

Golden Jubilee Conference Report

The eagerly awaited Golden Jubilee Conference of the ELT@I came and went, of course, not without leaving its impact on all of us. It was a grand feast both in terms of academic inputs, social networking and gastronomic satiation. Let us take a close look at some of the major events of the conference and also remember the people who made it a grand success.

The four-day conference was well planned and the preparation extended a little beyond a year from July 2018 to October 2019. There were quite a few heads that got together to discuss each aspect of the conference threadbare and arrive at the best possible options available. In between there might have been a few slips, and given the pressure of work, such minor event should be pardonable.

The conference got to a grand start with the inaugural session on the 9th of October at Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, NOIDA. The Honourable Vice Chancellor Prof Balvinder Shukla declared the conference open. The chief guest at this function was His Excellency Sri Yogesh Punja, High Commissioner of the Republic of Fiji in India. In his speech, the High Commissioner suggested the preservation of Indian culture despite learning English. He cited the example of Indians in Fiji who meet regularly to recite the Ramayana and keep their roots intact. Tom Birtwistle, Director of the British Council for North India appreciated the multilingual profile of India where English has a major role to play. Three publications of the Association were launched during this ceremony.

The conference had a well spread academic menu to cater to the eager listeners. This conference perhaps saw the biggest number of research papers being presented - more than 500. The papers were neatly shared in eleven parallel sessions each afternoon. In each of the parallel sessions no more than six presenters made their presentation giving each one of them nearly fifteen minutes to present their papers. All the papers chosen for presentation were properly scrutinized and selected from nearly a thousand abstracts received.

The papers presented were distributed according to the sub-themes of the conference. Major themes chosen were Indian Writing in English, Indian Diaspora, Developing Language skills, Evaluation, Place of Indian Variant of English in the International scene, Biographies and autobiographies, General topics in ELT, Feminism, Marginalised learners, ICT and Teacher Training. Each of the themes had sufficient papers to be presented and they were well received. Each year, three of the best presentations are awarded

and this practice could not be adhered to this year largely due to paucity of time on the part of the organizers. This lapse is regretted.

Besides paper presentations, there were ten other unique presentations to make the conference academically rich. The rest of the report focuses on each of these events briefly.

1. The first of the major event was a carry forward from the previous years – The Lightning Talk. There were twelve speakers during this event and this session was chaired by Dr Thiruvenkataswamy of SSN College, Chennai. Each of the twelve speakers (some were from outside India) was given a brief 4-5 minute slot to present some unique feature of ELT from their own contexts. The chairman consolidated all the views and presented them neatly in a capsule form. He also wanted the speakers to have rapid fire questions among themselves which did not work as expected. However, there were a large number of questions from the audience and these were responded to.
2. The second of the major events was the Plenary Talks. There were six plenary talks in all. The first of the talks was from Dr Lisa Morgan from RELO, US Embassy. She focussed on the importance of exploiting the imaginative aspects of our learners and engaging them in creative acts. Such activities can be harnessed to develop language proficiency. In the course of her talk she demonstrated a few tasks making her presentation interactive and interesting. Prof Vineeta Prasad, Head of AIESR chaired the session.

The second plenary had its focus on Artificial Intelligence and its application for language learning. Dr Angelika Salamoura from the Cambridge Assessment (United Kingdom) made her presentation. She elaborated on the research in progress and the invention of software like SIRI, CORTANA, ALEXA et.al to highlight the development of spoken and communication skills. Dr Mithun Khandwala, Head of Ahmedabad Chapter chaired this session.

Dr Elaine Boyd of the University College of London, the United Kingdom gave her talk on Helping Learners become Plurilingual. She brought about the subtle difference that exists between the two terms ‘multilingualism’ and ‘plurilingualism’. She argued that India practises plurilingualism. In a multilingual situation, many languages coexist but do not necessarily interact with each other. The chances of code-mixing are few in such situations. In a plurilingual society,

the languages co-exist and support each other and the users often switch from one language to another with ease and comfort. This happens in India and the users are not conscious of this. The session was absorbing and generated a lot of discussion.

Prof Sunney Tharappan delivered the fourth plenary on Writing English Through Spoken English. He advocated the process of learning in a natural way with no corrections offered to the learners. Corrections, often render the learners diffident. Errors have a way of correcting themselves as language is both organic and dynamic. Learners learn best when they are allowed to speak freely, and the language thus learnt can be diverted for purposes such as writing. This session was chaired by Dr Anita Sharma, Head of the Shimla Chapter.

