Language and Language Teaching

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Perceptions of Language Pedagogy

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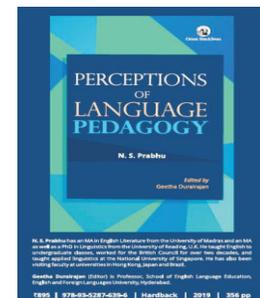
This book by N. S. Prabhu is a "must read" for every L2 teacher, trainee, trainer and specialist. It includes an illuminating discussion on the key issues in language pedagogy, clarification of critical concepts both from the author as well as other specialists in the field, and profound insights into matters of ELT theory and practice. To give an example, the penultimate chapter, which is an interview, elicits in detail the author's latest ideas on language pedagogy, and in the process focuses on some recurring issues in language teaching. Similarly, the last chapter highlights the importance of the personal theory of the teachers to their practice, what the author calls "a teacher's sense of plausibility". In addition, there are several chapters which clarify key concepts and ideas of some of the foremost methodologists. What could be of even more value to the reader is that there is one whole chapter devoted to exploring the question of why there is no best method that can work in all contexts, countries and cultures.

Above all, the book sparkles with a number of the author's original thoughts on language pedagogy, which deserve careful study by teachers and specialists. An added attraction of the book is the author's brilliant use of similes, which not only adorn the statements they occur in, but also make the contents more accessible to the reader.

The First Chapter and its Promise

Titled "Rational Approach to English Teaching", this chapter presents a bold, insightful and well-argued critique of the UGC's Report of the English Review Committee. This report was the outcome of a study headed by one of the most reputable tertiary level scholars Professor C. S. Banerjee. Right at the outset, the author asserts that ELT in India of the time presented an anomalous situation: "it no longer serves the purpose which it was once designed to serve . . ." The maturity, erudition, courage of conviction, analytical skills and incisiveness that are evident in this chapter leave their mark on most of the other chapters in the book, especially the chapters titled "Alternative Strategies in Educational Reform", "Procedural Syllabuses", "Materials as Support; Materials as Constraints", "Acquisition Through Comprehension: Three Procedures", "Communicative Language Teaching: Three Perceptions", and "Teaching is at Most Hoping for the Best".

Concepts Explored

One of the key features of the book is that it offers readers access to ideas and concepts that would have otherwise remained unnoticed. To elaborate a bit more on this, although Harold Palmer, one of the first Applied Linguists, published his idea of unconscious acquisition as opposed to the conscious learning of "ergons" as early as 1922, his first reviewers, as well as other scholars, overlooked these fundamental notions. Prabhu has touched upon them in Chapter 6.

Similarly, as early as 1985, Halliday propounded the idea of the "Mathetic Function" and explained how of the four skills, writing performs this extraordinarily sophisticated function. Equally valuable ideas of ELT's best-known names such as Allwright, Brumfit, Krashen, Newmark, and Widdowson, published in almost equally obscure places would also have passed unnoticed but for the book under review. For example, the concept of "plausibility" was explored in an obscure journal titled Teachers College Record as early as 1983. It was, however, Prabhu's genius that stretched it to mean "personal theory of our professional practice"; it can now be accessed in the last chapter of the book. The concept has been so brilliantly elaborated upon that it would not be an exaggeration to say that ELT's technical lexicon would have remained the poorer but for the clarity of the explanation given in this book.

Original Ideas

The most striking example of the author's originality is his syllabus design called Procedural Syllabus, extensively treated in Chapter 4. What is so unique about this as a syllabus? The syllabi of the Structural Approach consists of grammatical structures, vocabulary items, phonemes and intonations. Similarly, the syllabi of CLT comprises notions and functions. In total contrast to this, the syllabus of the "Procedural Syllabus" consists of problem-solving activities.

