A Process-Oriented Approach
To In-Service Education of Teachers :
An Overview

Prem S. Mathur
The British Council, Singapore

Abstract

The paper attempts to outline an approach which is aimed at exploiting practising teachers' knowledge and know-how in the process of their development as English teachers. The aim is also to develop strategies that would enable them to understand their specific teaching contexts better and to find their own adaptations of any current approaches. The overall objective of the process approach is to produce autonomous teachers.

The paper gives brief examples of the procedures adopted in the course and outlines the main task-types.

The traditional concept of teaching and learning is essentially prescriptive. The teacher tells students what, why, how, where and when they should do things in all subject areas. The teacher is the guru at whose feet the disciples sit and receive instructions. The learners may think and reflect but have to wait for an opportune moment when they can ask questions to clarify their doubt and discuss their problems, but it is the teacher who decides what they will 'learn'.

In teacher training programmes also this attitude is evident : 'We are the specialists, we know what is best for you. You just learn it and then we will test how well you have learnt to do it,' the trainers seem to say to the trainees.

This prescriptivism has been in evidence in most institutions in most countries, at least until recently. It functions in roughly the following fashion :

* 'Learn the latest theories'
* 'Now look at the applications of (the best) theory'
* 'According to this theory the existing methods and materials have these defects and therefore we should use these new materials and methods'
* 'Now watch carefully. I am going to show how it can be done. I will ask you some questions later so pay attention to what I do and say'
* 'Now you do it. I will observe and make comments'
* 'Good try. Keep practising'

This is what happened when the structural approach was discredited with the arrival of a cognitive view of language learning and communicative approaches to language teaching.

Those who are in the business of teaching begin to get sceptical, if not cynical! No wonder they do not want to change their methods even when the materials change or the syllabuses change, unless the education authority sends directives along with ready-made teaching packages.

The teacher might then say, 'I suppose I have to play the tune. OK show me how and I will do likewise'.

The problem with this approach is that in a few years teachers are ready for retraining because more new theories come into vogue, new materials appear, new syllabuses begin to mushroom and the trainers are obliged to say, 'Now we know better. Forget what we taught you five years ago.' They of course cannot say that they have been proved wrong by new theories.

The teachers merely toe the line. They watch and imitate. This is the main problem with prescriptivism : it induces imitative behaviour. Such an approach might have been the only workable approach available for countries which expanded their education programme suddenly after independence, when a very large number of teachers had to be trained in a very short period of time to get the system going. Perhaps there was no option but to give formulaic training in short periods of time and pack teachers off to learn from experience. Arguably, this is not the best mode of teacher training.

A Non-Prescriptive Approach

Many experienced teachers, having seen many seasons of fads and fashions in language teaching, resist any new changes. It is indeed very difficult to answer the question, 'When we used method X students learnt the language ; when we changed to method Y they still learnt it. What difference does it make ? Why change to method Z ?'

It would be deceiving them and deluding ourselves to say 'Now we know God's truth. We *acquire* a language through communication alone'. For no sooner does one make such a claim than counter-arguments and new theories begin to surface.

Even if the teachers accepted the specialists' argument (because the specialists are good speakers and can convince the gullible laymen) they would not be able to put this view into practice meaningfully because *there is no direct route from theory to practice.* The only direct route available is imitation which completely routs the very objective of teacher development.

In-service training presents another problem. Certain teachers refuse to change anything so long as they continue to get good examination results. They would also feel insecure if they gave up practices they are used to.

Another practical problem with prescribing a method is that as soon as a new method is presented, teachers, because there is no motivation to change, raise all sorts of problems :

> 'My classes are very large', or
> 'I have the syllabus, or the textbook, to cover. No time,' or
> 'This wouldn't work in my school; the kids are just not interested in learning,' or
> 'This is too easy/difficult for my students' or
> 'My Principal won't buy it', or
> 'This would generate too much noise ; I will have discipline problems', or
> 'Seats are fixed in my classroom, I cannot have group work', etc.

Such objections suggest that methods are perceived as routines--the relationship between underlying principles and the practice is not understood.

What is suggested therefore is a non-prescriptive approach which can bring about a real change in teacher behaviour, change which is informed by teachers' own perceptions. The nature of change would be determined by their understanding of the specific teaching situations they are in. The goal of a training programme should be to raise teachers' awareness of learning processes, language structures, specific skills and generally of what methods can help to achieve, what they

can do. Such a programme would aim at developing teachers' competence to learn from their experience and to construct strategies from their awareness of the various needs and contexts in their specific schools or regions. This would be possible only when the teachers can internalise a set of guiding principles and develop the ability to exploit their existing knowledge and experience in the process of adaptation.

