An Interview with K.N. Anandan

Tasneem Shahnaaz and Veena Kapur speak to K.N. Anandan who is a Chomskyan linguist turned ELT practitioner, and has conceptualized Discourse Oriented Pedagogy for Kerala, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh as part of revising the curricula in these states. He has authored several books and journal articles on second language pedagogy. He conceived the Second Language Acquisition Programme (SLAP) which shifted the focus from the skill-based and fragmentary teaching of structures and vocabulary to a more holistic approach, giving primacy to language acquisition. He won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Endowment Award in 2006 for his book *Chomskyan Revolution in Linguistics*. His second book *Tuition to Intuition* introduces his vision of second language pedagogy. He can be reached at anandan.kn@gmail.com

Tansneem Shahnaaz (TS): Dr. Anandan, thank you for agreeing to this interview. You have been associated with the teaching of English at the grassroots level for more than three decades and have developed a language pedagogy. Could you tell us in brief about this pedagogy and how it would address the issue of using the learners’ and the community’s rich linguistic resources in the teaching and learning of English?

K.N. Anandan (KNA): The language pedagogy I have developed is popularly known as Discourse Oriented Pedagogy (DOP) in the states of Kerala, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh ever since its incorporation into the curricula of these states. The DOP-oriented pedagogical models envisage a shift from transmitting information to transacting experience. Implicitly, this is a shift from the behavioural to the constructivist paradigm. The pedagogy leverages the innateness of human beings and
evolves various means to access innate, tacit knowledge.

DOP is not just another method for teaching English and other languages; it is a cover term for various processes and protocols that are subject-specific, theme-specific, level-specific, and learner-specific. It problematizes all skills-based methods of language teaching and targets the human mind itself rather than the products of the mind. It has basically to do with facilitating the process of constructing various systems of knowledge about language and core subjects.

DOP explores the pedagogical implications of the learning vs. acquisition dichotomy and the related hypotheses put forward by Krashen. It underscores the notion of comprehensible input and seeks to extend it further by insisting on discourse-level input and output. This has to be so because language exists only as discourses and not as discrete sounds, words, and sentences. Some of the discourses targeted are: Conversations, Descriptions, Rhymes /Songs /Poems, Narratives, Diary, Letter, Notice, Essay, Drama, Choreography, Report, Compeering, Slogans, Review, Speech, etc. Various levels of these discourses are defined in terms of specific features. For example, a beginner’s conversation may contain an initiation and a response, or a few sequences of these, but at higher levels, the conversations will become more refined both structurally and stylistically. This is true of the other discourses as well which implies that the traditional notion of structural gradation will have to be replaced with that of discourse gradation.

Veena Kapur (VK): How does your pedagogical approach address the multilingual approach advocated by NCF 2005 and mother tongue-based education advocated by NEP 2020?

KNA: All learners are in a sense, multilingual. Multilingualism is not a barrier but a conducive factor that can foster language acquisition. DOP tackles the multilingual situation by invoking code-switching as a pedagogic tool. Most teachers opt for extensively translating the text into the mother tongue to make input comprehensible. Another strategy they use is code-mixing; the syntax of the mother tongue is taken as the base, and some words from English are incorporated into the sentence frame. Probably, they are unaware of the fact that the comprehension of a given text is a derivative process that takes place in the mind of the individual due to the interplay of various contributive factors such as the context of discourse, its theme, the communicational expectancy triggered in the learner’s mind, familiarity with the words, and the need
to understand the text.

In DOP, the facilitator switches between L1 and L2; the switch-over takes place in the domain of discourse, not at the sentence level. For example, in a storytelling activity, code-switching is manipulated in such a way that the ideas could be generated in the minds of the learners as mental texts. Code-switching works out beautifully when the facilitator addresses the perceptual thinking of the learners.

**TS:** Does your pedagogical approach incorporate critical thinking skills which have become imperative for 21st-century learners?

**KNA:** The content-based approach forces students to memorize information and reproduce it. It presents packaged “knowledge” that is assumed to be complete, objective, and easily transferable; the world is depicted as static and unchangeable. In this approach, textbooks, syllabus, curriculum, and examination become hegemonial tools of oppression that dehumanize the learners and make them passive recipients of the lessons “delivered” to them.

Take for example, how non-critical pedagogy approaches a reading passage. The teaching activity comprises pre-teaching vocabulary, reading aloud by the teacher, and giving explanations. This is followed by asking a set of questions that check comprehension. The objective is to help the learners understand the text, memorize, and reproduce it. Different types of vocabulary and grammar exercises are given as practice materials that are considered essential for language development.

The DOP paradigm embraces critical thinking at all levels of classroom transactions and creates an entirely different learning environment. The interaction is carried out based on visuals that depict social issues. This helps to generate ideas related to the perceptions of the learners, their understanding of the world around and the social context in which they live. This serves as a rich source of input that helps the learners personalize and localize the information and thereby, develop constructs. Learners work individually, and in collaboration with their peers.

