

Book Review

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PRABHU, NS

Perceptions of Language Pedagogy, Geetha D (ed.)

(Hyderabad, India: Orient Blackswan, 2019), 356 pp. ISBN 9789352876396.

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This book locates the concerns of English Language education soundly within the broader concerns of formal education, drawing on a deep understanding of epistemology and cognition as the foundation stones of learning and education. The book includes Prabhu's articles on language education from 1966 to the present, tracing, in the process, his varied roles as a teacher, teacher educator, materials developer, researcher, and as a progressive and liberal thinker who is constantly preoccupied with knowledge development and the educational process.

The central ideas in this book can be grouped under four broad categories:

- the nature of human knowledge and the educational enterprise
- what language education ought to aim at
- the role of syllabi, teaching-learning materials, classroom activities, and teachers in achieving those aims
- how language teachers can be nurtured to function productively within that paradigm of education and language education.

Prabhu's very first published article, 'Rational Approach to Language Teaching', bears witness to this broad scope of his research. Instead of getting lost in the fashions of second language education represented by slogans about methods and approaches in language research, this article squarely points to the central challenges in terms of the value of the *goals* of language teaching, and the effectiveness and efficiency of the *means* to achieve those goals:

What is necessary is to re-define, clearly, the objectives of English teaching at each level, particularly in the undergraduate level, keeping in mind both the limitations of our educational system and the changed status of English in post-Independence India . . . Having defined the objective, one has to find the best method of achieving it.

The subsequent body of articles represents a lifetime's journey towards the clarity of conceptual thinking needed for engaging with these two challenges. Some of the core ideas that emerge in the course of this journey include:

- the importance of language curricula oriented to the capacities needed for the *mathetic function* of language (that of the construction and evaluation of knowledge)
- the relevance of the distinction between *ideation* as knowledge building (pure research) and *ideology* as the application of the results of ideation to make the world a better place (applied or instrumental research), and the relevance of the distinction to (language) education
- the importance of teachers (and students) moving away from total certainty to a sense of the *plausibility* of the ideas that we engage with, and its role in teacher education
- the role of learning materials and of teachers in triggering and guiding the process of learning, instead of determining what gets learnt; and the role of the learner's struggle in the process of active self-directed independent learning.

Some of the articles in the book that develop these ideas include:

- ‘Materials as Support; Materials as Constraint’
- ‘There is no Best Method — Why?’
- ‘The Mathetic Function of English as a World Language’
- ‘Teaching is at Most Hoping for the Best’
- ‘Ideation and Ideology’
- ‘Plausibility’

Informed by this paradigm of education, the remaining articles offer critiques of the existing policies, practices, and ideas that are relevant to researchers and practitioners in the field of language education. For instance, the field trial of Task Based Teaching and Learning in the Bangalore Project (discussed in ‘Rethinking Language Pedagogy’) is located in a theory of education grounded in a theory of cognition, but the details of its implementation are located in the field of English language education in India. The challenges facing language education explored in other articles include:

- Language through literature
- Educational reform in ELT
- Communicative Teaching
- Second Language Pedagogies
- Applied linguistics and language education

If we accept the above remarks as a reasonable account of what the book offers, then the choice of its title is unfortunate: it fails to signal the value of Prabhu's ideas for the enterprise of learning and education in general. The title and the references locate the

book's lineage in the fields of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics. As is obvious from our remarks, we do not share this view. Its deeper value lies way beyond these fields.

The book is not about (English) Language Pedagogy (in India) but about the role of language in education, cognition, and epistemology. It is primarily about the importance of ideation and the mathetic function of language. Ideation, as Prabhu sees it, is knowledge building. Now, an idea that Prabhu has championed, that of language *through* literature, is that learners acquire higher order language capacities by engaging with the subject matter of literature. Its natural extension is language through mathematics, the sciences, and the humanities disciplines. Its converse is language *for* literature and the other disciplines. When this is combined with the ideas of ideation and mathetic function, what emerges is a powerful result, that of 'language through and for academic inquiry'. A natural consequence of this is that helping the young to develop the capacity to engage in the mathetic function of language — its role in constructing knowledge — is the primary responsibility of language education.

And this means that language education must contribute to helping the young develop the language component of forms of inquiry, academic and otherwise. Prabhu's own engagement with the concepts of ideation, ideology, knowledge, knowledge construction, mathetic function, nature of learning, and so on are part of conceptual clarification as a branch of philosophical inquiry that investigates the world of ideas. In sum, the direction of language education that the book ultimately points to has far-reaching consequences for the way we think about formal education and the role of language education in that enterprise.

This book is a valuable addition to the literature on knowledge growth and educational progress not only in the field of language education but also in various other areas of human inquiry.