To give another example of his originality, insightfully, Prabhu theorizes that language learning takes place when learners try to comprehend the given text, rather than when they mechanically repeat isolated grammatical structures or try to memorize the structures or dialogues using repetition. Prabhu believes that a text should be difficult enough to challenge the learners to put in more effort without being too difficult. This concept is very close to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

Equally creatively, in Chapter 3, the author proposes that educational reform can be

conceived in two contrastive ways: direct contact strategy and remote-control strategy. He claims that while the former is idealistic and is bound to fail repeatedly, the latter is pragmatic and is almost always rewarded with success. This is another example of the finer distinctions that the author of the book makes between several concepts and practices, which is very likely to help both teachers and specialists develop a nuanced approach to ELT-related issues.

In Chapter 18, Halliday's notion of "mathetic function" is applied in a very original manner to English as a "world language". To put it briefly, different nations can claim their mastery over English in performing the mathetic function in preference to the pragmatic function. In other words, their higher status as users of English as a world language will consist more in using English to learn, think and make sense of reality, rather "than doing things one wants to do, getting things one wants to have, or making others do things for one".

Enlightening Clarifications

CLT took two long decades to develop. The contributors to its development were spread across America, Britain, and Canada. Besides, it developed thanks to not only experts in L2 pedagogy, but also leaders in linguistics and applied linguistics. Therefore, the readers of the book under review may not find CLT-related issues such as the following easy to assimilate: What exactly is meant by "communicative"? What are the three perceptions of CLT? Is the long-held belief in the value of practising grammatical structures unquestionable? Luckily, Chapters 5, 17 and 26 of the book under review come to their rescue.

Some Common ELT Terms Viewed in Uncommon Ways

"Eclectic" is a very useful word for many ELT practitioners to refer to their personal classroom practices. This is because it is not always easy to taxonomically and accurately name the methodology they use in their day-to-day practice. Also, "eclectic" can sometimes have a disparaging side to its meaning as in Prabhu's 1987 book, Second Language Pedagogy. Fortunately, in Chapter 11 of this book, the term "eclectic" gets a detailed treatment and a fair hearing.

Even highly erudite scholars occasionally use the word "ideology" in a negative sense, when contrasting it with "ideation". However, in the chapter titled. "Ideation and Ideology", Prabhu clarifies that both terms refer to intellectual activities and that neither of them has a pejorative sense. Clarifying them further, the author explains, "While 'ideation' is concerned with understanding the world, 'ideology' is concerned with changing the world for the better".

To "materials", one of the most frequently used term in L2 pedagogy, this book devotes two chapters. While the author discusses critical issues concerned with producing and prescribing materials, he also discusses in ingeniously classificatory ways the four types of materials: "course materials", "source materials", "meta-materials", and "semi-materials".

The commonest terms in L2 teaching that are treated in an extraordinary way in the book are "teaching" and "learning" themselves. In the chapter titled "Teaching is at Most hoping for the Best", the author shows in a brilliant manner, how while "buying" is the obverse of

"selling", learning is not the obverse of teaching.

A Stylistic Challenge

Readers who are not used to the highly scholarly style of this book may find it a bit too erudite and heavy in parts. However, they will be richly rewarded if they adapt their reading strategy by re-reading those parts, and by using encyclopaedic dictionaries when encountering uncommon words such as "mathetic".

Chapters Some Readers Might Want to Skip

As most readers of this book are likely to be ELT professionals, and not linguists, applied linguists, dialectologists, or university level curriculum constructors, the following chapters might be of low topical interest: "Descriptive and Prescriptive Approaches to Norms of English in Singapore", "English Language as a University Discipline", "The Appropriation of ELT", and "Misapplied Linguistics".

A Chapter of Special Interest

Originally a lecture delivered at H M Patel Institute of English Training & Research (Gujarat), Chapter 19 titled" Attempting Educational Change" deals with two themes—famous large-scale reforms such as the Madras Snowball; and well-known ELT approaches, starting from the Grammar Translation Method and ending with Prabhu's own Communicational Teaching Project. Obviously, this chapter will be of special interest to most L2 trainees and their trainers.