The learning activities naturally get extended to the social life beyond the walls of the classroom. Through the process, the students develop a critical perspective on their own identity in the world they live in. Students respond to different social issues by constructing various genres of oral and written discourses. This enables students to develop a
more accurate perception of their experiences and challenge oppressive social conditions.

VK: How far do you think, the pedagogic models that you talk of, can suppress the negative impact of language imperialism?

KNA: The 20th century had witnessed the rise and fall of a variety of language teaching approaches and methods starting from the Grammar-Translation method and ending with the Communicative Language Teaching. It is a known fact that methods become vehicles of linguistic imperialism targeting the disempowered. Therefore, we have to move away from the era of methods to what Kumaravadivelu has named the post-methods era, which is characterized by various efforts to reconstruct the relationship between theories and practices. This implies a shift from a positivist and product-oriented perspective to a constructivist and process-oriented one.

However, most teachers are not aware of this condition; nor are they bothered about it. Even after the emergence of the communicative language teaching of the 1960s and its several variants that emerged later, the poor performance standards of students in English remain a stark reality. Various studies provide us ample evidence that testifies to the failure of CLT in bringing about qualitative changes in the ELT classrooms.

ELT as is being practised today can only accelerate the spread of linguistic imperialism as is evident from several cases. Starting parallel English medium divisions and English medium schools in the government sector; the mushrooming of English medium schools in the private sector; teaching English from pre-primary classes onwards, entrusting agencies such as the British Council for training teachers in the country, the insistence on “correct” pronunciation as per the norms of Standard English; the fragmentary and skill-based approach as is reflected in language proficiency courses, and above all, the media propaganda on the excellence of private schools as against the poor performance of students in the government schools are all cases that instantiate the spread. All these distinct cases reflect what Phillipson has enlisted as the tenets of linguistic imperialism namely, teaching English monolingually, claiming the native speaker of English as the ideal teacher, introducing English starting from nursery classes onwards, and increasing the quantum of English teaching, and the aversion to teaching other languages.
From the perspective of critical ELT, the cases I have cited here have implications for designing teacher empowerment programmes. The global marketing of Standard English depends upon propagating the tenets of linguistic imperialism. Consequently, decisions will have to be taken on several matters such as the kind of English to be taught, the content and the nature of materials, the methods to be used, and so on. In addition to these, propaganda mechanisms and agencies would become necessary to ensure that only those materials, methods, and human resources, that are in tune with these decisions will get marketed.

As a result of the vicious spread of linguistic imperialism, a situation has emerged where a single global CLT package gets projected as what is needed for all learners and teachers across the world. It is never critically examined whether the products designed under the umbrella of Standard English will suffice to meet the actual needs of everyone. This leads to the demolishing of the linguistic and cultural identities of the native speakers of the non-Standard varieties of English. The problem will be much more intense for the native speakers of other languages who are compelled to learn the nuances of Standard English. This is nothing but linguistic imperialism which DOP has been trying to resist.

**TS:** In the Indian context, how useful is the CLIL approach/methodology and what are the changes required in teacher training programmes to prepare language and subject matter teachers for CLIL teaching?

**KNA:** Let us put CLIL into a critical perspective. The theoretical framework as proposed in CLIL integrates the 4Cs namely, content, communication, cognition, and culture. It has been pointed out that effective CLIL takes place through 5 dimensions: progression in knowledge, skills, and understanding of content, engagement in higher-order cognitive processing, interaction in the communicative context, development of appropriate communication skills, and acquisition of intercultural awareness.

As an immersion programme CLIL insists that the input should be authentic, meaningful, and challenging. The expected output includes cross-cultural communication with fluency, accuracy, and complexity, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Scaffolded tasks that focus on higher-order thinking skills, student interaction, authentic communication, and subject-specific study skills are suggested for materializing the outcome. The classes can be taught by either a subject teacher or a language teacher.
Subject teachers should have command over the content as well as the target language to be successful in their teaching.

Both DOP and CLIL endorse ideas such as comprehensible input, multilingualism, collaboration, and scaffolding. As language cuts across all subjects, integrating content with language is logically as well as pedagogically legitimate. Nevertheless, DOP differs from CLIL in terms of a few conceptual underpinnings and the protocols and processes it proposes to facilitate knowledge construction cutting across language and content.

DOP does not endorse some of the most commonly used CLIL strategies such as repetition or direct translation, explicit teaching of grammatical structures, and using visuals and props for making input comprehensible. In DOP, visuals and props are triggers for perceptual thinking that usher the learners to develop constructs. The discourses written by the learners individually and in groups will be refined through a process of editing that eliminates various errors in the domains of syntax and morphology and those related to writing conventions. This ensures greater proficiency in the targeted language.

The proponents of CLIL have attempted to theoretically resolve the tension between language and content but the tension still prevails. This has to do with the imbalance between BICS and CALP. There is a distinct lack of clarity in all the literature as to how BICS and CALP may be best combined. CLIL falls in line with other methods of the 20th century, including the CLT. It is incapable of materializing a total switch over to the constructivist paradigm. However, this point has not been widely recognized.

