

Interview

**Jennifer Thomas (JT) talks to
Dr. Yasmeen Lukmani (YK)**

Dr. Yasmeen Lukmani, noted linguist, was Professor and Head of the English Department at the University of Mumbai. She completed her Master's in Applied Linguistics and the Teaching of English from the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1977, she pioneered the "Communication Skills in English" course for the undergraduate programme at the University. She also introduced innovative courses in Applied Linguistics at the B.A. and M.A. levels. She devoted herself to training teachers in how to handle the new language courses, holding more than 30 training programmes. She is currently writing a book on teacher training.

JT: You've had a remarkable journey in the area of Applied Linguistics and ELT. Could you take us through your early days as a student of Applied Linguistics and later as a teacher of ELT in India?

YL: My basic training was in English literature. It was only after my first teaching job at Elphinstone College, Bombay that I became aware of the magnitude of the problem of English language learning in India. I realised that there was little point in teaching English literature when the vast majority of even English literature students didn't know the language sufficiently well. People, it seemed, were in fact desperate to learn the language for a variety of reasons, but they didn't know how to set about doing it. I realized that knowing English was a goal in itself and far more important than being only a hand-maiden to literature.

I was helped in arriving at these views while still at Elphinstone, by Dr. R. B. Patankar, my guru at the University English Department. He was very keen on getting someone to set up linguistically-oriented courses, so I decided to go off and study the field of English Language Teaching.

Luckily, I went to the best place for this field, the University of California at Los Angeles.

One of the major teachers there was Dr. Evelyn Hatch, who is my other guru. I came back full of hope that I could set up something which could make a difference. And very soon I did get into the University, the prime place from where to initiate change. I was offered a post in the Linguistics Department at the University. Through my close association with the University English Department and with the active support of Dr. Patankar and like-minded colleagues like Professor Vispi Balaporia and Dr. Margarida Colaco, we set up an English Language Teaching Cell.

JT: You spoke about how you got into Linguistics through language teaching. How are the two connected and how should that connection be used for training English teachers?

YL: Linguistics is usually taken to mean grammar. Some theoretical knowledge of this area helps, but teacher focus on it, unfortunately, has the opposite effect and can actually be detrimental to learning. In the teaching-learning process, I am basically for language as a form of use, rather than as a formal system, and in fact I think the less one focuses on formal grammar, the better the learning is likely to be. Learning requires that

the mind be alive and tuned in. This is so much easier if you are dealing with topics students are interested in, or involving communication with others, rather than dealing with abstractions like the rules of grammar. That's what language is. Off-shoots of formal linguistics such as sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics are of course of crucial importance in enabling teachers to understand and foster the learning process.

JT: You were the Head of the English Department of the University of Mumbai. How did you transmute your insights of language learning into actual courses?

YL: The ELT Cell which had been set up in the department was the start of my work on instituting changes in the teaching of English. A two-paper optional course in Applied Linguistics was introduced, dealing with issues such as teaching and testing methodology, sociolinguistics, error analysis and the processing of text. Next, I changed the compulsory course on “The Structure of English” to a course in “Linguistic/Stylistic Analysis of Text”, geared to the analysis of literary texts. It was in fact a hands-on approach to literature, for instead of discussing theoretical models, actual literary texts were linguistically analysed in order to see how meaning was created. At the B.A. level, I was instrumental in introducing a course in “Grammar and the Art of Writing”, which employed knowledge of grammar to create better writing abilities.

JT: The “Communication Skills in English” course introduced in the First Year B.A. programme in your university was a landmark departure from existing language teaching practice. Could you speak about this briefly?

YL: We introduced the program in 1977, in response to a forceful move by educationists at the University to remove English as a compulsory subject at the First Year B.A. level. They claimed that it had done no good whatsoever, as they were focused only on the final goal of the M.A. in English literature, and that it must be removed from the B.A. programme. They asked why such a course was made compulsory for a student of say, Economics or Psychology. All these other teachers admittedly had every right to protest, but Dr. Patankar managed to convince them that his team would provide an English course with a difference, one that was focused on the educational needs of students of all subjects. That was the start of the “Communication Skills” course. It was because of this promised focus, and only because of this, that English with was difficulty retained as a compulsory subject. This has to be remembered; nobody even knows now that English as a compulsory course of study could easily have been scrapped at this point at Bombay University.

