

Journal of NELTA Forum

[The present somewhat opinionated article has been included in this issue of the Journal with a view to creating a forum for its readers. Readers wishing to respond to the article may send their response or opinion to the editorial board. Selected responses will be included in the next issue of the Journal- Editors]

Content, Language and Technology: Perspectives and Prospects

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Introduction

Language learning is probably as ancient as human kind. Man has been communicating in one form or the other since the tie he evolved. Such means of communication has undergone a process of evolutionary changes to stabilize as language and provide an identity to its user.

With language becoming the principal source of interaction, the man in his curiosity and wisdom, began to analyse it to facilitate teaching/learning of the same easily. The present article is a conclave of such attempts (researches) and takes into account a historical perspective. While doing so an attempt has been made to discuss topics such as Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Information Communication Technology (ICT).

1. Let us begin with Historiography. This has caught the attention of many scholars (Dr Richard Smith is a well known name in the field), and the larger attempt of such research is to provide a perspective on the research in progress. ELT in India is 65 years old. I say this because, the first English Institute was established in 1953 in

Allahabad. The founders of this Institute were largely materials developers and strived hard to spread the need for language teaching in a small measure. In the year 1958, another major Institute of national importance CIE (Central Institute of English) was established in Hyderabad. This Institute had the mandate to train teachers of English at the secondary and tertiary levels and the Institute is actively engaged in carrying out this task to date. The Institute also has made pioneering efforts in developing national curriculum and produced textbooks for teaching English at different levels of learning.

The history of the Institute is also the history of ELT in India. The Institute was in many ways responsible for promoting the Structural Approach after it was integrated into the school curriculum. However, the scholars working here soon realised its weaknesses and switched over to promoting communicative language teaching almost contemporaneously with ELT practitioners in England in mid seventies. Jane Revell being one of the pioneers in this field. This brought about a change in the research perspective in terms of teacher

training, materials development and classroom strategies.

Some of the key projects that made a mark are the experiments carried out at Loyola College, Chennai (1975); SNDT University, Mumbai (1978); The Bangalore Project (1979-1981); West Bengal Textbook Board (COST) (1983); TELE - HMPIETR Gujarat (1985-1990); CBSE-CIEFL Project (1993-95); and the Modular Curriculum using CBCE 2000 onwards. CIEFL took the initiative to adopt the cafeteria model for students pursuing their master's degree in English Language Studies. The curriculum and evaluation practices have undergone several changes and the courses are on offer to date. Researches in each of these areas have taken place in various universities and academic institutes across the country.

2. The second area I have identified relates to theoretical inputs. For a long time ELT was not considered as a discipline and courses were not offered in ELT. For e.g. M A (ELT) programmes were not recognized, while M A Linguistics was considered a respectable degree. ELT formed a small part of Grammar unit/paper or one question in Linguistics unit/paper had some focus on language teaching. With works of scholars like W F Mackey, Halliday and McIntosh becoming available, it was possible to convince the academicians for the need to establish separate departments to teach ELT units/papers. The contributions to theoretical perspectives from India has not been much, however, one needs to remember with gratitude the efforts put in by NS Prabhu in formulating the principles of Communicational Approach to Language Teaching and

his efforts in developing tasks for teaching English differently. Another major contribution has come from Kumar Vadivelu Beyond Methods.

Research scholars have looked at the contributions from these two scholars in a variety of situations and established their success and suggested some modifications to suit local contexts. It is worthwhile to remember what David Carver said when he was working with the West Bengal Textbook Board Project. He coined two acronyms COST and TENOR. Both are significant in the Indian context and reflect on accepting the theoretical propositions blindly. COST stands for Communication Oriented Structural Teaching. He discovered that teachers in Indian schools were comfortable with the use of Structural Approach. To wean them away completely from such practices, and forcing them to adopt new ways seemed unreasonable if not impossible. He therefore devised certain strategies of modifying materials and strategies whereby the teachers could gradually adopt themselves to using communicative tasks in the classroom. The exercises designed by him can be found in course books produced at that time called *Learning English*. Exactly similar exercises have been developed by other scholars pursuing research in their attempt to make the prescribed textbooks to improve their teachability. The second acronym TENOR was coined by him, when he discovered that several researches in the area of ESP largely dealt with nitpicking rather than focus on content and language development. TENOR stands for Teaching English for No Obvious Reason. His stand was that, we first need to develop general proficiency in English. Once, a learner has a good grasp of the language, using English for

specific or special purpose becomes a matter of adaptation. This statement of his is axiomatic and hence can be accepted as a theory.

3. The third major area of research which is popular among the Indian scholars has a focus on Second Language Acquisition. Interest in this area picked after 1985 a little after Rod Ellis published his book with the same title. The situation seemed to be extremely conducive to the Indian situation, and the multilingual context created an excellent laboratory like situation for conducting research. Earlier to this period, most research focussed on contrastive analysis and non-contrastive approaches to language teaching. One major contribution of research in SLA has made is seen in giving the mother tongue its due respect. Teachers began to understand that all languages are learnt alike and they behave alike. Taking support from mother tongue while learning a new language does not damage either of the languages.

