai.in). Our **Online Discussion Forums** provide opportunities to our members to interact with one another and also to get updates about our association activities. Since the Covid-19 lockdown in May 2020, ELTAI has been organizing **weekly Webinars** contributing to the professional development of our teachers. We also conducted an eight-day Faculty Development Programme (FDP) on Reading in July-August 2021.

### **Annual Conferences**

We hold our annual conferences regularly, several of them international, too, attended by a large number of English teachers and research

scholars. We have had quite a few speakers from IATEFL, RELO (Regional English Language Office, US Govt.), and the British Council at our annual conferences.

### **ELTAI: An Associate of IATEFL (UK) and an Affiliate of TESOL (USA)**

As an Associate of IATEFL, we are able to provide a fixed number of its subsidized memberships to our members. Almost every year a member is sent to attend the IATEFL conference with some financial assistance from us. A few have won IATEFL scholarships too to attend the international event. Some of our members have also contributed to their publication ‘Voices’ in recent years. We also participate in the TESOL Affiliate events online.

### **IATEFL and Hornby Trust-Funded Projects**

ELTAI was the first recipient of the IATEFL Project grant along with another European country for our project on ‘Training the Trainers in Virtual Learning’. Another project undertaken by our Association with support from the Hornby Trust, UK, was on training teachers in using smartphones for the teaching and learning of English. Yet another project funded by the Hornby Trust was a Master Training Workshop for our Chapter heads on ‘The Use of Digital Tools for Learner Autonomy in Communication skills’.

### **Collaboration with the British Council**

The British Council has also been collaborating with us for a range of our activities for a number of years now. Our ‘Shakespeare lives – 2016’ celebrations in collaboration with the British Council in six different cities in India included competitions for students and seminars for teachers on the relevance of the playwright’s works for all ages.

*Dr. S. Rajagopalan, Patron, ELTAI.*