

Interview with Alan Maley on Practical Approaches for Teaching Writing

by Sharoon Sunny

Alan Maley's career in English Language Teaching began with The British Council in 1962. After post-graduate training at the University of Leeds under Prof. Peter Strevens and Prof. Pit Corder, he worked for the British Council in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, PR China and India over a period of 26 years. After resigning from the Council in 1988, he became Director-General of the Bell Educational Trust in Cambridge (1988-93). He then took up the post of Senior Fellow in the Department of English, National University of Singapore, where he stayed for 5 years. His last full-time post was as Dean and Professor of the Institute for English Language Education, Assumption University, Bangkok, where he set up new MA programmes.



Since retiring from Assumption in 2004, he has occupied a number of visiting professorial posts at Leeds Metropolitan, Nottingham, Durham, Malaysia (UKM), Vietnam (OU-HCMC) and Germany (Universitat Augsburg). He has published extensively and was series editor for the

Oxford Resource Books for Teachers for over 20 years. He continues to write for publication. He also remains active as a speaker at national and international conferences. He was a co-founder of The Extensive Reading Foundation, and of The C group: Creativity for Change in Language Education. He is a past-President of IATEFL, and was given the ELTons Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012.

Conversation text from SSN Chennai conference interaction.

Dated: Oct 26th, 2018

Time: 7:00 PM

Abbreviations: AM = Alan Maley; SS = Sharoon Sunny

SS: Alan, thank you for making time to talk to me especially at the end of a rather long day. This is perhaps a good time to share that I immensely enjoyed reading your book on creativity in the language classroom.

AM: You've read it? How did you get it?

SS: Yes, *Creativity and English Language Teaching: From Inspiration to Implementation* is available on Amazon.

AM: I know it is. It is very expensive but

AM: Thank you for buying it if somebody bought it i.e.

SS: It's a very insightful book. But I'd like to begin with how I became familiar with your work-my introduction to Alan Maley. During early days of my PhD classes, I met a lot of my professors to understand how I could fine-tune my research interest. When I met Prof. Jayshree Mohanraj and discussed my area of interest in writing, one of the first things she asked me was, "Have you read Alan Maley?" I said, "I haven't". She said, "Perhaps that's where you should start."

AM: So you started with that book?

SS: No, no. Not with that one; particularly with *Poem into Poem*. I started with you and with your articles and interviews. And what you say about using different elements in the English language classroom resonated with me. For example, you've said you use meditation.

AM: Well, that's one possibility.

SS: Also, theatre and music and there are the various other elements. We are whole people and we cannot live a language in isolation. But whenever I try to ask teachers to think about using

these various elements, I hit a barrier. What I hear is that, yes this is fantastic and I could use it but I honestly don't have the time. So I don't know how to get them to see the long-term benefits.

AM: There's no magical answer to that, is there? People say they haven't got the time but everyone's got the same amount of time. It is a question of how you deploy the time and I know (you are talking about teachers) teachers have an enormous amount to do and a lot of that is useless and pointless. There's no magical answer unfortunately. Only by example really.

SS: There aren't very many though

AM: Very many what?

SS: Teachers who lead by example

AM: No. Well you have to start with those who will. You may try to persuade large numbers of people that it is possible – but you will only get a few who will try it. And those are the ones you need to work with. It's human nature. And people are in the teaching profession for different reasons as well. Some are there to collect the money at the end of the month and get through the day with minimal damage or loss of feathers. It's sad I know but there isn't a magical answer.

I often suggest that teachers should try just one or two very small things, perhaps at the beginning of the class or at the end. Just leave 5 minutes and you can do something with those five or ten minutes and maybe you don't even need to do it every day. But do try small, small things and introduce new things. Once the kids latch on to it, it's good for the teacher as well. 'So tomorrow I'm doing a creative writing activity. Something to look forward to.' Many of these activities are very simple, so simple you won't believe it - and the kids love them. They really get into them. The activities don't take very long and students will even do them outside class once they get interested. The teachers will say, 'You know we did this and the kids loved it. Can we have more of this?' I think you can start really small and that is really the only kind of advice I can give you. I wish I had a magical philosopher's stone or something.

SS: For the longest time I've believed that using creative writing strategies in the classroom can improve overall writing abilities. I've not had very many takers.

AM: No?

SS: No. The learners love it because you can bring in so many elements.

AM: Absolutely. It helps the other kind of writing as well.

SS: Yes. It does.

(Sangeetha: Do some students get left out in this kind of a classroom? For some students their creative juices begin to flow and they benefit, but do the left-brained students get left out?)

AM: I don't think they do, actually. No. Although there's a lot of controversy about that anyway. You know people are not, with very few exceptions, wholly left-brained or wholly right-brained. So left-brained people also stand to benefit, since it supplies a mental activity that they don't otherwise get. And the right-brained ones of course love it and it is a great relief to them that they don't have to do all those left-brained things that actually make them marginalised - because they don't like doing them or don't do them very well. No, I think it's something for everybody but it's not a panacea. It just happens to work in most cases. You know I've never...let me think. No I've never had a creative writing session that didn't work at some level for everyone.

SS: I'll add to that, too. I tried using creative writing strategies for over 4 years and I have to say that it worked--it worked to enhance other kinds of writing. Now my aim is to help teachers understand that it works and that it is definitely not a waste of time, as they often see it. I want teachers to understand that this is not to fill a gap and that if used consistently it can produce striking results...

AM: Right. There are tremendous benefits. Benefits in lexical acquisition, grammatical reinforcement, you know and stylistic, and I'm saying stylistic in the broader sense of .the way texts are put together, they've got some understanding after they've done it themselves so that, in terms of reading, for instance, it helps with developing reading proficiency too.