Dr. C P Vishwanath delivered the fifth plenary on theme 'Deep Comprehension for Deep Learning'. Being an outsider to the field of ELT he brought in fresh light on the methods of teaching. He largely talked about his own experiments in language teaching as a publisher and what inspired him to give up his well paid job and accept a challenge to spread literacy and language skills among young learners. His premise is based on the fact that everyone of us likes stories. Stories help us grasp language and also improve our vocabulary. Story provides a context which a textbook lesson fails to do. This being the case, producing attractive story books both in print and audio versions, he thought would enhance language learning skills. His abundant faith in this premise is not belied.

The last plenary was by Dr Keki N Daruwala the well known poet and novelist. The focus of his talk was on My Writings and My Concerns. He recounted his works, especially the collection of his poems and provided contexts for writing each one of them. He read a few of his poems to illustrate the imagery used and its relevance. His talk was very well received and appreciated by the audience. Dr Dhannapa Metri, Head of Sholapur Chapter chaired the session.

3. The third major event of the conference came in the form of a symposium. Dr Neelima Sharma, Associate Vice President, Trinity College of London (UK) chaired the session with six speakers. One of the speakers Ms. Bulbul Malik was a student of BA studying in AIESR, Amity University. The topic of discussion was the need for using different strategies to teach different genres of literature. The presenters drawn from different countries presented their views

succinctly. Ms. Bulbul Malik suggested that the present day teaching of explaining every line by the teacher was not only boring but useless. She suggested that in the age of technology, methods conducive to ICT should be adopted and learners involved in the entire process of learning. Dr Neelima consolidated the views expressed by all the speakers and concluded the session.

4. Panel Discussions: There were three stimulating panel discussions included in the conference. The first panel discussion was chaired by Prof Shreesh Choudhary and looked at the proposition put forth by the researchers of Cambridge University Press. The CUP contends that in 50 years or so the majority of English speakers will be Indians and Indian English will, through the usage of millions, be the dominant variety. The panel consisted of seven senior professors and a student from the MA course at AIESR. The discussion veered around the standard variety of English and other variants. All the speakers described some of the key features of Indian variant of English and said how some of this usage is increasingly becoming accepted in the international circles. Ms. Kirti Kambiri the student participant made an axiomatic statement and said 'English is not only a language to communicate, but it is a lifestyle.' (sic).

The second Panel discussion had its focus on the recently released document the National Education Policy. This document is now available in public domain and is ready for being placed to the cabinet committee for approval. Prof S Mohanraj chaired this session with six very senior educationists on the panel discussing different aspects of the document. The aspects discussed included features of School education, Higher education, Teacher education, Vocational education, Implementation strategies and the Overall impact. The chairman concluded the session by providing a gist of positive outcomes of the policy when implemented.

The last panel discussion had four participants and discussed a major reform to be introduced at the tertiary education level. The UGC under the instructions of MHRD proposes to introduce Learning Outcome-based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) from the forthcoming academic year. The document has been prepared by a team of experts and the same members were participants on the Panel. The discussion was chaired by Prof B K Danta of Tezpur University. The members presented some of the departures that have been made from the existing system providing scope for the learners to choose courses

of their choice to complete their education. Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) which had its loose ends have been tied properly to give the present framework a pragmatic design. The larger emphasis is on making the learner autonomous and employment ready. The language learnt will be more life oriented than text oriented.

5. **Teacher Tales:** This was a unique session planned and presented by Prof Rama Mathew. The entire presentation was based on her long years of research involving school teachers. A team of nearly twenty teachers presented their experiments and demonstrated to the audience how learners can be motivated through a process of proper mentoring. The young scholars showed how research can focus on everyday learning problems in school and with proper focus when solved lead to discovering new ways of teaching. Prof Rama Mathew urged all the participants in the seminar to take up research and publish their findings. She shared with the audience a couple of books which have been a result of such practice.
6. **Presentations from International Associations:** This was another unique session which provided the audience to take home some novel ideas of teaching. ELT@I has signed Memorandums of Understanding with English Language Teachers' Associations in nearly ten countries. Though all the associations were invited, seven associations had sent their representatives who made a presentation on some of their innovations. The countries represented were Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, the USA, Philippines, and Sri Lanka. The session was chaired by Dr Rajani Badlani. Each participant provided a brief and unique feature of their association and the experiments they had conducted in their own country.
7. **Featured Talks:** This has been a regular feature of the conference and each year distinguished scholars are invited to give a talk on one of the sub-themes of the conference. Each speaker is given an hour to make the presentation followed by discussion. This year, we had twenty two featured speakers giving their talks on a variety of topics related to ELT in India.
8. **Workshops:** There were fourteen workshops conducted by both Indian and international scholars on different aspects of ELT during this conference. The topics for the workshop had a larger focus on CLT and developing language skills. There were a few workshops which emphasised the need for using language games and empowering learners. A few workshops on life skills were well received and

appreciated. Workshops has been a regular feature of our conferences every year.