Features of a Non-prescriptive Approach

A non-prescriptive approach thus should have the following main characteristics:
1. It should exploit teachers' existing knowledge and know-how.
2. It should use negotiation as the mode for resolving problems.
3. It should use tasks for integrating theory with practice.

The general strategy of a prescriptive approach differs from a non-prescriptive one in that the former goes from theory to practice while the latter goes from practice to theory. (See below)

1. A Prescriptive Approach

Teaching new theories, etc., through lecture and discussion
Demonstration of methods and materials from the theories
Supervised practice of the new methods
Practice in school with some amendments
Routines established

2. A Non-prescriptive Approach

Tasks for awareness raising
Discussion of underlying principles
Tasks exploiting the principles
Review and critical appraisal of the theory/approach
Teaching practice (video/audio-recorded)

Review

Prescriptive methods have been found to be largely ineffective; in-service course participants tend only to pay lip-service to new approaches, or at best put up a show when the supervisor visits. Moreover imitative behaviour is very much in evidence. For instance when we were using books for second language methodology they faithfully repeated the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) routine even where the first P was not required. Here was some definite evidence of teachers learning the form without the meaning. The methods prescribed did not succeed in effective learning. (This does not, however, imply that all our methods were prescriptive or that all resultant teacher behaviour was imitative.)

Goals of Procedural Teacher Education

In any teacher education session or course there will inevitably be some 'lecturing' by resource persons who are expected to say more than participants, but a tutor-dominated session where there is a one-way traffic of ideas is by its very nature an impediment to the achievement of the objectives of teacher development for on-going and creative change. Feedback from our course participants shows that they learn more from hands-on sessions than from lectures. As a result, a procedural approach has evolved over the years where maximum possible contact time is devoted to tasks for relating theory and practice, and relating these to participants' own beliefs, attitudes and practices. The in-service education approach, therefore, has moved away from *talk*-orientation to *task*-orientation.

This has also meant that we have moved towards an essentially, 'learner-centred' approach which facilitates change in teachers' attitudes as well as behaviour. The communicative approach practised in teacher education courses also enables the participants to understand what the process of *learning* involves.

Moreover the participatory training sessions are far more enjoyable than listening to 'talk, talk, talk' by the lecturers and are therefore more conducive to learning. A learner-friendly environment encourages freer interaction which in turn facilitates intake; the resistance to change is thus greatly reduced.

Resistance to change is natural. Change involves effort and extra work; it involves an investment of emotional energy in persuading others that their innovations are relevant to the teaching situation, and yet more energy to persuade others to do likewise: it requires the will to accept challenges involved in departing from the safe routines set by the school or education department to the insecurity of finding new pathways.

It is evident that the change being aimed at in our in-service programmes is not the top-down statutory kind, but is a change of the *evolutionary*, bottom-up kind. It should take place first at the individual classroom level and gradually permeate *upward*. The goals, as far as immediate needs are concerned, are to 'upgrade' the teachers' ability to affect better English language and literature learning at the classroom level. In the long run the goal is to educate teachers to become autonomous learners, to continue to adapt, and to continue to learn.

Process-Orientation

There is a difference between teaching content and facilitating the learning of content in any subject area. Given a list of topics one can give talks or lectures and ask questions to check how much has been understood. This kind of teaching is obviously content-oriented. There perhaps are subjects and learning contexts where such an approach is desirable and effective. Language learning, however, by its very nature, is a process: students learning language and teachers developing them to learn are engaged in an organic, evolutionary process. This I assume to be self-evident. Teacher education, in this area at least, should therefore be aimed at exploring better ways of stimulating this process. Whether it is learning how to use the overhead projector in a variety of ways (skills) or understanding comprehension processes (knowledge), the objective ultimately is to *do* something in the classroom which might activate and support language learning processes. It it not suprising therefore that process-orientation has proved to be more cost-effective.

I am using the terms cost-effective advisedly. 'Communicative' approaches to language teaching have been accused of being 'time-consuming'. This is asserted on the basis that not many 'topics' are covered in a unit of time and that a great amount of time is wasted in talking, some of which is peripheral talk, digressions from the point at hand.