There were various considerations in setting up a good compulsory English course. First of all, the goal of training people to think (while they developed their language skills). This was a major focus and one of the ways in which we felt we could achieve this was by doing away with a prescribed textbook. This was a major decision. The moment you have a textbook, teacher exposition sets in, and students proceed to just mug up texts; they cease to think, they cease to approach the text on their own.

Another important consideration was the nature of the test. We wanted to ensure that the test required students to think when answering the questions. The next point was how do we develop these tests, for which there was no precedent?

Dr. N. S. Prabhu, arguably the greatest applied linguist that India has produced, was called in for support and guidance. At the British Council, Madras he had set up a highly innovative language teaching project, which was a trendsetter not just in India, but on the world's Applied Linguistics stage. He was of enormous help in the project. The other outsider who helped was Professor Jacob Tharu of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad. Dr. Prabhu came up with the brilliant and unprecedented notion of introducing the concept of levels in the test format. The student population, running into thousands in about 100 plus colleges, included what is currently Goa University as well as rural parts of Maharashtra. So the students ranged from those who spoke the language as a native to those who did not even know the alphabet. They were all necessarily, by virtue of belonging to the same University, to be given the same course and the same examination in First Year B.A.

The course focused on the skills of reading, writing, summarizing, and only to a small extent, listening and speaking (because of practical difficulties in dealing with a huge population). We decided on equal marks for reading and writing, i.e. 40 marks each. Note-making carried fifteen marks. In reading, we had three levels and in writing, two levels. At the lowest level of each, we hoped that the average learner of the language would improve sufficiently over the course to get 50 per cent of the allotted marks and thus would be able to pass. The others could legitimately earn better marks at the intermediate level, and even more at the advanced level, by doing progressively more difficult tasks, and genuinely earning their marks.

The reading questions demanded factual comprehension, interpretation, inference and

evaluation on unseen texts. The tasks, even those in note-making, were broken into small and manageable parts, and the writing tasks had some amount of guidance built into them. So, it was possible for even the lower level student to answer the Level I questions.

JT: What evidence do you have that this course, based on a no-textbook policy, worked?

YL: We did a year-long course evaluation programme (something which is never done) under the aegis of the British Council 10 years later, with Professor Alan Davies of Edinburgh University, and found that the level of English reached by “Communication Skills” students was very much higher than the comparable control group we got in S.N.D.T. University, Bombay. In addition, the difference between the entry level of “Communication Skills” students and their exit level at the end of the year was quite remarkable. It was reassuring that same year, at a conference in Ratnagiri, mainly for teachers from rural colleges, there was a unanimous demand for more courses of this type.

We gave colleges whatever support we could. Writing the test paper being a very challenging task, the ELT Cell made available the preliminary and terminal exam question papers for ten years. We brought these papers out as university publications, and for years they were used as teaching material. There were of course no prescribed textbooks, but teachers had to have some material to use in the classroom. They increasingly began using these question papers for teaching.

Other texts were also used, predominantly Bhasker and Prabhu's *English Through Reading*. Many teachers objected very

strongly at the beginning to the lack of a textbook. It meant much more work not just for teachers but for everybody—the students, the test writers. In colleges where it was well taught, the results were staggeringly good, even where the initial English level of the students was poor. Of the wide range of colleges surveyed, a very large proportion of students and teachers were in support of the course. To help initiate the teachers, we had over 30 teacher training workshops spread out over many years, so that fresh entrants to teaching could get proper exposure.

JT: In the light of this, would you say today that we have come a long way from the Grammar-Translation method?

YL: I don't know, frankly. But it seems to me, the way in which people are setting major national tests, they are still focusing on tiny matters of etiquette like the difference between “can” and “may”. There are so many more fundamental things to be dealt with. It appears that what we should be more concerned with is the connection between sentences, rather than grammar within the sentence, and primarily with clarity in statement of the message. The indoctrination that we have always had about correct sentence construction, however, is so great that it is very difficult to get out of that mould.

Recently, I was very impressed with how task-oriented the new *Bal Bharati* textbooks in Maharashtra are. I hope the teaching is in tune with this trend. But one does not readily see teachers who have the English to deal with it. There is also much talk of Communicative Teaching, but little evidence of it.

