

One-on-One: Interview with S. Mohanraj

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Dr S Mohanraj served as Professor in the Centre for Training and Development and Dean, School of English Language Education, at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. His areas of specialization include Teacher Development, Curriculum Design, Materials Production and Educational Technology.



Professor Mohanraj, you have been a teacher, teacher educator, teacher trainer and materials writer for over four decades. What inspired you to become a teacher in general and English language teacher in particular?

My ambition in life was to become a medical practitioner. After I graduated with a degree in science, my attempts to get into medical school were not successful. I got a seat in MA English on the strength of my marks in language English paper and soon I paid my fees and joined the course. A month later I was offered a seat in MSc but I could not take it for the fee once paid could not be refunded or appropriated. So having done my masters degree in English, I became a teacher of English, and I have no regrets since. A teacher who taught us phonetics (Dr L Vishwanath) greatly impressed me and motivated me to go to CIEFL for further education, and this shaped me as a teacher educator.

You have taught in different states in India and abroad. Can you share with the readers your most rewarding teaching experience?

After obtaining PGDTE and M Litt degrees from CIEFL, I got a job in an ELTI at Vallabh Vidyanagar. This helped me shape my career as a teacher educator. This Institute used to offer training programmes both at the pre-service and in-service level. In-service teacher training took me to different corners of the state and beyond. While here, I taught in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Goa. Teacher training is different from teaching. It is more challenging for the students are mature and scope for discussion is a greater possibility. I began to develop tasks for helping the participants on the programme grapple with concepts in language teaching and materials

development. The experience across all the states was more or less similar. In Goa, the state decided to develop its own course books for teaching English. I was a resource person to train a group of teachers to develop the new books Gomantha Bharathi. This was a very enjoyable experience as the results of training were seen in tangible form. Subsequently, when I was chosen by the UGC to work as a Resource Person on a refresher course meant exclusively for the Method Masters of English from Colleges of Teacher Education from across the country (at the Central Institute of Education, New Delhi in October 1985) my outreach as a teacher educator expanded.

Having worked in Gujarat for over a decade, I moved to CIEFL in 1993 and this gave me an opportunity to visit different states of the country to train teachers as part of the ELTI Support Scheme as well as the District Training Scheme. This helped me gain a first hand knowledge of the syllabuses used in different states and the course books used for teaching English at different stages of school level. I consider this a valuable learning experience.

In 1996, when I was your student at CIEFL you said that you love interacting with school teachers and teaching school students. Do you still have the interests?

Yes. Being a teacher educator, I have always felt that it is essential to keep in touch with the ground realities. Hence, I have maintained a good rapport with schools, and whenever I get an opportunity, I go to a school and teach the children with some of

the new techniques that need to be disseminated.

According to the Framework for 21st Century Learning, the four most important skills that one should possess are: 4Cs – Communication, Collaboration, Creativity and Critical Thinking. Does it imply that English language teachers' role as mere teachers of English has changed / has to change in the twenty-first century?

Teachers of English have been endowed with the responsibilities of teaching 4Cs from a long time. I remember this happened way back in mid 80s. I was in Anand (Gujarat). National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) started a new department of Human Resource Development (HRD) and the concept was still new. Some of the members of the faculty in our Institute (H M Patel Institute of English Training and Research) were drafted in to train the personnel. We designed the course on communication skills including interpersonal skills, presentation skills, and a bit of persuasion skills required by marketing personnel. We went to sources available and learnt these skills ourselves using peer teaching as a strategy.

Today, in most of the Engineering colleges a special paper has been introduced in the VII semester of the course which has a focus on 4Cs including confidence building strategies, facing interviews and participating in group discussions. This course is managed by the teachers in the department of English. This suggests that

a change in role has already been in place, and it is right that we brace ourselves for the same.

You spent over a quarter century as a faculty at CIEFL (EFLU). It is said that the premier institute of English language education should have contributed much more to the development of ELT as a specialized field than it has done. Your comment.

Sadly, what you have said is at least partly true and many of us should take the responsibility for this. The Institute was set up with a specific mandate to train teachers to teach language English at all levels. This was at a time (1958) when Indian ELT was in its infancy. There were plenty of opportunities to develop an Indian brand of ELT. But sadly that did not happen. I do not like to blame anyone for this. Perhaps, the teachers those days were trained in Britain and had lofty ideas which were not very practical in the existing Indian context. Hence, no concrete contribution could be made and sustained.