Communicative approaches applied to teacher training sessions, by analogy, are a waste of time because many topics in the syllabus are not 'covered' and tutors waste a lot of time listening to what the participants have to say to each other rather than using that time to impart more knowledge. In our experience this 'wastage' is in fact sound investment resulting in distinct gains, and they are *major* gains:

* Participants bring to the tasks previous knowledge, skills and experiences, as well as their prejudices. Through interaction between different perceptions they begin to reconstruct their approaches.

* They share varied perceptions of similar teaching situations and discover similarities between different contexts, which results in amending generalisations or arriving at new ones.

* Inputs, in the form of tutors' contributions, are more readily understood and assimilated.

* Readings are seen to be relevant to the issues being examined, they become a means rather than the goal.

I have attempted to give an idea of the interactive nature of the process in the following figure.
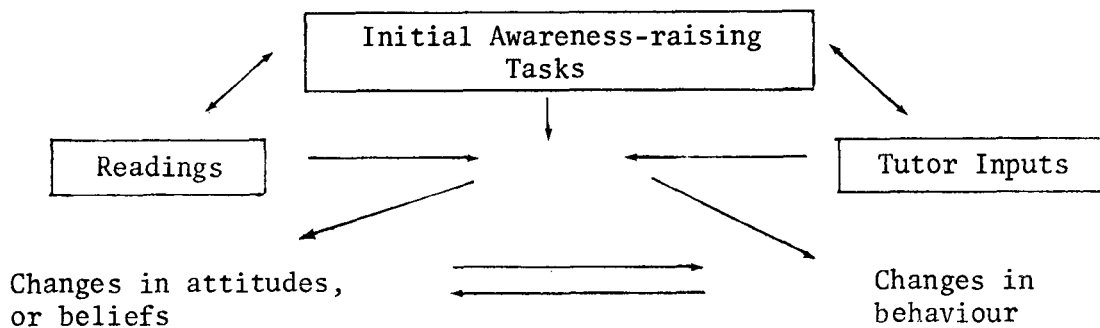
Tasks

It has been stated above that certain tasks are employed to stimulate processes. It is not really necessary to define what one means by 'task' but it should not be taken to be synonymous with 'activity'. A language drill is an activity, but not a task. It would be best to give a few illustrations to indicate what is implied by 'task'. What are given below are outlines of certain tasks:

1. Participants are taught a unit of language using a specific method, e.g..data input - -> generalisation - -> further data - -> correction of generalisation.

   They are then invited to reflect on the process and draw inferences.

   This process is repeated for other methods and inferences are drawn.

   Participants then compare the different methods for what they do to the learner.

2. A participant is asked to give oral instructions on how to use the overhead projector or any other machine in the classroom. She is then asked to give instructions on how to use a machine *not* in the classroom.

   The instructions are audio/video-recorded, or the teacher keeps detailed notes of relevant language features.

   Participants are then asked to write instructions, for a specific audience, for the same machines.
   The three versions are compared for linguistic features, audience awareness, oral vs written mode, etc.
   Inferences are drawn about the nature of writing.

3. Participants are given a series of cloze exercises.

   There are three (or more) texts at different levels, for example, a difficult text from a linguistics book, an upper secondary level text, and a primary level text.

   The value of 'n' in the deletion of every nth word is also varied.

   They are then asked to comment on :

   a) how they inferred the meaning of certain words;

   b) why they could not infer the meaning of other words, and

   c) why they thought one text was easier than the other.

   They make some inferences about 'text-difficulty' and the process of reading.

4. Participants are asked to make a list of criteria they use for marking compositions, mark the given composition and then compare first their mark and then the criteria with group-members. In the process they clarify certain criteria, fill conceptual or information gaps and realise the need to refine the marking scheme to make assessment more reliable.

5. Participants make a list of common grammar problems and the individual lists are compared for
   a) different schools at the same level e.g. secondary 3.
   b) different levels e.g. secondary 1 with 3.
   They invariably find a large common area across the board.
   They discuss why this is so. Indirectly they begin to examine the language processes and the place of overt grammar teaching.

This is not an exhaustive list of all the different tasks we have used, nor does it show the different variations possible. This is just an illustration of what is meant by 'task' in the context of teacher education. Incidentally, the above examples are not hypothetical, but are based on first-hand experience.

Processes

Tasks, such as the ones described above, are generally very interesting and stimulate animated discussions and debate among the participants as well as between the tutor and the participants. What the tasks result in is easy to report but it is not so easy to list the various types of processes involved. What follows is an attempt to do so; it is not the result of 'research and refined data', but a result of many years of observation.