I have to say that the craze for introducing English at the first standard does not help. It is useless introducing it at that level when

you don't have adequately trained teachers to teach it, or often, even teachers who at least know the language. Naturally, students do not learn, regardless of the class in which English is introduced. To be honest, it's incorrect to say that they have not learnt anything. What they have learnt is that they cannot learn. They have got this message so deeply within them that learning for them is impossible. I think that is a dreadful message for the educational system to convey. So we need to make people perform with whatever materials are at hand—games and drama, or anything that stimulates and excites. Let them speak, read, write. Let them make mistakes.

After all, we do not lose hope with a child learning its mother tongue, with a whole series of stages of error. Why are we not able to absorb that notion into English teaching? This is the crucial idea all English teachers should have, that learning takes place through practice and making errors.

It was in the post-Chomsky phase that new views on the nature of language learning were developed, particularly the notion that people should be allowed to learn at their own pace. In mother-tongue learning in every language, certain things are learnt earlier and certain things later, different learners have different learning agendas, even though there are certain similarities in general patterns of learning. As teachers, we should apply this same principle to second language learning and make language do the work that it is supposed to do—which is use in context.

Perhaps the study of grammar does more harm than good. It is very heartening that now task-oriented exercises are being developed in textbooks. Hopefully we will develop teacher training techniques to build towards implementing a task-oriented and contextualised approach.

JT: Yes, I think the missing link is the teacher training component in all of this.

YL: And also the nature of the English test; because that determines the teaching. Unless you are going to be able to develop those kinds of tasks in the test, it's useless putting them in the textbook.

But yes, at least some textbooks have changed. What have not changed are the poor facilities provided in teacher training, and particularly for English competence training in teachers. We have to spend a great deal more money on training.

JT: Let's talk about your 1972 study on integrative versus instrumental motivation of Marathi speakers to learn English. Could you talk a little about this study?

YL: I was trying to find out how one can make a language course work, because if it is to work it must tap [*sic*] the aspirations and motivations of students. I took a representative sample of Mumbai students. My subjects were from an average Marathi-medium school in a middle-class locality where the levels of English were fairly ok. I found that people did want to study English because it gave them opportunities to rise higher in life. In the indirect questionnaire which had a series of traits to tap [*sic*] the deep-seated beliefs of learners relating to themselves in relation to the English-speaking community of Indians, as well as their own community of Marathi speakers. I found that while the students seemed to be grounded in their own community, the features on which the English-speaking community was rated higher were standard of living, and prospects of greater success, both things which lead to a

better lifestyle. However, in their ratings for their own self-concept, they showed that they did not want the modernity and the independence they associated with the English-speaking community. These students wanted to learn English and to lead a better life but were quite prepared to be culturally grounded. They showed a clearly instrumental motivation for learning English, not an integrative motivation which is what all studies done in the US on immigrants had so far shown. This study was published in *Language Learning*, a major Applied Linguistics journal in the US in June 1972, and I was told later that more offprints were requested for this article than any other in that year.

As a matter of interest, I may mention that a book by Lambert and Gardiner, among other things corroborating these findings, based on a study in South-East Asia, came out in December 1972.

Later on, I also did a study on the motivation of English Literature students to study English. The results were much the same. The motivation was instrumental. Students were taking English literature as a means of studying the English language. Why, I would like to ask educators and educational planners, don't we have language courses available for them to do instead?

JT: There is a new education policy in the offing. Do you wish to see any significant or specific changes with regard to language education policy in India?

YL: We need to have much more teacher training, and the training should directly reflect the teaching methodology they would later be following. I would like to train

students to first and foremost, think. I would like them to start off using the language to express themselves, and then concentrate on perfection in sentence structure only later.

I would also like attention to be given to the nature of the tests we provide. They should be challenging and force students to think. Teachers need specific training in how to write tests; and ultimately these kinds of tests can only be written if the process of teaching changes.

I have to end on a sad note. Unfortunately, for all my hopes, the sad story is that none of the courses that we started and which were so successfully run for 15 to 25 years, whether the Communication Skills course at FYBA, or the B.A. course or the M.A. course, have survived. In Communication Skills only the name remains; the course is now textbook-based.

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