But this is not the whole truth. In terms of materials development, CIEFL has contributed substantially. *Let's Learn English* was a course book produced by CIEFL and published by NCERT for use in Kendriya Vidyalayas and other CBSE schools. These were qualitatively different from course books available around the same time (mid 70s). The structure of these course books gave rise to similar books by private publishers – *Gul Mohar* series being one of them. This book is popular to this

day thirty years after it was published for the first time.

One person who is a product of CIEFL and gave the world of materials an excellent course book was Prof Prabhu. In collaboration with Prof W W S Bhaskar he designed *English Through Reading*. Often, I have said and with conviction, that I am yet to see a course book which is better than this.

Another contribution CIEFL has made to the promotion of ELT in India is monitoring two major national projects – The ELTI Support Scheme and the District Centre Scheme. These schemes were funded by the Central Government and have helped several thousands of teachers across the country to receive good training in teaching methodology as well as materials development. Some of the teachers trained under these schemes have attained senior positions both at the national and international levels.

Unfortunately, there are no records maintained and continuity of work is missing in the Institute. This gives an impression that the contribution of CIEFL has been almost minimal. The statement is just partially true.

Almost a quarter century ago, you experimented with educational technology in ELT and introduced the course “Computer-Assisted English Language Teaching” at the CIEFL. I was fortunate enough to be one of your students on the course. I must say that

you inspired me to get interested in technology-integrated language teaching. Are you still interested in education technology?

I had a basic training in using computers in 1985. The NCERT organised a master trainers programme in line with the recommendations of MHRD to introduce CLASS (Computer Literacy And School Studies) programme. Those days we had very basic models of desktop computers which worked on DoS environment. These were called AT and XT systems with very low memory (compared to today's systems). In those days, such memory (64 MB) was thought to be elephantine. However, the CLASS programme was shelved due to certain political reasons. It is not appropriate to discuss the details of it here.

When I joined CIEFL, I proposed a course in CALL as an optional course in the second semester of PGDTE. The Academic Council gracefully accepted the proposal and I was happy to offer the course with meagre facilities. You are a witness to it. Luckily for me, we had Professor Keiser visiting us from Lucerne, Switzerland. He literally held me by hand in offering the course. I am always grateful to him. Today, the course has developed itself substantially, we are able to provide hands on experience to our students and become fairly proficient in using the available software for teaching English. They also undertake projects in CALL which are classroom based. I am happy that a course that began in a modest way has developed itself wonderfully well.

Some of my students who are now on the faculty are handling this course.

My personal interest in educational technology has not waned, but I am not able to keep pace with the recent developments. I am happy using my PPTs, and Web2 Tools to a certain degree when I am asked to teach.

Gary Motteram, in his book *Innovations in learning technologies for English language teaching* argues that “digital technologies are ideally placed to help teachers working with learners, and learners working independently, to do the necessary ‘languaging’ (M. Swain) that makes their language development possible.” What is your take on it?

In response to this question I would like to go back a little in terms of time and look at the original objectives of ET. ET had four basic objectives:

- a. Promote self-learning as best as possible
- b. Provide every learner with a teacher
- c. Promote learning at one's own pace.
- d. Maximise learning by reducing wastage in teaching inputs.

Programmed learning was supposed to achieve all these objectives. Today, these objectives are seen as more pragmatic in relation to ICT. I am reminded of what one of my teachers (Prof Devidas, who was a pioneer in using Radio for language teaching) said, ‘with the use of media (read technology) a teacher can also learn with the learner. Learning becomes

participatory'. There cannot be anything more true than this statement when we use technology to teach our learners.

Technology has made individualised learning a reality. To give a simple example, an exercise in print can be put on a system and the same exercise when administered on a system (in soft form) can be used by different learners in different formats. The exercises lend themselves to better exploitation. You would remember some of the exercises like London Adventure, Cloze, Text Salad etc which we used on the CALL course with their inbuilt feedback mechanism providing an opportunity for constant improvement. Prof. Keiser used to often emphasise on this aspect of computer based exercises. With a lot of advancement in programming materials, we have today Web based exercises which provide for independent learning.

What is your response to the criticism that in India not much has been done to promote the use of technology in language teaching?

Unlike CLT, Technology has not spread very widely in our education system. It is still confined to urban pockets and perhaps better used in schools of medicine, technology, management and to a certain extent in some institutes of teacher education. Several international schools and rich private schools have harnessed technology but their number is far below the desired levels. Technology will reach across the country if and only if this is

introduced in all government schools with proper training given to teachers. The government in many cases has provided the hardware, but the schools have little or no resources to cope with the maintenance and also buy the required software and consumables. This, I find as the major reason for technology not picking up in the Indian education scene.