Of late, research in SLA has a focus on levels of task complexity leading to learning problems and using mother tongue support in completing the tasks. Further, attempts are also being made to study the interface as it exists between cognition and psycholinguistics. The application of such research is seen in teaching vocabulary in terms of word chunking and further leading to reading comprehension using eye-tracking movements. Translanguaging is another off shoot of SLA research where learners are allowed to express their ideas in mother tongue and subsequently translate the same into English with peer help. This is particularly evident while teaching writing employing group work

strategies and using Think Aloud protocol for data elicitation.

Contributions from scholars like Ajit Mohanty and Minoti Panda in this context are noteworthy. Both scholars have shown genuine concern in the multilingual structure of the Indian academic set up. Their main focus has been on language conservation along with language development.

4. A recent phenomenon in research deals with Continuing Professional Development which is an offshoot of teacher education strategies. Like it took time to recognize ELT as a discipline, it took longer time to recognize teaching as a profession. Reasons given for not considering teaching as a profession were far too dubious. However, of late, adequate recognition is received and teaching is not only a respectable job, but also a much sought after job.

It is necessary to thank a person like Tony Wright for instilling this sense of professionalism in us. In his book *Roles of Teachers and Learners*, he has elucidated the number of roles a teacher needs to play in the life of a learner and the society at large. Other things being equal, this lends a sense of responsibility and respectability to the teacher. The book tacitly advocates the traits that need to be developed among student teachers during the course of teacher education. Such qualities in teachers makes them real professionals. This concept has been explained and the need for CPD established by scholars likes Rod Bolitho and others. A group of teachers from India have also worked in this area and some SIGs and TDGs are established across the country. NELTA here is a case in point.

Research in the area is not scant either. The latest research in the area dealt with using ICT strategies to develop reflection among pre-service student teachers and the work has received good appreciation.

5. Finally, I would like to talk about a few developments that have taken place in the field of ICT. ICT is today a buzzword and almost seen as panacea for all ills in our society – including teaching. Efforts to introduce computers in language teaching began in the year 1985 when the systems worked on DoS environment with 32/64 MB rams. Computers were largely untouchable by ordinary mortals, and one was required to undergo special training programme to use a computer. NCERT, a premier institute established by the government of India to promote school curriculum and also offer quality teacher training was harnessed to train master trainers. The training of five day duration provided the participants with adequate knowledge to use computer for creating a file, saving it and print the document when needed. The pedagogy part was not developed though the entire programme was called CLASS – Computer Literacy And School Studies. However, this programme was withdrawn in favour of ‘Operation Blackboard’ for political reasons. The contesting party then thought blackboards can fetch more votes than computers.

DoS environment helped develop some language exercise using BASIC language for teaching grammar and vocabulary. Some initial exercises in reading comprehension were also developed, but these were highly behaviouristic. They facilitated excellent pattern practice. With the ushering in of the Windows

environment, several manipulations could be brought about in the use of computers and for the first time the ability of the computer to think algorithmically was exploited to check spelling and grammar rules. Authoring facility, which helped in building interactive exercises were introduced, and attempts were made to teach writing. However, this was limited to organizing sentences in a jumbled paragraph. Several aspects of discourse that are crucial to good writing could not be captured.

With further developments in computer programming and the invention of new languages computers were given the ability to think. This is largely realised in harnessing Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing. Developing writing skills with inputs from discourse became a possibility. Another major impact of this was using computers for translation of texts from one language into another.

Computers also facilitated storing dictionaries and other reference materials in soft forms. Soft copies of dictionaries became popular and the added advantage was the inclusion of exercises which are all interactive. The latest edition of ALD with its *i-writer* is a good example of this. A large number of researchers are looking at ICT facilities in its various manifestations and their applications for teaching in schools. The use of software has extended beyond computers and filtered down to mobile phones. There are instances of research in the area of MALL though it is in its nascent stage.

It is necessary to mention the phenomenal contribution made by Paul Nation to ICT. He has developed software to test the vocabulary size of the test taker. He has also developed strategies by which a text can be analysed for its word count, sort it into types and tokens, and also provide concordances for any word as it is used in the text. This provides for greater understanding of the word, and a better strategy to develop ones vocabulary.

Research in ICT is fairly popular among the research scholars in India. Of late, several scholars have taken up work on using ICT intervention for creating tests, evaluate them, analyse the scores and build data bases for future use. Attempts are also made to use ICT for Dynamic Evaluation by offering online tests and allowing the test taker to stay in touch with the administrator throughout the period of test. But this is still in a nascent stage.

Conclusion:

The present article takes a look at the nature of research that has taken place to date. What does language teaching research hold for us tomorrow? The answer to this question is not simple. With ICT playing a major role and with the ushering in of Artificial Intelligence (AI), we may move towards creating learning capsules with narrowly specific objectives. These capsules can be administered online or may be through some other process yet to be discovered. This ushers in a new journey for both the teachers and teacher educators with differently defined roles.

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