

Praveen Singh (PS) Talks to Dr. Tara Mohanan (TM)

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Praveen Singh is a trained English language teacher. He also likes to study linguistics and philosophy.

Tara Mohanan did her Ph.D. in Linguistics from Stanford University and went on to teach at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where she developed (along with K.P. Mohanan), an inquiry-oriented undergraduate programme in Linguistics. She is well known for her work in Theoretical Linguistics, through several research papers and books. She is also the co-founder of ThinQ.

PS: Could we start with your biographical journey as a linguist and an educator.

TM: I always wanted to be a doctor, but for various reasons, I couldn't do that. I ended up doing a Bachelors and a Masters in English Literature in Kerala. We had, in the M.A. programme, one paper in linguistics which I really enjoyed. Having finished M.A., I did some teaching—a year in Kerala and a year in Tamil Nadu. Being the junior-most staff member, I got to teach linguistics, which nobody liked to teach. That's how I got even more interested in it. Later, I went to CIEFL, which is now EFLU (English and Foreign Languages University) in Hyderabad and did a diploma and an MLitt. in linguistics. Later, when (K. P.) Mohanan was doing his Ph.D. at MIT, I was working, doing all kinds of odd jobs. Also, my daughter was very young, so I was away from linguistics for a while. But at MIT, I audited several courses and was part of grad[uate] student discussion groups, so I hadn't completely lost touch. It was only when I went back to linguistics at Stanford that I began to get over my disappointment of not having been able to do medicine.

PS: What were some of the things that you learnt during your Ph.D. that have stood out for you?

TM: During the Ph.D., I learnt a whole lot of things both about teaching and learning and about research. I found that we all have different paces of learning. So now at times, I feel terrible about a classroom where you have sixty children. All of them being taught the same thing, having to do the same exams in very cramped situations—intellectually, emotionally, physically cramped situations. That was not the kind of learning we had at Stanford, partly because of the freedom to learn, where we were not pushed into

anything particular, and partly because we could learn together. In our first semester, one of our professors, Joan Bresnan, told us to work in affinity groups. From the political implications of affinity groups, this became a kind of intellectual growth community. That kind of peer learning and peer support was immense.

PS: Do you think that something like the affinity groups can be made to work even in our Indian classrooms, and even at lower school levels, given the teacher-student ratio and other constraints?

TM: I think this can work from at least Class 8 onwards. It has worked for me for classes with over a hundred students. In NUS, we tried it with 400 students. We've tried it in a workshop for Class 8, 9 and 10 at a regular school in India. The class size was twenty. We got them to form groups of four and five each and gave them a problem where they had to work together. And [sic] one of the delightful surprises was that the students said, "we learnt that we are learning by ourselves and we learn much more when we learn together." So that for me is a validation that groups work.

PS: Do you think that the freedom to learn things that you are interested in is lacking in the Indian classrooms or Indian academic situations?

TM: Absolutely. I think that freedom to learn is lacking not just in schools but even in colleges, in postgraduate learning and even in the course work for Ph.D.'s.

PS: What other things impressed you and were there other instances that left an indelible impact on you that shaped the way you taught things afterwards?

TM: I heard a professor say that you could tell the quality of a department by the way

the professors talk, not about their own work but about their students' work because they are excited by it. In fact, that became part of a habit in the linguistics programme that we started and developed at the NUS.

PS: Could you elaborate for us how this thing spilt over to your programme at NUS?

TM: We started it in Singapore almost the day after I graduated. We took a year to develop the academic programme as well as the administrative aspects and the educational philosophy underlying the programme. We decided that we were not going to use any textbooks in the first two years of the four-year undergraduate programme. Linguistics has this advantage that without going to a laboratory, you have a natural laboratory right there in the classroom. This was particularly true in Singapore because you had different languages spoken around you—several varieties of Chinese, what they call dialects but are languages in their own right—Hokkien, Hakka, Mandarin, Teochew; and there was Malay and Tamil and of course English, the shared language. From day one, we got students to engage with and monkey around with data to see if they could find patterns. And [sic] those that spoke the same language, we got them to work together in what we called a “play group”. We had that for phonology and for syntax, and we'd get them to bring up data and look at patterns, form their generalizations, and that was how the journey began. So for the first year, the classroom sessions were really for building the tools for doing linguistics and the tools for thinking and inquiry. We focused on things like: How do you classify these things? How do you define certain things? How do you state a generalization?