Some language researchers and ELT professionals say that methods are dead and we are in the post-method era. Kumaravadivelu (2006) talks about facilitating “the growth and development of teachers’ own theory to practice” and “postmethod pedagogy”. What is your view on methods?

I would prefer to take a slightly different path in responding to this question. Many scholars have said ‘there is no best method’. Prof Prabhu’s definition of teaching is ‘Teaching is hoping for the best.’ (This is largely because, we as teachers are blissfully unaware of what is happening in the learners’ brains.) When we look at these statements, we may need to change our perspective on teaching. For long scholars have advocated ‘eclectic approach’ as the best approach. There are ever so many definitions of this term. One I like most is ‘best method suitable for my learners at a given point of time’. I like this because of its flexibility and the autonomy it provides to the teacher.

A teacher knows his/her students and their needs best. Hence, a teacher should be given the liberty to do what he/she thinks

is best. In fact, Kumaravadivelu does suggest this in his book *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching*.

Your PhD research was on materials. You have written over a hundred course books and you have been quite successful as a materials writer. Stephen Krashen says that input must be not just interesting but compelling and when it is compelling the learner forgets that it is in another language. According to him, “Compelling input appears to eliminate the need for motivation, a conscious desire to improve”. What is your response to Krashen’s Compelling Input Hypothesis?

The term ‘compelling input’ is not a new one. We have been talking of need based materials. Let us look at it from a different perspective. Littlewood held ‘Language cannot be used without a purpose’ as the basic tenet of language teaching. If we take this seriously, we can accept Krashen without any argument. To relate this point to materials, let us cite a few examples. Building exercises with sufficient amount of information gap, framing comprehension questions that are not factual but inferential, testing comprehension in a variety of ways such as information transfer etc. which will help in creating a purpose for using language. Compelling input helps us develop what I call ‘copy proof’ materials/ exercises. A learner provides a response based more on his/her experience and understanding rather than copy a part of the text. Such materials are available today in Indian course books both at school and college levels and are labelled HOTS –

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exercises that promote Higher Order Thinking Skills.

Most English language teachers depend on the course books prepared by experts like you and this over dependence kill their creativity as teachers. Don’t you think that English language teachers should be trained to become materials writers too?

I cannot agree more with you on this point. All teachers should be basically materials producers to some extent. Therefore in our courses on teacher education, we obviously provide sufficient practice in analysing syllabus and the course book. For this we may use the framework provided by Cunningsworth or we may develop our own framework. A detailed analysis of either of these documents helps them understand their structure. With such understanding they are able to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses in these and also find ways of overcoming the weaknesses. This is what I call basic introduction to materials development. A teacher who can look at the textbook prescribed, cull out the syllabus based on the course book, understand the needs of the learners and appropriately supplement the textbook is a materials producer in his own right.

You have been involved in English language teacher education for many years. You taught at HM Patel Institute for 13 years and at CIEFL for 25 years. Pre-service training is very important for novice teachers. How effective are the BEd and MEd courses offered by different

education institutes for teachers of English?

Pre-service teacher training course [BEd, BEd (Elementary)] have undergone a revision as recently as 2016. Unfortunately, the changes have not happened the way they were envisaged by the NCTE (National Council for Teacher Education). A draft curriculum was framed in the year 2009 called NCFTE (National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education). A team of very senior teacher educators (mostly retired from NCERT) went round the whole country disseminating the broader objectives of the new teacher training curriculum envisaged. A period of five years was given to prepare a good curriculum for the two year programme which was to be introduced in the year 2016. However, the new syllabus was a recap of the old syllabus divided into four parts to cover the four semesters. A few additional value based courses were added and the duration for teaching practice was increased from 40 days to 120 days. Many details that should have been spelt out with these changes were not properly spelt out and hence the B Ed programme has remained what it was.

All teacher education programmes whether they are in-service or pre-service should aim at providing adequate content knowledge. The two year period was thought to provide for improving content proficiency. This has not happened. (The four-year integrated programmes offered by Regional Institutes of Education – NCERT have been successfully doing this for over five decades now.) Another reform is likely to happen

soon. The nation is planning to come out with new curriculum at the tertiary level 'Learning Outcome Based Curriculum' with choice based courses made available to the learners. With this the structure of B Ed programmes is also likely to change for the better.

M Ed is not a teacher training programme as conceived by the NCTE. It is a trainer training programme and the curriculum here also needs to be revised in line with contemporary societal needs.

