

Interview

Teaching and Materials Development Over the Years

Padmini Shankar in Conversation with Prof. Paul Gunashekar

Paul Gunashekar taught English, trained teachers of English, and developed instructional materials for English Language Teaching for over forty-three years. He was a Professor in the Department of Materials Development, Testing and Evaluation at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. He retired in 2017. He has authored, co-authored, and edited over two hundred and fifty English teaching books. He has conducted over a thousand teacher-training workshops in India and abroad. He has several research publications, notably the *Directory of ELT Research in India*. He is adviser and Indian English consultant to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

Padmini Shankar (PS): Good morning, sir. Thank you for agreeing to share your vast knowledge and experience in the field of materials development. Could you summarize the notable accomplishments of the Materials Department since its inception at EFLU?

Paul Gunashekar (PG): The Department of Materials Development, Testing and Evaluation is one of the oldest academic divisions of the University. Set up in 1963 as a textbook unit, it has emerged as a premier symbol of the University's success in strengthening the teaching of English in India. Its roll of honour in the last six decades has included eminent ELT specialists and pioneering materials developers like M.L. Tickoo, A.E. Subramanian, P.T. George, V. Sasikumar, K.A. Jayaseelan, Esther Ramani, Sipra Roy Chaudhuri, S.R. Prahlad, Sachi Madhavan, Shyamala Kumaradas, and Meera Srinivas.

The Department's singular achievement has been the establishing

of materials development as a significant area of specialization in English language studies in the country. Its teaching materials have been widely used by national bodies like NCERT, CBSE, the Navodaya Vidyalaya Sangatan, the Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangatan, IGNOU, and state agencies like the AP Board of Secondary Education, the AP Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society, the MP Board of Secondary Education, and the Arunachal Board of Secondary Education. It has also been at the cutting edge of efforts to introduce innovations in curriculum design, methodological practices, proficiency teaching, and testing procedures. Among its notable publications are the *General Series* and *Special Series* English school textbooks (the first indigenous teaching materials developed in India), the two epoch-making *Language Through Literature* volumes, the thoroughly trialled *Stairway Reading Course*, the highly innovative *ENGLISH 400 Reading Cards and Coursebooks*, the socially relevant *CIEFL-APSWREIS Reading Programme*, and the ambitious *CIEFL-UGC Functional English Resource Books*.

PS: What were the major concerns of materials producers and teachers when you joined CIEFL in 1975?

PG: Materials are a reflection of the materials developer's view of what language is and how it is learnt. In the 1950s and 60s language specialists believed that since language is made up of grammatical and lexical items, the items should be taught sequentially, incrementally, and in a graded manner. Accordingly, school materials had to be specially prepared using a previously decided list of structural items and the pedagogic sequence: 'presentation-practice-production'. The two CIE courses *General Series* and *Special Series* (and the Structural Readers developed by Bhandari and Ram at ELTI Allahabad) used this approach. Since the content of structural materials was largely insipid because of the stranglehold of language control, the late 1960s and the 70s saw the emergence of content that was readable and enjoyable. Language control was no longer overtly highlighted. The mid-70s was also beginning to feel the winds of change, at least theoretically, in the form of CLT.

PS: What was the nature and structure of the course in *Materials Production* that was offered by the Department of Materials Production at CIEFL?

PG: The course was designed to help the PGDTE participants look at materials in four ways: 1. materials selection 2. materials simplification 3. materials adaptation 4. materials production.

We did this by helping the participants take a historical perspective on teaching materials, with particular reference to Structural and Communicative materials. In addition to providing them widely acceptable criteria for evaluating teaching materials, we helped them get hands-on experience in developing classroom materials.

PS: What are some of the principles of materials production that need to be followed, and which of them are non-negotiable?

PG: Let me respond to this key question in the form of questions.

- (i) Are the materials founded on a proven approach to language teaching, like CLT or a language-through-literature approach or a conscious blend of different approaches?
- (ii) Do the materials follow sound principles of language teaching, like teaching through meaningful contexts, using pair and group work, deploying role-play and simulation, and establishing a balance between correctness and appropriateness?
- (iii) Do the materials reveal a good understanding of the learners concerned, in terms of their age and learning experience, their needs and wants, their learning styles, and their cultural background?
- (iv) Do the materials offer adequate pedagogic guidance to the teacher, in the form of a teacher's handbook or through pedagogic suggestions built into the materials themselves (a strategy pioneered by Prof. Sasikumar)?
- (v) Do the materials contain illustrations and photographs that are not mere embellishments but aids to a deeper understanding of the content?

