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# Reflections on language pedagogy

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I spend a lot of my time reading academic publications because I enjoy the clarity with which scholars engage in a detailed study of what they choose to focus on. Their insights help me sharpen my understanding, see a problem from different perspectives, and come up with new questions that deepen my learning. I feel sorry that most Indian educators in full-time teaching jobs hardly get the opportunity to sit down and read journal articles.

Another issue is that of access. Much contemporary research is locked behind paywalls, and one has to be affiliated to a university that subscribes to scholarly publications either in print or digital form. It is quite challenging even for me to find what I am looking for. Sometimes, I have to reach out to as many as three or four friends and acquaintances located at universities to check if they can help me acquire a copy of what I need.

Even if all educators had the privilege of free access to journals, the skills required to decode academic language are not available to all. Most articles use specialized vocabulary that is taught and internalized through higher education in a manner that almost seems like being inducted into a cult with its unique practices that are intelligible only to fellow members. Teachers who spend a large part of their week in classrooms are deprived of the opportunity to engage with theoretical frameworks and research inputs that could benefit their students.

This piece is a humble attempt to bridge the gap between academic scholarship and school teaching, and I hope that there will be more efforts in the same direction. What I offer here is my summary of and reflections on some key ideas put forth by N S Prabhu in his book *Perceptions of Language Pedagogy*, edited by Geetha Durairajan and published by Orient Blackswan in 2019. Prabhu is widely respected for his pioneering work in the field of task-based language teaching through the Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project in the 1990s. It was a five-year experiment in teaching English to children studying with their mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

## Archives

Prabhu's work has drawn a great deal of attention from scholars of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly those who study the interface between the mother tongue and the second language. His new book is a collection of 29 articles written by him over half a century, so they "encapsulate a lifetime of contemplation and articulation on language pedagogy." Many of these assume a readership with a high level of academic training in the field of ELT, so the book may not be a worthwhile investment for English teachers in schools. However, it does contain ideas that would greatly enrich their pedagogical practice. I present here some of those, and also offer questions for you to ponder over.
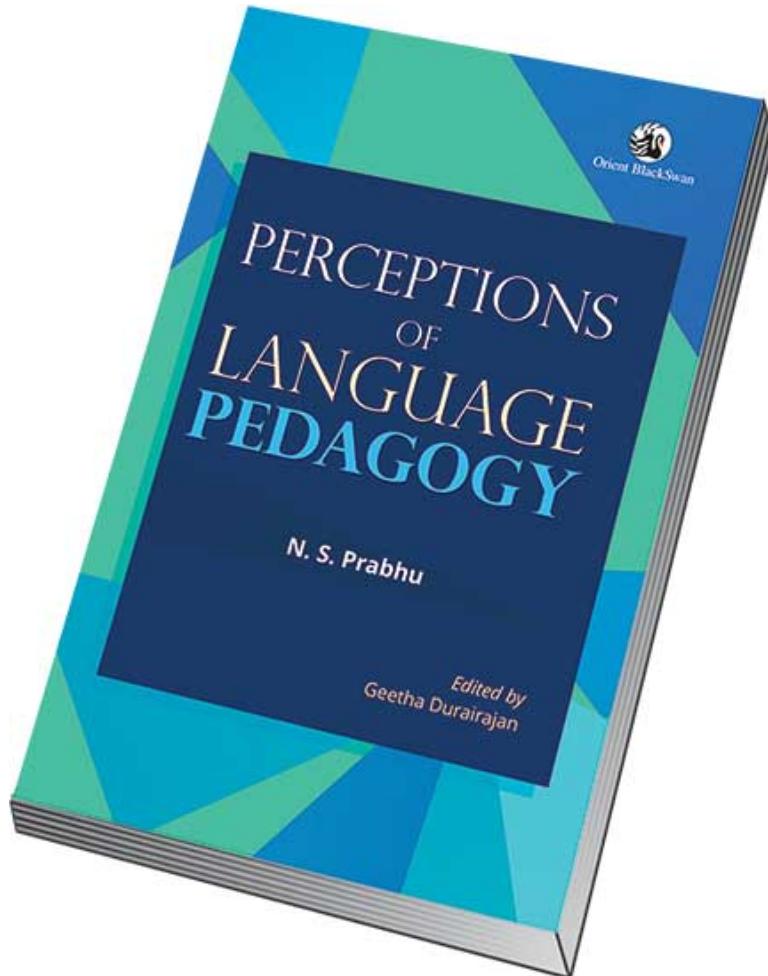
In 'The Teaching of English and Notions about Communication', an article that was first published in 1979, Prabhu writes about the shift from forms of language to a preoccupation with the meaning or the message. This means that, instead of obsessing over 'correctness', teachers are more concerned with ensuring that their students can excel at communication. On a day to day level, they provide opportunities for students to use the language in games, simulations and role plays. Students realize the consequences of their errors during the process of fulfilling these communicative tasks. This is a major departure from the earlier emphasis on error prevention.