Though the communicative language teaching continues to be the dominant ELT method in many countries where ESL/EFL is taught, most ESL teachers in India seem to be obsessed with traditional methods. As an ELT educator, how do you see this issue of resistance to change by teachers?

I am not sure if this is really true today. There are strong reasons to support what I say. I consider the years 1990 – 1992 as very significant in the history of ELT in India. Earlier to this, there had been attempts in smaller pockets to introduce CLT but without much follow up. To cite a few examples, experiments conducted by SNDT experiment (1975), Loyola College Experiment in Chennai (1975), West Bengal Secondary Education Board experiment (1983), Bangalore Project (1979-81) etc. In 1990, the CBSE took up a major project to develop new type of materials, build new strategies of teaching and evaluation. This was a bottom up process in true sense of the term. 50 practising teachers from

different CBSE schools in the country were selected to undergo a sustained training programme in Marjons College, Plymouth. They were trained to develop course materials, train teachers and also develop question papers. The three teams worked in coordination and trained secondary school teachers across the country. Two new course books called *Interact in English I and II* were prescribed for use in classes IX and X respectively.

This caught the attention of teacher educators across the country. Several teacher educators volunteered to become trainers and trained teachers on 10-day inset programmes before the course books were put to use. To help children cope with the new materials, several schools took the initiative to develop similar course books and give the learners an early start. This has picked up in a big way with all the CBSE schools.

Looking at the success in such schools, several state board schools have also developed new materials, trained their teachers and the CLT has come to be accepted. There may be a few small pockets where traditional methods are still in use. But by and large, CLT is the in-thing today. Not only in schools but also at the tertiary level similar course books are produced and used. This is especially true of colleges of Engineering and Management studies.

How important is professional development for teachers of English? What should be the role of premier institutions like EFLU in contributing to

teachers' professional development?

The concept of Professional Development (CPD) has picked up in the recent years in an obvious manner. This boils down to teaching ethics and its importance cannot be ignored. We have had teachers of exceptional quality in the past. Some of their working qualities have been systematically abstracted and offered to the teachers in training as a course. This is really necessary.

Professional development is an awareness rising (conscientization) programme and should be an essential component in teacher education. Lack of professionalism can be deterrent to one's career and also to the general goals of education at large.

You have been actively involved in teacher development activities since retirement. You have been playing a vital role in strengthening the English Language Teachers' Association of India (ELTAI). What should be the role of ELTAI in promoting English language teachers' professional development in the days to come?

My involvement in teacher development programmes was for two reasons. It gave me my bread and secondly, it became a passion with me. Perhaps there is yet another reason, it helped me build a better rapport with teachers who were closer to the learners and thus they formed a bridge between me and learners in school. I could access the school learners easily because of my involvement in teacher development

programmes. As time progressed, I had to retire, and with a long standing request from Dr. Elango, I accepted to offer my help.

ELT@I has been engaged in certain activities related to teacher development, conducting seminars for updating knowledge and also publishing a few journals both in print medium and online.

This is good work in itself. But being a premier association and at that being a very large body of teachers, it has potential for lot more work. I for one feel, that ELT@I can harness its strength in publishing quality books. There is a dearth of good books in ELT with a focus on Indian situation. ELT@I has adequate human resource to deploy to produce quality books.

An index of all the articles published in the Association journal (over 50 years and 300 issues and nearly 3000 articles) can be made available to the readers in soft form. Some of the best articles can be published in the form of anthologies of good writings in ELT and this can be a good source of reference and also bring in some revenue for the Association. I had briefly mentioned this in the Conference at Cochin (2017) and this is reiterated by Prof Robert Bellarmine.

The Association has now started

establishing chapters. The chapters can be provided with some autonomy to design their own programmes and earn some revenue to maintain themselves well. There can be a system established to bring about collaboration among the chapters and the Central body. This will help in providing necessary motivation for some of the chapters which have not been active.

Name one ELT book that you found very useful. Would you recommend the book to other teachers of English?

Ray Mackay's book *Basic Introduction to English Language Teaching*. This is a book published based on Dr. Mackay's experience of working with teachers of English at different levels in the state of West Bengal. Though the book provides examples from Bengal and teaching at the primary level, the book is relevant to all the teachers of English across India.

Thank you Professor Mohanraj for sharing your experience and views on different aspects of ELT with the readers of the *Journal of English Language Teaching*. I do appreciate your contributions to the growth of ELTAI .

Thank you, Albert for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts with all of you.