For me the above five features are non-negotiable. The following are some desirable qualities:

- (i) Do the materials provide opportunities to learners for periodic self-assessment of learning?
- (ii) Were all stakeholders (like learners, teachers, administrators, and parents) part of the materials development process?
- (iii) Does the price of the materials represent good value for money?
- (iv) Are the materials easy to obtain?
- (v) Have the materials been developed by academics who have expertise and experience in materials production (like Sasikumar and Gunashekar!!)?

PS: Very often schools prescribe or recommend some supplementary materials. Could you explain to us what role such materials play in the language curriculum?

PG: As the word suggests, some materials are a supplement to the main coursebook or textbook. They generally include a supplementary reader or a literature reader, a workbook or a language activity book, a learner's dictionary, audio, video and other electronic materials, and even extensive reading materials.

A supplementary reader is usually an intrinsic component of a materials package. It is intended to provide essential additional reading experience. It can be an anthology of reading texts (often simplified for the primary school) and/or an abridged and simplified novel (for the higher classes). For example, in the late 1980s and 90s in Andhra Pradesh, as supplements to the main Reader (authored by Prof. Sasikumar) for English medium schools, we had an anthology of prose texts (edited by the late Prof. Desai) as well as my simplified version of Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Some schools recommend a list of stories and books for extensive reading. Such materials are intended to be read at home or in the school library so that learners not only enjoy reading but also adopt a positive attitude to reading and develop the reading habit.

PS: Course designers generally advocate the use of authentic materials. What is the role and place of authentic materials in language learning/teaching?

PG: I would like to offer a clarification about the notion of 'authenticity' using Widdowson's view. Widdowson made an important distinction between 'genuine' and 'authentic'. He said: *I think it is probably better to consider authenticity not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver.* (Widdowson, 1979)¹ That is, a restaurant menu, a rail schedule, or a matrimonial advertisement can be authenticated only if they are used in a textbook for the purposes for which they were originally created. If learners are compelled to answer a series of traditional comprehension questions after reading a menu, for instance, authenticity is not realized. We skim and scan a menu, choose an item or two, place an order, and wait for the food to arrive—nothing more.

We also need to remember that at the lower primary level, in particular,

so-called authentic, ready to use stories are simply not available—good textbook writers have to put on their creative hats and produce engaging narratives in simple English. So created content can also be motivating for learners.

PS: India has moved to NEP 2020. How is the NEP likely to influence the nature and process of materials development?

PG: This is a significant issue. Let's look at the five curricular principles that the National Education Policy 2020 highlights and their likely impact on materials development in India in the next few years:

(i) Learner-Centredness and Learning Centredness:

The Policy strongly reiterates the widely held belief that curriculum development should put learners first, recognizing and building on their knowledge, and responding appropriately to their needs. In other words, the curriculum—and by extension, classroom materials—should reflect a genuine concern for the learner. There is also a clear indication in the Policy that *learner-centredness* should lead to *learning-centredness* where methodologies proposed encourage learners 'to select their learning modes, use one another as learning resources, negotiate learning content with the teacher, and generally take responsibility for the management of their own learning.' (Prabhu, 1985)²

(ii) Creativity and Curiosity

The Policy suggests that learners need to be urged to think, formulate, and express their own ideas, opinions and feelings rather than be coerced into implicitly agreeing with or converging on their teacher's and textbook writer's views all the time. The emphasis therefore will now be on the selection of teaching texts and creation of teaching materials that will promote divergent thinking. Consequently, teachers will be required to create learning spaces where the ideological mantra is *divergence* and not *convergence*.

(iii) Intellectual and Emotional Development:

The Policy believes that the curriculum can enlarge the human capacities of the learners by creating platforms for chiselling their intellectual and affective responses to issues of contemporary concern. Accordingly, language learners will be provided materials to sharpen their thinking and urged to make meaningful responses to issues of national concern chosen from the Constitution—like India's freedom movement; cultural

heritage; egalitarianism; removal of social barriers; and inculcation of a scientific temper. The aim will be to use teaching materials to enable learners to respond to issues of significant concern (like gender inequality and environmental degradation) with critical awareness.