Prabhu does not undermine the importance of the grammatical system of a language while talking about developing communication skills. He believes that an inadequate knowledge of grammar could seriously limit the capacity of students to communicate. Perhaps what is required then is not a complete break from teaching grammatical structures in the classroom but doing that only when it helps students communicate more effectively. What do you think? It seems to me that a one-size-fits-all strategy is not as helpful as one that is responsive to the needs of a particular group of students.

How does this tension between accuracy and fluency play out in your own classroom? Is your approach guided by intuition honed through years of experience, or by the expectations of your educational board or school management or the textbook you use? Do students in your classroom have avenues to talk about how they would like to learn, and the methods that they might find most beneficial? My intention is to support you in identifying the links between your beliefs and practices in relation to language pedagogy, not to prescribe an ideal method or to convince you that Prabhu's word is the ultimate authority.

It is useful to consider his definition of 'teaching', which appears in an article titled 'Materials as Support; Materials as Constraint' that was first published in 1989. He writes, "Teaching is a translation of syllabus intentions into classroom events, and the operation involved can be thought to consist of two stages." Prabhu calls the first stage "materials development," and it includes "the selection of appropriate language samples and cognitive content, the designing and construction of useful activities or exercises for learners to attempt, and the sequencing or cyclic arrangement of such activities so as to fit them into lesson units, on the one hand, and facilitate cumulative learning on the other." The second stage is called "classroom teaching," and it involves "the planning and carrying out of actual classroom procedures which enable learners to benefit from those materials."

How would you define teaching? Does Prabhu's explanation resonate with your own experience as a teacher? Which of the two stages take up more of your time and energy? There are schools that hardly involve the classroom teacher in materials development. The teacher is explicitly instructed not to venture beyond the textbook. In other schools, the textbook is regarded as the main resource but the classroom teacher is expected to supplement it with other print, audio-visual and digital resources. And there are schools that urge classroom teachers to take full responsibility for materials development in accordance with a set of curricular goals or learning outcomes. What is the situation like in your school?

Prabhu is of the opinion that if both stages of the work are performed by the same person, "they are likely to find it too much," and "be forced to make sacrifices on the quality of one or both stages." He recommends division of labour and specialization – a system that leaves teachers "free to concentrate on classroom procedures," and enables "a highly skilled few to provide well-constructed materials to a large number of teachers." This is a common argument employed by policy makers as well as scholars who believe that learning materials must be centralized in order to ensure a certain quality standard across the board regardless of the specific teacher in a given classroom. I have come across experts who speak of teacher-proof materials, assuming that the materials developer has a better understanding of what the students require than the classroom teacher. Do you think this is an assumption anchored in reality? Can someone create contextually relevant learning materials without having met the students? Do materials development and classroom teaching require skill sets that are not offered by the same person?

Prabhu asks us to think a bit more critically about the notion of 'quality' instead of seeing at something that is "preserved when different teachers use the materials in the form in which they are provided," and is "destroyed or diluted when they alter their content or form." According to him, learning does not depend only on the inputs made available to students but also on what students bring to bear on those inputs. Prabhu uses the term 'investment' to describe students' current knowledge of the world and their current language abilities. In his view, learning results from the interaction between input and investment. He suggests that "inputs can achieve quality only by being altered or adjusted by teachers in the light of their perceptions of learners' states," implying that centrally produced materials ought to encourage teachers to exercise their pedagogic judgment.