**VK:** The year 2020 represents a watershed year in world history. The world has experienced the uncertainty of the pandemic in varying ways and contexts. We would like to know your views on the challenges thrown up by the pandemic in school and higher education in a developing post-colonial country like ours.

**KNA:** The Covid-19 pandemic situation demanded a switch over to online classes. Though uncertainty still prevails, the state governments, private institutions, non-governmental organizations, and individuals have positively responded to the situation by producing and uploading online lessons for all subjects and classes. At this juncture, it is necessary to critically review the effectiveness of the online classes in terms of...
access, coverage, quality, and sustainability and plan for the future course of action involving all stakeholders.

Consider access and coverage. We know that all students on rolls do not have access to online classes due to a lack of computers or smartphones and internet connectivity at home. SCERTs and IT-departments of the states have partially resolved this issue by airing online lessons using their TV channels or the channels they hired. But we have no data as to whether all students have even TV at home or have watched the online classes on TV. We are also not sure whether lessons in all subjects and of all grades have been telecasted. Several teachers have created WhatsApp groups with parents and uploaded the lessons for the learners. But this has not happened universally.

Regarding quality, the online classes focus on transmitting information using technology. There is hardly any scope for making the classes interactive, and providing space for the learners to construct knowledge in a collaborative environment. Creating digital materials in tune with the constructivist paradigm is a huge challenge that educational systems will have to take up eventually.

Almost the same kind of problems exist for the students of all age groups. The youths are intrinsically motivated to achieve their goals by making use of available resources. But they may not have access to connectivity at home and their parents may not be able to procure the necessary gadgets for them. Governments and NGOs have to collaborate to provide value-oriented quality education to our youths through producing and disseminating MOOCs that take care of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, problem-solving skills, responsible decision-making skills, digital literacy, cultural literacy, and design thinking.

We have to also think about the sustainability of digital teaching and learning. Only very few teachers have been involved in the production of online materials. These materials can create hegemonial structures where those who have the know-how of the production of the materials will hold the power relegating the practising teachers to the periphery. Such a situation is not conducive to empowering teachers as transformative intellectuals who should be able to creatively intervene in the social phenomena and contribute to the welfare of the individuals as well as to the sustainable development of the country.
Capacity building for teachers of all subjects and levels will be needed so that teachers will be able to conceptualize, design, and produce excellent digital materials that address the 21st-century skills needed for both teachers and learners. They will have to understand how to resist the spread of colonialization in the educational sector, visualize a knowledge-based society, and work towards building it. This will be possible only if teachers have the pedagogical acumen to choose the right kind of pedagogy that is disruptive, futuristic, transformative, and innovative.

**TS:** Given the lower access that disadvantaged students have to technology and connectivity, and the greater likelihood that their families are economically impacted by the pandemic, it should be expected that their opportunities to learn were disproportionately diminished compared to their peers with more access and resources and less stressful living conditions. What sort of permanent impact do you see on the learning of the disadvantaged students?

**KNA:** The digital divide had set into our country even before the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some students had much more access to the benefits of technology and internet connectivity, whereas several others did not have these. There has always been a divide between those who have everything and those who have nothing. When the underprivileged families have to struggle for their survival, they may not be able to provide their children with access to technology and the internet. The pandemic has widened the chasm between the privileged and the unprivileged. The negative impact of this on the learning of disadvantaged children will be long-lasting. It should be a collective agenda of the governments and all non-governmental organizations to work out viable ways to bridge this gap.

**VK:** What changes do you envisage in teacher training programmes in the light of online teaching in India, especially in rural sectors where both teachers and students may face a lack of digital resources?

**KNA:** The stakeholders of education, especially teachers have realized that online learning is a value addition but not a replacement for normal schooling; the students cannot be kept away from school for long. We will have to plan for teacher empowerment programmes incorporating the bifurcation of curriculum between the offline mode and the online mode. The pre-requisite for this will be a critical perspective on offline
teaching in general and online teaching in particular. Teachers need to be oriented on the pedagogical implications of the nomenclatures such as the innateness theory, constructivism, multiple intelligences, language acquisition, formative assessment, and critical pedagogy. They will have to explore how best they can use technology to materialize the shift from the teaching paradigm to the constructivist paradigm. The online teaching materials are also to be scrutinized in terms of the efficacy of the learning management systems (LMSs).

**TS:** What future do you see for English in the new and evolving India? Will the English language continue to be an integral part of the social and professional life of Indians?

**KNA:** English will continue to enjoy its status as an integral part of the social professional life of Indians. However, switching the medium of instruction to English and opening more English medium schools will not be the solution. We have to empower learners at all levels with proficiency in English. But this will not be possible unless we liberate the teachers and the learners from the nexus between textbooks and examinations. We have to help the teachers at all levels to evolve as creators of excellent reading materials and digital materials in all the languages they teach including English. Similarly, the learners at all levels will have to be elevated to the level of creative writers who can contribute to producing children’s literature. This is a big challenge but not impossible. This is precisely what DOP has been striving for.

**VK:** Thank you Dr. Anandan for sharing your views with us. We are, indeed, honoured and privileged to have you speak to us.