(iv) *Self-Dependence and Autonomy:*

The Policy reflects the prevalent belief that the only certainty in the world today is *changingness* and that the foundation of lifelong learning is the ability to learn how to learn. It argues that learners should be trained from an early age to take responsibility for their own learning so that they can move smoothly from a marked dependence on teachers to autonomous study. In this context, the role of the textbook as well as the teacher will therefore be modified quite substantially.

(v) *Local and Global Identity:*

The Policy strikes a fine balance between a national identity that is firmly rooted in Indianness and global citizenship. It underlines the inherent pride that emanates from acknowledging and appreciating our Indian ethos but cautions us about the risk of cultural isolationism. Kumaravadivelu of San Jose State University captured this conundrum in a lecture he gave at EFLU in 2013: *'One's cultural growth should be rooted in one's own cultural traditions but must also be enriched by an ability and willingness to learn not only about other cultures but also from other cultures. Learning about other cultures merely leads us to cultural literacy. It is learning from other cultures that will lead us to cultural liberty.'*

PS: Most Indian classrooms are multicultural and multilingual. Could you describe the nature of materials that could optimally use the potential of the learner in this teaching-learning context?

PG: This is a matter of considerable importance. I can think of several changes that materials developers would want to introduce:

1. Textual materials are likely to be effective when the emphasis is on integrated teaching, in which institutional subjects are combined into learning areas and taught thematically. For example, a course in English can be used to emphasize environmental concerns at all stages of language education.
2. Materials should give prominence to the knowledge that learners bring to the classroom, that is, *everyday knowledge*, and its relevance to *institutional knowledge* that is developed in an educational setting.

This means that the materials developer's job includes modifying, extending, or elaborating the schemata that learners bring with them to the classroom.

3. Learners should develop a sense of self-worth through classroom materials. Materials should help them experience acceptance, irrespective of the language they speak, the religious convictions they have, and the gender, class, caste, or ethnic group they belong to.
4. The textual content of teaching materials should include topics and themes that reflect cultural sensitivity. Materials should enable learners to recognize the uniqueness of India's multiculturalism and linguistic pluralism.
5. Classroom materials should engage learners affectively as well as cognitively, that is, they should provide opportunities for personalization and extrapolation.
6. There should be a greater emphasis on an *English-across-the-curriculum* approach. The 'horizontal' or 'lateral' links that English establishes across a range of institutional subjects should be strengthened by, for instance, incorporating the salient features of environmental studies in every book of an English course.

PS: Could you speculate about the nature of textbook production in the future in India?

PG: In today's English classroom, we need to constantly remind ourselves of what the educational theorist John Dewey said: *'If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's students, we rob them of tomorrow.'* The current generation of students are tech-savvy since they have grown up texting and using the social media and the Internet. For us teachers therefore, there is an acute need to shift from a position of resistance and trepidation about the use of e-materials to one where we overtly welcome the incorporation of digital technology in the language classroom. Research has also shown that there is a tangible increase in commitment and enthusiasm in students when they have the opportunity to use technology for the creation of authentic learning experiences. Introverted and shy learners appear to be distinctly eager to participate in language learning activities when the materials concerned deploy educational technology. AI will increasingly play a prominent role in the materials produced by both government and private agencies.

PS: What advice would you offer budding enthusiasts in the field of materials production?

PG: Here are a few suggestions:

- Make a checklist before you begin writing materials (which you can modify when your work is underway).
- Make sure what your mandate is: are you producing materials that will be taught in a traditional fashion or are you developing flexible source materials that teachers can use in ways that they consider desirable and feasible?
- Be as sure as you possibly can about who your learner-users are going to be.
- Prepare a set of objectives and methodological principles that you hope will be realized in the materials. (Consult potential teacher-users and learner-users in this regard.)
- Record the sources you are borrowing your reading texts from, and when required obtain copyright permission to use them.
- Remember to trial your materials and use the feedback to chisel them.
- Producing materials can often make you feel lonely, neglected, and frustrated. To keep your sanity, work with a like-minded materials writer.
- Never forget that as a materials producer you will not be noticed—you will remain a backroom person! But you will be an unsung hero.

PS: Thank you very much for putting several issues in perspective, sir. It has always been a pleasure and privilege interacting with you.

Notes

1. Widdowson, H.G. (1979). The authenticity of language data. In H.G. Widdowson (Ed.), *Explorations in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
2. Prabhu, N.S. (1985). 'Coping with the unknown in language pedagogy. In R. Quirk & H.G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literature*. Cambridge University Press.

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