

BOOK REVIEW

Maley, Alan (Ed.). (2019). *Developing expertise through experience*. British Council.

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How important is it for teachers to reflect on their own experiences as learners and teachers? Why is it important for teachers to conceptualize and theorize their practices? How do teachers' beliefs, values, and experiences contribute to their personal and professional development? These questions have been raised by teachers at different times in various forums.

The book *Developing expertise through experience* edited by Alan Maley is a collection of learning, teaching, and training experiences, reflections, and narratives of twenty professionals based on Prabhu's concept of 'the teacher's sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1987). In the foreword, Prabhu defines plausibility as "a feeling or perception that occurs to one, not something that can be aimed at, worked for, or predicted." He further explains that "plausibility is commonly seen as a state of knowledge short of certainty." Differentiating 'certainty' from 'plausibility', he states that "certainty signals an end point, while plausibility is always a stage in understanding that can change and develop

infinitely". In another article, *Plausibility*, in the book *Perceptions of Language Pedagogy* (2019), he elaborates it: "Plausibility is not a fixed concept but a developing perception. As long as one maintains what I have called an alertness to events, such perceptions can gradually lead one to a clearer and more comprehensive view."

Both Prabhu and Maley believe that teachers/professionals, by sharing their personal perceptions of plausibility and personal theory of teaching with fellow teachers, can help everyone in the profession have a sense of self-worth as teachers. So the aim of the book, according to Maley, is to explore how teachers' accumulated experiences and reflections enable them to build a personal theory of teaching action. In other words, the book is an exploration, amplification, and celebration of Prabhu's notion of 'the teacher's sense of plausibility'. For every teacher and trainer, their values, beliefs, and experiences matter as these factors lead them to become professionals.

Twenty contributors, carefully chosen from a wide range of countries and different teaching contexts, age, gender, and length of teaching experience, have shared their personal histories of people who inspired them, certain critical moments that shaped their beliefs, publications that influenced their thinking, and various other factors that contributed to their professional growth and development of a personal theory of teaching.

While reading the narratives of the contributors, readers can relate to their experiences and bring back to mind their own experience of how they learned and how they

were influenced by various factors such as personalities, books, and incidents. The book has a lot of interesting and insightful anecdotes and can help readers sharpen their perceptions. Besides a detailed foreword on the value of shared experiences by Prabhu and an introduction by Maley, the book has twenty chapters by twenty professionals from different parts of the world.

In the first chapter, Robert Bellarmine, who served the British Council Division, South India, as English Studies Officer (ESO) and later as examiner and examiner-trainer for the Cambridge ESOL examinations, discusses the development of his sense of plausibility and its implications in a detailed manner. He narrates his experience of how he developed his 'teacher's sense of plausibility' (TSOP) at various stages and shares how his face-to-face interactions with Prabhu shaped his thinking. Bellarmine gives a list of beliefs he acquired after becoming a teacher, and the salient ones are:

- (1) Good teachers of English transcend the prescribed texts and bring in stories, anecdotes, and the like connected with the texts and classroom incidents.
- (2) Most good teachers have or develop a sense of humour. (They need it to survive!)
- (3) The procedural syllabus consisting of cognitive tasks is much more effective than the communicative, functional, and structural syllabuses.

John F Fanselow, Professor Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University, narrates his experience of how his earliest experiences of language learning and education have affected his current views and practices. He says how the words '*You can*

change the world, but please don't unless you know what you are doing!' he heard in a talk about bullying and school shootings resonated with him and prompted him to write the book *Small Changes in Teaching, Big Results in Learning* (2018). The message is that teachers should know what they are doing in order to be real transformers.

From little steps to giant strides: The story of my professional journey is quite an inspiring narrative by an African teacher. Kuchah Kuchah, currently the President of the IATEFL, was born and raised in Cameroon, where he had limited learning resources and challenging experiences. He narrates beautifully how he was able to overcome challenging situations and achieve his professional development in Cameroon and, after moving to the University of Warwick, to study for an MA in EYL. Kuchah shares his experience of how he was able to know the difference between 'pedagogy of autonomy' and 'pedagogy for autonomy' and realize the importance of theorizing from practice: "It may, therefore, sometimes be more useful to encourage teachers to theorize from their practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Ramani, 1987) than to expect them to implement some learned theory."

Christine CM Goh, Professor of Linguistics and Language Education at Singapore's National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, introspecting on her professional journey, says that two kinds of knowledge have influenced her beliefs and practice: documented knowledge and practical knowledge, which she describes as knowledge that she co-constructed with her peers and her students in her daily enactment of teaching and learning in the workplace.

Dr Phuong Le, Phu Yen University in Central

Vietnam, shares how she developed herself professionally at different stages in different places while interacting with people of different nationalities and cultures. Her beliefs about language and learning languages include:

- (1) Language and culture cannot be separated.
- (2) Knowing another language can change a person's viewpoints and lifestyles.
- (3) The more fun learners have in learning, the more success they have as learners.

The experiences and reflections of other contributors including Tessa Woodward, Adrian Underhill, and Fauzia Shamim are also noteworthy. It is clear that all these experts have developed their expertise through experience and exchange of their reflections on their professional development can definitely enlarge and sharpen other practitioners' perceptions.

The objective of the book is achieved as the contributors, who have decades of experience in language education, have shared their sense of plausibility and how their experiences and beliefs have helped them reach their professional goal in an engaging and convincing manner. Each article, written in a simple and non-academic style, offers insights into language learning, language teaching, and professional development.

Stating that the underlying theme of the book is the significance of experience, Maley has summarized, in a systematic way, the recurrent themes in the twenty chapters to show how a number of thematic threads weave the narrative together. It appears as a part in the *Introduction*. It would have been better if it had appeared as a separate and last chapter of the volume.

To take it forward and include this in professional development training, Maley suggests a range of CPD activities at: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/e-file.pdf>. They are useful CPD activities.

Albert Einstein has rightly said that "The only source of knowledge is experience" and it is essential to value the experience of ELT practitioners and professionals in order to generate ideas and create knowledge. It is also important to pay attention to personal experiences of learners and teachers in teacher education. Exchange of personal stories can be a rewarding experience for teachers. Andrew Wright, one of the contributors, asks the right question: "Experiencing and studying language both have their parts to play. But if we have two legs, why hop?"

I believe that "experience is a lesson of the past to lessen the burden of the future" (Michael Sage) and the experiences shared by the ELT practitioners can give us insight into English language education. The contributors have given their own perceptions and beliefs about language and language learning. As 'plausibility' is not 'certainty', it is always good to be critical and develop our own personal theory of teaching.

I am not sure whether any such book which values teachers' personal experiences is available in the market. The book deserves a place in the bookshelves of passionate teachers of English, teacher trainers, and teacher educators, as it can motivate everyone in the profession to become a reflective practitioner and professional.

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