

Book Review

Developing Expertise through Experience

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Are there any similar lines of thought about language learning and teaching among ELT professionals coming from India, Canada, Argentina, Singapore and South Africa? Can English teachers with several decades of experience from Vietnam, Hungary, Greece and Brazil agree on what some of the crucial elements of successful language acquisition might be?

The editor, Alan Maley, decided that these questions are worth exploring despite the vast geographic distances and the widely different contexts in which the contributors to the volume have gained their expertise in the course of their life-long development as teachers, teacher trainers, authors and policy makers. Maley invited 20 ELT practitioners to describe their personal stories and the journey they took to arrive at the values and beliefs that lie at the heart of how they perceive language learning and teaching. He asked the contributors to weave together “the five strands of places, personalities, ideas, publications and critical moments” (p. 8) and align them with Prabhu’s (1987) concept of ‘the teacher’s sense of plausibility’. The result is a rich tapestry of experiences that are often rooted in early childhood and describe the learning of additional languages as a source of immense joy and, on occasion, a fair amount of frustration.

The aim of this review is to pull the threads together and look for some of the crucial ingredients that have made the authors successful (language) learners and, not at all unrelated to that, effective and inspiring teachers. Maley himself provides a list of recurrent themes but, within the confines of a short book review, I can only highlight the ones that stand out and speak to me based on my own experience of more than four decades as a Hungarian English teacher and teacher trainer. First and foremost, the overarching concept, namely, ‘the sense of plausibility’, a term that is understood as “a teacher’s intuition about learning arising from her own experience of teaching” (Prabhu, p. 6) or, in other words, “a personal theory of teaching action based upon ... accumulated experiences – and reflection on them” (Maley, p. 8).

The aspects that I briefly look at are early memories of language learning, the remembrances of teachers that formed us more than we realise or would often care to acknowledge (for me it was my Latin teacher, *Ilus néni*), the relationship between motivation and language acquisition as well as the eclecticism in most authors’ approach to teaching coupled with priority given to lived experiences, bottom-up approaches and systematic reflection.

It is astonishing to find how many of the authors have a vivid memory of their first encounters with languages other than their mother tongue. Fanselow mentions his fascination with Latin, Ferradas the whispers in German or broken Polish at the time of a coup in Argentina, while Kuchah Kuchah mentions Cameroon’s colonial history, a country in which 286 languages are

spoken and where English and French have emerged as the official languages with him preferring Aghem at home and Pidgin English when talking to his friends. Medgyes describes his stern private English teacher in Budapest and the course book they used: Eckersley's *Essential English for Foreign Students*, incidentally, the same book that I was taught from during my teenage years in Delhi Public School in the mid-1960s. The plump and self-conscious young girl that I was did not utter a word in English for the first five months...

Teachers, mentors, critical friends and colleagues have all played instrumental roles in the contributors' lives and learning. Mukundan, who is dyslexic and is, therefore, "wired differently", remembers his wonderful Ms Ong, whose cheerful attitude and creativity has had such a lasting effect on his own teaching and learning philosophies. Underhill's Mr Kelly was able to bring poems to life and transport his students to the jungle when he read 'The Tyger' to them. The role of songs, rhymes, music and stories is one that is highlighted in many of the accounts as genres that provide taste and texture to language.

This leads us to the idea of motivation, which is often interpreted as tapping into curiosity and humans' vital need for communication leading to the creation of an environment that is conducive to learning. Bellarmine believes that motivation and exposure result in acquiring English effectively, in fact, he claims that "Given motivation, exposure is automatic" (p. 18). Wright stresses the effect of "social belonging" and "emotionally charged motivation" (p. 226) as well as the importance of the meaningful use of language by setting up activities and creating the conditions for task-based learning or Content and Language Integrated Learning. Mishan also underlines the need to engage learners in activities that require what Prabhu calls "communicational effort" (p. 115). Closely related to this idea is that comprehensible input can "stimulate response" which, in turn, can "ignite a motivational spark" – a reason to communicate (p. 116). Using language in an authentic manner and employing it as the medium rather than the message is described in Joshua's contribution about a writing activity that resulted in the local municipality upgrading the dusty and dangerous road that led to her school.

Many of the contributors have a clear understanding that theories on language learning should be rooted in classroom practice: "unless theories come from practice, they will not apply to practice" (Farrell quoting Bullough, p. 40) and emphasise how reflection brings about professional growth. No wonder that several authors vouch for what Ferradas calls "a sort of principled eclecticism" (p. 51), which is based on careful needs analysis and the designing of tools that can lead to where the student wants to be. In Spiro's vocabulary, this implies being an 'enlightened eclectic', who does not feel the need "to follow any orthodoxy or fashion" (p. 197) because the aim is to put emphasis on the learner's needs. Underhill goes even further when he contends that a learner-centred focus should move towards a "learning-centred focus" (p. 203) echoed by Farrell's belief in "creating an effective learning environment" (p. 40). This approach does not exclude teachers having "high expectations of their learners" says Shamim (p. 185), resembling Scrivener's demand-high teaching drive.

Underhill agrees with Palmer, who says that "You teach who you are" (p. 204); a variation of this idea is Farrell's statement: "Who I am, is how I teach!" (p. 46). Inspiring teachers have an inclination to project their authentic self to their students and combine it with the other two

fundamental qualities of teachers as defined by Carl Rogers: “non-judgmental acceptance and empathy” (p. 206).

The volume, as could be judged by the snippets above, provides a fascinating insight into the personal development of famous and not-so-famous ELT practitioners. Their stories and perceptions provide us plenty to learn from and reflect on. To me, all are stars that shine and help ignite that spark which creates motivation that leads to exposure and response and sets out our learners on that potentially joyful journey of acquiring a new language.

True to their beliefs that learning is best achieved by doing, each contributor has supplied suggestions for practical activities that can be used to exploit (trainee) teachers’ narratives and experiences both in pre- and in-service training programmes and for Continuing Professional Development.

The edited volume and the accompanying compendium of practical activities are freely downloadable via this link:

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/developing-expertise-through-experience>

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Reference

Maley, A. (Ed.). (2019). *Developing expertise through experience*. British Council.