How do you feel about this? Does it sound like additional work? Is it scary? Are you in agreement with what Prabhu is proposing here? While concluding the article, he mentions that he is not doubting the expertise of professionals who work exclusively on materials development or assuming that all classroom teachers are able to make sound judgments and provide responsive inputs. He clarifies, "The professional experience of materials writers is best employed, not in preventing decisions by teachers with low levels of judgment, and thus causing a continuance of those low levels of judgment, but instead, in finding ways of requiring and assisting the exercise of teachers' judgments." That sounds like a tall order but it is certainly worth aiming for.

Another article that caught my attention in Prabhu's new volume is titled 'The Dynamics of the Language Lesson'. It was first published in 1992. Here, he writes about the four different dimensions of a lesson – as a curricular unit, as an implementation of a method, as a social event, and as an arena of human interaction. This conceptual framework is fascinating. The completion of a lesson is supposed to represent the completion of a step in a student's psycholinguistic development, and the reason behind building a curriculum is to present the classroom teacher a pragmatic alternative to the challenging task of following the student's actual development. The conceptual aspect of a lesson as a method of implementation has to do with the theory of how learning takes place, and the operational aspect is concerned with specifying what should be done in a classroom while each teaching unit is in progress.

A lesson can also be understood as "a routinized social event, with roles and role relationships established by tradition and with a ritualistic aspect to the actions performed." Associated with this are certain ideas about the structure of a lesson, the different components and phases, what constitutes legitimate and deviant behaviour, duties and obligations of teachers as well as students. As an arena of human interaction, a lesson is shaped by the perceptions that teachers and students carry about each other. "There are likes and dislikes, loyalties and rivalries, ambitions and desires to dominate, injured pride and harboured grudge, fellow feeling and jealousy, all creating a continual threat to security and self-image, and calling for protective or corrective action," writes Prabhu. According to him, winning approval and saving face are two of the biggest concerns that occupy students and teachers.

If you were to analyze your own lessons using these four dimensions, what would you find? Is there a particular aspect that you struggle with, and wish to dedicate more attention to this year? How do you plan to proceed? I am going to mull over what Prabhu says about conflicts that arise among students when they are assigned work in small groups. This is a common practice in schools as it is believed to provide a sense of safety to students who are overwhelmed with large classes or are simply worried about being bullied by peers or scolded by teachers for making mistakes. Prabhu points out the flaws in this line of thinking, reminding us that there is "a complex play of personalities between learners, involving dominance, rivalry, rebellion, submission or withdrawal, and there isn't a socially established frame of roles and routines for small-group interaction as there is for teacher-fronted activity."

I also agree with him when he says that classroom teachers have a tendency to place a high value on student talk in the classroom, giving the impression that students who prefer to be silent are not fully engaged. Teachers also make special efforts to draw out these students, and end up making them more uncomfortable instead of being a source of encouragement. We need to recognize that contributions can be made in multiple ways, and that it is not always a good idea to push students who feel diffident or anxious. Instead of guessing what they are struggling with, it might be better to see them one on one, get to know them, and ask what they need to feel supported.

Prabhu's new book also features an interview, the language of which is a lot more accessible than the journal articles mentioned before. It has been conducted by the editor of the book, Geetha Durairajan, in collaboration with Deepesh Chandrasekharan. It was first published in 2018, and does an excellent job of getting Prabhu to reflect on his earlier work and stating his most recent thinking on language pedagogy. It appears at the end of the book, and effectively distills the essence of all that has been said before.

Prabhu says, "When children make friends in a linguistically different neighbourhood or find pleasure in listening to stories/viewing cartoons/playing games in a different language, the attraction and enjoyment felt drives the acquisition of the new language. The most favourable circumstance for acquiring a new language, therefore, is a need or desire for knowledge encoded in that language." If you had to take away just one thing from this book, this is it.

What I found disappointing, however, is that the teacher is consistently referred to as 'she', and the student as 'he'. This usage reinforces gender stereotypes at a time when dictionaries have progressed much further, and have begun to recognize the use of 'they' in the singular as well as the plural form. The use of pronouns is not to be dismissed as a matter of political correctness or identity politics. Language constructs meaning, it shapes our worldview, and it influences how we interact with people of various genders.

The author is an educator, writer and researcher. He has an M.Phil. in English Language Education. He conducts workshops with school teachers and students on topics that lie at the intersection of peace education, mental health and queer rights. He can be reached at **chintan.prajnya@gmail.com**.

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