Also, how do you engage with a question? One of the things we said was: first figure out what the question is asking for, figure out what is given to you by the question. What is it that you need to bring into it, and how do you formulate it. We never had a single closed-book exam for any of our courses. In the open-book exams, you can actually see how much they think, how much they can bring to bear on what they had learnt over a semester and how they unpack something that's completely new. The exams and the evaluation were geared not towards looking at how much students had mastered but what progress they had made from before. It was extremely labour-intensive, so I don't think I'd expect any faculty to invest that kind of time. But is it possible to do this in a less labour-intensive way? Definitely.

PS: Was there a certain purpose of education that you had in mind which got into the way you developed the linguistics programme at NUS?

TM: For this programme, we started out with very specific goals. But the specifics were so general, that I don't think that's the kind of goals you would normally find. We thought: of those who do a Bachelor's degree in linguistics, how many are going to go on to become linguists? Very few. Those very few need to be able to get enough content of linguistics and alongside that, the ability to go further and do linguistics on their own, do research. So, for that, you have to empower them to think about things, to be able to do things and to construct knowledge on their own. This is true of any discipline, not just linguistics—whether it's physics or sociology or any other discipline. A physics bachelor's degree holder doesn't always become a physicist. So, what is it that those who do not wish to pursue

linguistics in the future would still take away from the program? And that was the modes [sic] of thinking that linguistics was able to give them. That was the force.

PS: What were some of the things that you initially thought would work in classrooms but somehow did not work? Were there any failures that you too faced, and how did you cope with those?

TM: The biggest obstacle I faced was people not wanting to think. I got feedback from students who said that there was too much thinking in the class and too much rigour; but that was like a failing in something like 20 percent of the students in a large class. So would I give it up? I don't think so.

I found other ways of keeping the rigour and the thinking by easing people into it rather than going full blast right from the beginning. I also realized that it's not just something having [sic] to do with students at higher levels, but that it happens because of the education at much lower levels. You need to get children to start thinking and learning on their own, and recognizing that not everything that they want to know is already out there, and somebody can tell them. They need to know that there are things that we know nothing about, and there are things that they have to find out which nobody else may know.

PS: What do you think about the overall language learning and language teaching situation as is practised globally and also locally in Indian classrooms? What do you think can be done for the teachers and also by the teachers, that will improve the situation?

TM: Well, this is something we've thought about, talked to teachers about and done workshops on. Essentially, language

learning for a child should happen in a way that the child doesn't know that she is learning something. Language learning should happen as a by-product. And for that, the best way is through things that they enjoy doing. For example, watch small [sic], enjoyable movies with them in the classroom. Read to them, have them read.

Our daughter learnt to read at a very young age and one of the things that we used to do with her was to read with her. We'd read to her stories that [sic] she wanted to find out what happened afterwards, and then say that we're a bit busy and leave the storybook with her. She'd then look into the book and try to figure out herself to the best extent a child can and try to learn to read. You want to create situations in which they want to learn to read.

PS: Don't you think that this may be easier for parents to do with their children, but not for teachers in classrooms?

TM: It's possible for teachers too. One of the ways is (there may be others) if somebody can create (this would be for Grades one and two) let's say, small videos that can be shown in the class where you have the pictures, and you have the words where the children can follow them, and you also have a recording where a voice reads aloud the words on the screen. Children would learn to read. They would learn to listen and to pronounce, and they also enjoy it all. In a half-hour class, you can have ten minutes for the story; and then they talk about what they saw. That takes care of their comprehension and communication. Teachers should ask questions about what children would want to talk. I volunteered to try teaching in a [sic] second grade at a school in Pune. For some of the activities, it was their thinking

component that was active, where they had to do things with their mind, figure out how many squares there were in a grid, and so on. They arrived at different answers. They learnt by talking and listening. One activity was in teams of four and five. Children were given some stones and seeds, and they had to separate them into groups and give names to the groups. When they were done, the teams had to give their answers. Some said "beans and rocks"; others said "seeds and stones". They debated and argued over why it should be a stone and not a rock. During the discussion, some said, rocks are big and stones are small, so these are stones. As for beads, they said people make them, seeds happen on their own. They were classifying, conceptualizing, thinking on their own, differentiating, and communicating. It involved all of these.