* Information recall and sharing
* Clarification of concepts and the terms used to express them
* Revaluation of the existing concepts of language learning, teaching and testing
* Recognition of problems as well as underlying issues in teaching practices
* Crystallisation and formulation of problems
* Brainstorming and cross-fertilisation
* Challenging 'received' opinions and methodology
* Examination and evaluation of proposals or solutions offered by fellow-participants, tutors and specialists
* Opening up, resulting in a freer acceptance of criticism, and beginnings of the process of continual change

In general terms the process approach, which is implemented through setting up tasks, enables the participants to :
   a) become aware of phenomena related to language teaching and learning,
   b) reflect on them,
   c) analyse them further with the help of new knowledge,
   d) make inferences, and
   e) refashion their approach.

Macrotasks

It has been noted above that tasks are employed in order to activate the various processes of learning. Tasks, it is worth pointing out, can either be narrowly focused on a specific skill or concepts or they can be global, involving a number of integrated skills or knowledge of a complex process of learning. These global tasks, or macrotasks, might thus appear to be unfocused but they help to trigger a series of interrelated questions. For instance the cloze task referred to earlier helps to

a) demonstrate that a number of skills underlie an apparently simple, single unified task.

b) raise awareness about a number of specific strategies that could be exploited in teaching, and

c) integrate a variety of points made earlier about language learning.

Macrotasks are also useful for what might be called practice sessions; for example materials writing or adaptation exercises and lesson planning, when they are well-focused for a group of learners.

Video-recorded teaching sessions during the course involve a series of such macrotasks, from selecting materials, and adaptation thereof, to execution. During the various stages participants consider all the multifarious factors they are aware of at that point in the course. The videos are viewed and themselves become the focus of further analysis and reflection of the learning-teaching process.

Procedural Schemes of Work

Lest the term 'procedural' suggest to some that there is no set of objectives or list of contents in a process-oriented approach, let me point out that all the in-service courses we run have a set of objectives and that the participants are duly assessed.

A major course, the RSA Diploma for the Teaching of English in Singapore Schools (RSA Dip TESS), has to be conducted under the watchful eyes of the RSA Board as well as the Singapore Ministry of Education, the latter since we conduct the courses in response to their needs.

What is significant however is *how* we achieve our goals, how we 'cover' the behavioural objectives. It has been stressed that we try to focus on the process (and the product takes care of itself); it is natural then for us to think of our schemes of work in terms of procedures although they would still appear as topics on the timetable.

An illustration would be in order here :

Topic : Language Learning

Time allotted . 8 hours

Schemes of work : (The set of procedures) :

1. **Task** : Participants examine a set of sentences and decide whether they are acceptable or unacceptable. Opinions are compared with group members.

   They are then asked if they can cite a rule or rules to support their opinion, rules that they learnt in school or at a later stage. The set of sentences are so selected that the generalisation cannot be covered by the simple overgeneralised rules that are normally taught by teachers or are found in school textbooks. The sentence types are, however, quite common.

   Participants are thus made aware that there is a part of their 'knowledge' of English which is not conscious. Nevertheless they have the competence to produce such sentences and make intuitive judgements about them.

   A hypothesis is suggested : that a major part of the language we know is acquired through 'use', or communication, not through a conscious learning and application of structural rules.

2. **Input by tutor** : Brief references to current theories of language learning and follow-up readings are suggested, which would be discussed in tutorials.

3. **Task** : Participants do a problem-solving or an information gap task; also a variation on the task, like solving a riddle or a puzzle in pairs (and as variation, in groups, or individually).

Observers and/or the tutor note the linguistic nature of the interaction and strategies of communication employed (a worksheet may be used).

4. **Reflection** : Participants reflect on the activity about the nature of language use and potential language learning points (for students). Observers fill in the gaps and the tutor, who has been going round observing different pairs/groups, completes the picture. If the tasks are at a sufficiently challenging level of difficulty, even senior teachers and administrators of schools are found 'groping' for words and expressions to express their ideas and discuss and develop strategies for effective communication. For example, it was found quite challenging to write instructions for making a paper toy without the help of diagrams or demonstration ; it was clearly observed that some new language use was learnt in the process.

