

### **Interview with Dr. N.S. Prabhu**

by *Alan Maley*

A.M. Well Prabhu, it's very nice of you to agree to give this interview to 'The Teacher Trainer' and nice to have you back in Cambridge.

N.S.P. Thank you.

A.M. Can I ask you, what have been the most significant events in your own teaching life?

N.S.P. Early in my ELT career, I stumbled on Harold Palmer's "Principles of Language Study". It's a very small book. I really was greatly moved by what I thought was a pedagogic sense of intuition and excitement in that book. It's a book I've read again and again since then. The other thing was Chomsky's "Syntactic Structures". It's equally small! These two books had a great influence on me. In a way, I've been trying to make sense of language teaching in a way that is in harmony with those two views. Other than that, it's been actual teacher training that I have learnt a great deal from. And from 1979-1984, every day teaching on the Bangalore project was a real stimulus to thinking.

A.M. From my own knowledge of you, I know that trying out ideas on people and getting a response, even if it's disagreement has always been very important to you.

N.S.P. Yes, I see professional progress in those terms. I think that's the source of growth for the profession; the growth of ideas in different people and the development of these together, the influencing of one another, gradually, imperceptibly.

A.M. If we can just pass on to the "Bangalore Project" as it's popularly known. What would you say were the defining features of that project? What made it different from other classroom research projects (of which admittedly there had been very few until then)?

N.S.P. I think it came, at least in Southern India, at a time when there was a wearing off of people's belief in the structural approach. There was a kind of psychological readiness. In my own mind, the idea that grammatical competence might best be provided through a preoccupation with meaning took shape suddenly as a result of earlier tentative thinking. I saw it as taking Harold Palmer's thinking a step further.

Because of the psychological readiness, a few people in the project said, "Why don't we go ahead and do it in the classroom?" And also it seemed a good way of stimulating professional discussion in the light of actual teaching and evidence about teaching made available to people – rather than going on with seminars etc. So, it was one way of getting professional discussion going and making it more meaningful.

A.M. Was it ever your feeling that the pilot project could be generalised to national or state level?

N.S.P. I suppose when we started I would have said "Yes" but I'd also have said that we wanted to work on it for a while before we could say it was something that deserved to be done on a larger scale. And indeed, within the first year it became clear that the model (of piloting followed by large scale implementation) wasn't going to do justice to the project. It was thought best to influence teachers and then teaching gradually.

A.M. I know you've always been somewhat sceptical of large-scale implementation of other people's ideas, partly because the originators' understanding and experience aren't there.

N.S.P. Yes, and in fact the implementation of the structural approach in India shows that. It became a fixed set of procedures which teachers carried out with no sense of involvement, and in some cases actually with a sense of resentment. I can't think of that kind of teaching being beneficial to learning, whatever the method.

A.M. Could we pass on to your present work in Singapore at the National University? Are you doing any work there similar to the work in South India?

N.S.P. Not really. I don't think it would be easy at all in Singapore. First of all the education system is much more effectively controlled than in India. Secondly, wanting to try out a new method would imply that the methods already being followed in the schools are less than good. In Singapore, there are these sensibilities. Being an expatriate I don't think I'll be able to attempt anything like trying out a new method. Probably there'd be more controversy than productive work. So my teaching is confined to Post Graduate Courses, electives in Applied Linguistics for students majoring in English on Honours or M.A. courses.

A.M. But you do still have a number of things that concern you deeply about the processes of language learning and training teachers?

N.S.P. I'm thinking more and more about what it means for a teacher to work with some understanding of how the teaching leads to learning, with some concept that has credibility to the teacher himself. Also, about what it means for the teacher to be influenced by other concepts and how ideas change. To the extent that we can understand this, we can look for ways to clarify and facilitate the process.



What I want to do when I get back to India is keep an open house for any teacher who wants to walk in and talk about teaching. It doesn't matter if it's only two or four teachers. I want to try to get the teachers to state on paper what they've said. Trying to write, clarifies things. It straightens one's thinking. It reveals and develops new thoughts. This is the 'process writing' philosophy. So, a small number of teachers trying to state their perceptions, and then other teachers trying to state their perceptions but taking in the perceptions of the first group - this can not only help those teachers immediately but it can also reveal to us some of the processes by which teachers' perceptions work and form. Perhaps there's room for something like a journal – not in the sense of learned articles – but of teachers' statements circulated to other interested teachers.

A.M. In a sort of networking mode?

N.S.P. Yes.

A.M. What you've been talking about, you've given a label to, namely "a sense of plausibility"?

N.S.P. Yes. I think in teaching, as in any human interaction activity, one needs to work with some understanding, some concept of what is going on. In teaching,..... How the act of teaching might lead to the act of learning. That conceptualisation of intentions and effects and so on is "a sense of plausibility". I call it that because I don't want to make any claims about it's being the truth. For that teacher however, it is the truth! There is a very real sense in which our understanding of phenomenon at any one time is the truth for us.

There is also in teaching, as in other recurrent interactions, a need for routinisation. But if the job becomes over-routinised, there is no sense of plausibility engaged. The "sense of plausibility" gets buried or frozen or ossified. From that point of view, the aim of professional activity should be to keep the teacher's sense of plausibility alive and therefore open to influence by the on-going experience of teaching and interaction with other teachers' perceptions and senses of plausibility. I think that is the process of teacher development. There has to be some measure of routinisation but there needs to be some room for something being at stake, some scope for satisfaction and dissatisfaction, so that something is learned from the act of teaching.

A.M. Is there anything you'd like to say about teacher training in connection with the Bangalore Project?

N.S.P. We did surprisingly little teacher training on the project actually. Initially it was a group of about five people who had participated in the seminars and discussions leading to the project. In the first year we tried out different kinds of lessons jointly so they were a part of the evolution of the teaching procedure. About 12 teachers came to the project in subsequent years. Mostly they had attended the Annual Review seminar, got interested and offered to join the project. The seminar gave them some idea of the philosophy, and as for the practice, all they did was watch the teaching of other people in the project for about two weeks, teach a couple of lessons, watched and commented on by one of the existing members of the project and after that they went ahead and taught.

A.M. It seems to be based on a "sitting with Nellie" model. You watch other people doing it, you do it yourself and reflect on what you've done and discuss it.

N.S.P. Yes, and thereafter you learn in the process of doing it yourself. But, these were people who found themselves interested in the project and volunteered, so that possibly makes a difference. There was one teacher, or trainer actually, who was drafted onto the project. He tried for four or five months but I don't think he ever understood what was going on.

A.M. We're doing this interview for 'The Teacher Trainer', a journal which is a little bit along the lines of the newsletter you were mentioning. The aim is an exchange of an informal kind between teacher trainers. Would you have any message for teacher trainers? Any perceptions you'd like to share with them?

N.S.P. I think the problem in teacher training is finding a way of influencing teachers' thinking without seeking to replace their existing perceptions. Teachers ought to be able to interact with ideas from outside and those ideas have to be available to them and, in fact, to be put forcefully so as to give them full value. But how to do this without psychologically intimidating or cowing down teachers or demanding acceptance of the ideas is, I think the problem of teacher training. It's giving value to what teachers think but giving value too to the ideas one puts to teachers.

A.M. Thank you very much. That's very interesting.

Reference

Prabhu, N.S. (1987) Second Language Pedagogy O.U.P.