PS: Can all this be done only in the child's mother tongue or can this also be done in second/foreign language? How do I go about teaching a class where the majority of speakers speak some regional language and are expected to learn another language at school?

TM: Well, one could start with, say, Marathi. Give the students pictures to look at and then give the students words for creating sentences or having dialogues, and ask them: "what do you think they are saying?" So, the children are guessing the meanings and in the process they are learning the language.

And [sic] then there's the immersion kind of thing. I really don't know which one works better, but my feeling is that they both need to be tried in any situation. Even if it's a purely English classroom with every student has some basic English, it is good to occasionally give them the

mother tongue word so that they know the concept and can connect it to the English word. Let's just take Hindi as the students' mother tongue and English as the target language, and this would apply to any other situation. Tell a story in Hindi and tell the same story in English and gradually build up their vocabulary; and then get to a point, in say six months, where you tell them: "No Hindi allowed. It doesn't matter if you make a mistake, just say it in English." Don't correct them every time, as long as you are getting the meaning. Their language will grow on its own at that age.

PS: It is often said that if it's two or three languages, then it is perhaps possible to manage but in a classroom with thirty or forty students where many of them speak several languages, do you think something similar could be done?

TM: That's fine. It doesn't matter if they mix up the languages. They will at some point get to where they will start separating them; and till then, as long as they are communicating, don't correct them. There's a striking example of this in my experience. This was in 1978 and this child I have in mind was five. Her family was driving me somewhere. We were six of us in the car, and this child said something to me in English. Then she turned around and said the same thing in Hindi, Telugu, Kannada and Konkani. I asked her, "Why did you do that?" She said, "Because everybody needs to know about it." She was able to do it because she spoke English at school, Hindi with her friends on the campus, she spoke to her household help in Telugu (this was in Hyderabad), and to her parents in Kannada and Konkani. Children can acquire multiple languages at the same time. We just don't use our imagination enough with children.

PS: Are there some teaching methods that you think language teachers in India, if exposed to, will benefit from? Do you think that some kind of training in linguistics could be of help to language teachers in India?

TM: For language teaching, I don't think any formal training in linguistics is going to help. Most people don't know anything about linguistics, but speak multiple languages perfectly; but what I would have them focus on, even in language learning, is on certain kind of thinking critically. I'll share something I tried with the second graders. I read out to them a version of the story of "The Three Little Pigs" (and they automatically joined me in reading a part of the story—the huffing and puffing).

At the end of it, I asked them, "how was this story different from your story?" The differences they told me were:

- the three little pigs: one is a farmer, another one a carpenter, and the third one, she is a dentist so she has a brick house. The farmer and the carpenter go to her house to be safe; and the wolf comes and huffs and puffs but cannot reach them.
- one of the pigs is a girl.

When I asked, "What does a carpenter do?", most of them said that a carpenter was one who painted. A few who knew what "carpenter" means told the others. They shared that with each other. That is also an example of peer learning and collective learning. So, it was language learning, vocabulary, and critical thinking. They were also putting their cognitive skills to use.

Another thing they said was, the pigs are very kind because when the wolf comes into the house through the chimney, they don't burn him by lighting a fire. Instead,

the dentist waits with her tools and when he appears, she pulls out his teeth so that he can't eat anyone anymore; and then she brings him and heals him because he is in pain. They are kind, because they help the wolf. These were [the] thoughts of the children. So, they were engaging in critical thinking, and also visible was their ethical sensitivity. This also is an instance of literature working for language teaching; it's just that you have to find the right stories.

PS: Are you suggesting that one of the things for the language teachers would be to look for the right kind of literature—the readings, the videos, the poetry, and so on.

TM: Yes, and there's another aspect to this. I read them the book *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein and at the end of my trial, I asked them what they thought of it. They said, we are cruel to trees and still the trees keep giving us so much. Something had struck them and you realise that you can teach a value system through this. It's not just language learning. We tend to compartmentalise things even in language teaching, but that doesn't have to be so.

PS: Isn't it that the same discovery procedures can be transferred to other domains such as maths, physics, sociology, literature, etc.?