5. **Tutor input** : Besides supplementing the observers' description of the language use and processes, the tutor points out the nature of predictability of specific language items in a task involving authentic language use and suggests that a strict preselection and control of the language to be used in a language exercise would interfere with the natural language learning process. (Another example might be a drill task similarly replicated). Follow up : readings and tutorials.

6. **Task** : Participants make a list of errors, compare the lists for different levels and consider possible reasons for this phenomenon ; mother tongue interference, lack of practice, etc. are put forward by participants, and discussed.

7. **Tutor input** : Interlanguage hypothesis, the possibility of two separate language systems coexisting-- one for conscious rule application for monitoring speech and another the unconscious internalized ('acquired') system used in normal language production.

8. **Task** : Participants examine a unit of the textbook they use and identify which types of language activity are covered and which are not, also if there is a bias for any one type, e.g. controlled language drills, simulation activities, or communication tasks.

This scheme is easily extended to a series of macrotasks--materials adaptation or preparation, lesson planning and video-recorded teaching, followed by review. The scheme of work described is by no means intended to be an 'ideal' scheme for the given topic. It is simply an illustration. There could be any number of variant series of tasks (with inputs at relevant moments) to cover the same area of knowledge.

For example, one might use video-recorded lessons with a worksheet to enable the participants to home in on relevant learning episodes to introduce the idea of acquisition--early in the scheme as a time saving measure, or later in the programme if reflection on the tasks done fails to make the point for the participants. The selection of variants would be purely on procedural grounds because it is required to facilitate learning, not for reasons of expediency.

Tutor's Role

There is an illusion in this procedural approach of the course tutors, or lecturers, being passive observers and nothing more. As with communication activities in language teaching the gurus are only seemingly passive : they have to be alert all the time, observing and *learning*, for teaching is a two-way process. The guru cannot help learners to learn if they are not learning themselves--learning something about the processes through which the participants internalise skills, approaches or beliefs, as well as gaining insights into language teaching processes.

While participants are working in pairs or groups, and during whole class presentations and discussions, the tutors are expected to closely monitor the processes, and introduce new ideas and strategies at points where a need is felt or where there is an opening for injecting new ideas,

or, at least suggestions for new directions of thinking and alternative possibilities in teaching strategies. The tutor inputs are not only made at relevant points, they are adjusted to the level of difficulty or level of abstraction, according to the stage of the discussion and of the course itself. The tutors should ideally postpone, or leave out altogether, the prepared inputs to maintain the cohesive nature of the session, unlike in content-oriented approaches where content, or the target topics scheduled for given timeable slots have to be taught as long as time permits. Syllabus coverage thus is made as needs-related as possible and it is the tutors who regulate the inputs in meaningful contexts.

Some people argue that where the coverage of contents is not formally organised or the order is not pre-determined, there is a serious risk of the participants not learning some of the topics at all. However, this fear really concerns 'acquaintance' with subjects rather than acquiring knowledge. Moreover, coverage of topics in the approach is managed through schemes of work and there is no risk of leaving out any major areas. If the topics that get left out are comparatively minor or easy to understand, one can depend on the adult learner to read up on the topics (what are the books for?) and discuss any points they wish in class or in their tutorials.

Tutors thus create conditions for processes to take place, monitor these carefully and provide relevant inputs. They also adapt or modify the following stages in the scheme of work in light of the experience of a given session. Without such adjustments the approach would not be truly procedural nor the tutor honestly a facilitator. Obviously, ideal conditions are never fully realised but the important thing is for us to continully work towards an ideal.

Assessment Procedures

The anxiety about coverage of syllabus referred to above is related to the obsession with, and fear of examinations that most teachers and trainers have : 'What if questions are asked on these topics in the examination?' We know at the same time how examination-orientation in teaching can vitiate learning-teaching process. Therefore assessment procedures should be so designed as to support learning for real needs and have a salutory backwash effect on the process.

The assessment scheme for the RSA Diploma Course in the teaching of English for Singapore teachers comprised continuous (formative) as well as summative external examinations. The internal continuous assessment consisted of written assignments and a project on applied topics as well as lesson observations. The external examination consisted of a written examination and two lesson assessments by external examiners appointed by the RSA and moderated by the Chief Examiner. As we moved more and more towards process-oriented schemes of work and methods our results also improved steadily from 80 per cent to 100 per cent in four years (from 1981/82 to 1985). Still we decided to modify the scheme in order to fully back up our goals of teacher education.