9. Pair discussions: This was a unique event this year and a modified version of a long debate which has been an annual feature. Eight scholars were identified to participate in this programme. They were divided into four pairs and each one was given a topic and the two pair partners were to put forth their views in the form of a debate. However, since some invited scholars could not be present in the conference, the debate was restricted to two pairs. The first proposal discussed was: 'Has English Teaching failed to meet the aspirations of India's youth?' This proposition was debated by Prof Neeru Tandon and Prof Mukti Sanyal. The debate remained inconclusive. The participants on the second debate argued on the proposition 'Right to English in India: Myth, Mirage and Reality'. The discussants were Prof Rajendra Jadeja and Prof Pushpa Lata. The two seemed to agree on most points and differ in a few and these few points were put across forcefully for the audience to savour.

- 10 Round Table: This was one more unique experiment that was tried out in this year's conference. Six very senior professors participated in this event and presented their views on the Indian Traditions in ELT. Quite a few indigenous strategies used to teach languages were suggested that appropriate the modern methods of teaching English. The round table was monitored by Prof Kripal K Gautam.

- 11 Along side we also had a few sponsored talks. These were delivered by people who had sponsored various events and funded some sessions. Each sponsor was given a brief slot of about 15 minutes to make a presentation. Some of these were very useful and one such talk that stood out was by Mr Vishwanath, CEO of Karadi Path whose insights into teaching in general and teaching languages in particular was appreciated by all the members attending the conference.

ELTAI which is 50 years old, is the largest body of teachers of English in the country. It has more than 5000 members teaching English in primary schools to departments of English offering postgraduate studies. These members have formed themselves into 50 chapters to function smoothly and are spread across the country. And the Association publishes 5 journals which reach out the members either online or in physical form. The conference which is reported here was a befitting tribute in its Golden Jubilee Year. The success of the

conference is attributed to the tireless working of the following: Patron Dr S Rajagopalan, President Prof Sanjay Arora, Vice Presidents Drs Shraavan Kumar (Conference Chair) and Shekar Reddy, Secretary Dr Elango, Joint Secretaries Mr. Prakash and Coordinator Dr Mangai, Prof Ramani, Dr Harleen and a host of others along with a strong band of volunteers.

There were quite a few takeaways from the conference for the members to ponder about. Though it is difficult to list all of these, we would like to share a few of these ideas with our readers. The Sri Lankan method of reaching the unreached – providing teacher training in village schools by reaching out to them is a very good experiment. Perhaps, ELTAI can take it up. One of the suggestions that came from a panel discussion was about increasing the outreach by exploiting ICT resources. This would facilitate teacher training, assessment and also follow up strategies. There are associations that have been visible because of their publications. It should be possible for ELTAI to use the Indonesian model and also the Philippines model to publish books based on the conferences and make them available at large. This would not only provide visibility but also add to the coffers of the Association. This same idea was expressed by a session on Teacher Tales as well. It is not just the plenaries, panel discussions that gave us scope for mulling over new ideas, even the workshops also contributed in this direction. One such was novel ways of using literature for language teaching and making the classroom a welcome place rather than a boring place. All these ideas focus on modelling our teacher training programmes differently and developing our materials more imaginatively. ELTAI has adequate human resource to work in these areas.

The chief guest at the valedictory function was Sri Temjen Imna Along, Honourable Minister for Higher Education, Technical Education and Tribal Affairs, Nagaland. In his short but impressive speech he recounted how important it has become to learn English these days. Language which is a powerful tool of communication has wielded several results which guns and swords could not. He also added that a person's character is revealed by the use of language. Indian English which has today acquired global importance and needs to be developed without destroying our own culture and languages. The valedictory function was chaired by the Vice Chancellor Prof Balvinder Shukla. Dr Shraavan Kumar, the Conference Chair and the mainstay of the conference proposed the vote of thanks.

S Mohanraj