TM: Yes, exactly.

PS: Do you think a similar thing can be done with young learners at primary and secondary levels to better their conceptual understanding in all subjects?

TM: Yes, it's possible, their developing tools of inquiry. That is one of our foci, and the goal is for the child to be able to discover knowledge and be able to create

his/her own knowledge. We do something we call "chalk-dropping" with the sixth graders (among other activities). You go to a class. They don't know what the object is and you drop it and you ask them: "What did I do?" They say, "You dropped it." "What happened?" Some might respond, "It broke into four pieces", or "It became powder."

"Imagine any piece of chalk, what would happen if you dropped it?"

When the learners respond, they're making a statement about a chalk falling in general. It becomes a generalization. What they did there was, they were reporting or describing what they saw. "Does it always happen? If you drop a thick chalk, does it also break?"

They say, if it is of such and such thickness and so on; and if you take a long one, or you take a short one, you vary these parameters. So, at the end of it you can say, "these are the 'variables' that you were using." Write them on the board: the length of the chalk, the material of the chalk, etc. They immediately understand the notion of the word "variable". They have already got the concept, which is then useful for all kinds of things afterwards.

Now you take a thick, soft mattress instead of the floor and change the height from which to drop the chalk and so on. Here they've started thinking about the range of possibilities, the kinds of variables, what they are. Get them to form small groups of three or four. They have to talk amongst themselves, and they have to take turns. We have to hear everyone's voice separately at least once during the class. Every child gets a chance to talk. Another thing is that if one of them is speaking, the others have to listen to that person. So, this way they are respecting the speaker, and in the process, they learn to articulate these things, formalize them and acquire clarity and precision of

statements. There's a certain kind of habit of mind and behaviour that comes into play here.

So in one half-hour class, you can build in a whole bunch of learning outcomes. So if B.Ed. courses were done very differently with these things in mind, starting with the goals like what do we want to accomplish, what do we want the children to be, and what do we want them to be able to do at the end of ten years of school. We start with that in mind and work backwards and have B.Ed. courses [that] help teachers, not teach them unnecessary fancy stuff. They have to learn ways of doing the kinds of things we've talked about, and using their imagination. The hard part, unfortunately, is changing the mindsets.

PS: What would be the key things that I should keep in mind assuming that I am the teacher whose job it is to teach not only a language but also something like math, physics, geography, etc., while performing all kinds of different roles?

TM: The very first thing for the teacher to know and be able to say is "I don't know everything". The next equally important thing is respect for the students, and not ever say, "that is stupid", or "you are wrong", or "shut-up." Those two would be the most critical aspects of any teacher; part of creating the environment for learning. Beyond that, as much as possible, get them to think rather than yielding to the urge to give them answers. Be able to hold back answers so that the students use their minds to arrive at them. Teachers should develop the sense of when to offer help. The mistakes children make are natural, and there is nothing wrong with them. They shouldn't go away with a sense of guilt or inferiority. That is absolutely crucial. Teachers should also get into the habit of

creating a sense of co-learning. If you respect the students, they will respect each other. You get them into the habit of listening to each other and learning equally from their peers as they do from the teacher. You build that habit from grade one. We've taught classes in schools where teachers sometimes sit in. They sit at the back of the class and talk amongst themselves. How do they, when they go to their class, expect the children to listen and to engage. Be role models, for the children are watching you all the time, and it matters to them how you treat them, how they see you treating other students, whether you are fair in your treatment. I think that makes a great difference.

The entire curriculum is sort of focused on content knowledge and memorizing. But you can get student sexcited about things, about how to do something in order to be able to learn something that you will never forget.

PS: Are you saying that the curriculum that the teachers have to stick to does not then become a serious issue, because you're saying that you are teaching the same curriculum, just that you have found a different way of teaching it?

TM: Let's admit that even the curriculum needs changing. The textbooks need huge amounts of changing. In fact, you have to start with the policymakers and the top educationists to change mindsets. The purpose of (formal) education should not merely be the learning of some smattering of English, or mathematical terms, or the sciences; instead, it should be a lot more. Even the cultivation of a value system should be part of education. The ability to critically understand and to inquire should be the focus.

PS: Thank you for sharing your insights and your time.