The nature of change in the assessment scheme, which was approved by the RSA after ensuring moderation procedures that would help maintain high standards, is highly significant and I think historical. The written and practical examinations have been dropped and we have a purely continuous assessment scheme. It has the following components :

1. Six written assignments on practical topics

2. One practical project related to the participant's specific situation

3. Six lesson assessments, two of which are done by external assessors approved by the RSA

The weighting is 30%, 20%, and 50% respectively. Thus everything the participants do for assessment purposes is integral to their teaching in schools.

It is worth noting that this is not a softer option. Teachers have to put in much more thought and work into their project work than is required for preparing for written examinations since everything they learn must not only be integrated, but has to be relevant to their students--they have to execute their plans and report on them. Incidentally, since the written examination was scrapped we have not yet given 100% passes in all areas.

In the practical assessments (of lessons in teachers' own classes) the processes of learning and testing also cohere. For each observation the participants have the opportunity of consultation with their tutors/assessors. The feedback provided helps them to further develop their strategies and also become aware of their weak points. The whole process is developmental--there is no 'terminal' behaviour and no 'summative' assessment. The sum total of all the work done during the course determines the overall grade awarded in each area.

The Developing Teacher

The overall objective of the process approach is to produce teachers who are autonomous learners, who have acquired the competence to be innovative and who will adapt to new teaching problems and new contexts as well as assimilate new approaches and strategies that appear at frequent intervals; the intervals are getting shorter and shorter! However in order to do this they will need institutional support. For example, they will need professional journals in their school libraries, such as the *English Language Teaching Journal*, and *English Teaching Forum*, the *Reading Teacher*, etc., and they will need the *time* to think and prepare new schemes of work, lesson plans and tasks. Above all, they will need patience and support from education authorities. A degree of flexibility in the system is also a necessary condition for innovation and change.

The society as a whole should be educated to understand that good teachers are ones who concentrate on good teaching and it is they who produce good results in the long run, whatever the mode of testing. But reform in examinations and testing procedures cannot be postponed indefinitely because until the vast majority of teachers are covered by in-service courses of the type described, examinations will continue to dominate the teaching scene and all lessons will be consciously or unconsciously designed for what is called 'preparation for examinations'. Not only do we want examinations and internal assessments to keep in line with good teaching, we would like to see them providing positive backwash effects, encouraging good teaching practice.

We must all sympathise with the teacher who is under constant pressures, often contra-dictory, from all directions, and we must therefore take precautions against producing confused or demoralised teachers. We believe that process orientation in teacher development strategies will help to produce balanced, creative, growing individuals.

The process approach outlined above facilitates mediation between theory and practice, between the learner and the textbook, between the tutor and the learner, and between learning and assessment. Teacher education can thus be organic, with intrinsic relationships between learner needs, teacher needs and the needs of the education system as well as of the society in general. The tutor plants the seed and watches it grow, nurtures it and sprays with insecticide (negative feedback) when necessary! However the gardener is not outside the tree; he is a part of it, for he grows too with the tree.

Notes :

1. I have presented many of the ideas expressed in the essay in various seminars and conferences :

   - In Japan, JALT (Tokyo, 1984 and Kyoto, 1985)
   - In Hongkong, ILE (Faculty Seminar 1984, International Seminar 1985)
   - in Singapore, RELC (Regional Seminars 1984 and 1987)

   Some of the main ideas are expressed in two short articles :

   1. 'In-service Teacher Education: The Workshop Approach', in Perspective on English Language Teaching Ure and Vellayudhan, Macmillan India, 1985.
   2. 'Tasks for Language Teacher Education', ILE Journal, Hongkong, 1986.

2. My own ideas are influenced generally by communicative approaches to language teaching and specifically by Dr. Dave Willis and Dr. N.S. Prabhu. Dr. Willis was English Language Officer and Director of Studies, at the British Council Singapore from 1981 to 1986. Dr. Prabhu was English Studies Officer at the British Council, Madras until 1986. He is now a Senior Visiting Fellow at the National University of Singapore.

I have also learnt a great deal from Singapore teachers (our 'trainees') and from my colleagues past and present at the British Council in Singapore.

I am also grateful to the British Council, Singapore for permission to print this article.

The Author

Prem S. Mathur is the Director of the Teacher Education Unit at The British Council in Singapore. He has taught the English language for many years in India and has been involved in teacher training in recent years. Moreover, he has published widely in the fields of ELT and teacher education, and has participated in seminars on these topics throughout Asia.