S: Students begin to appreciate the language and the beauty.

AM: Yes, but that is true for the students but you are talking about the difficulty in persuading teachers that it's worth the investment.

SS: What was fascinating for me about the book...

AM: The BIG book...(laughter)

SS: The use of the word creativity was fascinating to me, because that's what I'm currently researching. What are teachers' beliefs about creativity and how do those beliefs impact the teaching of writing. So when I ask teachers if they think creativity is important, they say yes, it is absolutely necessary. But when I ask them if they can elaborate how they enhance this in the classroom, then I hit a big, empty, blank wall.

AM: Hmm...it's a blank wall. That's why you need to show how very simple things can be done. You don't have to be a genius to do that.

SS: So when you said you'd be releasing your haiku book...

AM: But that's not a teaching book. I want to focus on my own creative writing from now on. I am doing one last EFL book. It will come out as a freely downloadable book with the BC on their website like the other two. I've got 20 people. 20 experienced people, some of them very famous, some of them not famous at all, contributing one chapter each. They are drawn from a variety of countries with a variety of teaching contexts, from primary to university. We've tried cover all the angles as far as possible. And I asked them to follow more or less the structure of my talk at this conference: your earliest language learning experiences before you became involved in the teaching business, the places, people, books, ideas that influenced you. And as a result what are your beliefs? And then at the end I've asked them to give one or two teacher development activities which could be used in training sessions. The deadline for the submission is 31st of December, then it should come out by Sept. next year probably. They'll probably put it on their website, *English Agenda* or whatever they call it.

SS: I'll look forward to it.

Coming back to your haikus, the reason I'm excited about the haiku collection is because I'm asking teachers to write haikus themselves so as to understand the finer nuances of writing so that they will then be better able to teach it.

AM: Yes, of course this is how it should work.

SS: So the first place is to start with writing haikus.

AM: Well, it's very easy to write a bad haiku but never mind. I'd rather write a bad one than not write one at all. The good thing about haikus, and they have been used in mother tongue teaching for years and years, is the discipline they require. If you want to play by the rules, you know you need 5, 7, 5 syllables, so they have to go through a whole lot of reformulation to get the right number of syllables, which means they are recycling whatever language they have acquired quite deeply. So I agree that haikus are a good place to start...

SS: I ask teachers if they know what a syllable is.

AM: I'm sure you get some very funny answers too... (laughter)

SS: The other question I had was about the Asia Teachers Group -

AM: Which no longer exists. It became defunct around 2014. We met in a different country each year and that year we were to meet in Nepal again and that was the year of the devastating earthquake. Unfortunately, none of the other members offered to run it in their country instead - and without somebody taking it on, we couldn't do it.

SS: How did it work though?

AM: It worked voluntarily. I mean we had round about 40 members overall but they didn't always come to everything. Every year we would run one workshop lasting a week in one of the countries in the region. So we had run two or three in Nepal. Two or three in Indonesia, in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and one in China. We would be together for a week - sometimes 10, 15 or 20 people. Every time I would set them a task beforehand so they would write before coming. They would come with some texts which they could share and comment on and do peer editing and everything. Then we would have sessions where they would be writing new material. We always had one day where we went on a writing excursion day to a place of interest. If we were here, for instance, we might have gone to Mahabalipuram, which would then have provided the stimulus. We would spend the whole day out - writing, writing, enjoying and playing around - and then come back and write up our notes and jottings. The next day we would share what we'd written. And when participants went back, they would write full drafts and send them to me and I would do an edit - and then it would be published.

So after every workshop that we did, we published a book.

SS: What were they called?

AM: I don't know...creative writing or poems. (See the list in the attachment) We usually did separate ones for stories and poems. Some of them would go back to try these things and come back with their practical ideas for the next workshop, or some would conduct workshops for local teachers themselves. Some of these people took it upon themselves to make this happen because you know, they weren't high up in the hierarchy. Most of them were simply classroom teachers.

SS: But they were passionate?

AM: Yes, they were very passionate. They would come paying their own airfares, which could sometimes represent a month's salary. So they were really committed to it and they got a sense of community as well. They were coming from a lot of different places and learning a lot about other places.

SS: I was so excited when I read about your interview with an Iranian named Ruzbeh where you said you considered all types of writing as creative: emails, blogs, essays, letters.

AM: Yes. You know some of the run-of-the-mill kind of writing tends to become very dull. I used to teach writing at NUS, and my undergraduates had some very funny ideas about writing. Even the MAs. They thought that if they were writing something academic, it had to be lengthy, convoluted, using high-sounding vocabulary and all those things which make it unreadable. Writing needs a personal voice.

SS: One of the things that I've always argued for is that each of us can build a writerly voice.

AM: Yes, you can. I used to write things and then someone would say, I knew it was you. It couldn't have been anyone else. That is a high compliment.

SS: The article that you wrote about researchers and teachers, I loved that one. I sent it to a few of my professors and they loved it, too.

AM: You did? But that doesn't change anything, does it?

SS: No. it doesn't.

AM: You know there is a vested interest in nothing changing. Going back to developing a personal voice in academic writing, I had an MA student who wrote a very interesting thesis on this very subject. How to develop a personal voice in academic writing. It was really good. One of the best I've seen actually. She worked on it very, very hard. But the idea that academic writing has to be conformist and dull is very deeply entrenched.

Elmore Leonard was an American who wrote detective stories. He was very dismissive and had scathing things to say about people who wrote enormously long sentences and all of these things. There is an article which lists ten things not to do as a writer - you'll find it if you Google his name. And one of them is "cut the hooptedoodle." It sounds very funny, but it is very, very true.

When I taught my writing courses at NUS, I did a lot of background reading on process writing and all of the stuff that we are familiar with. But I found that when we used creative writing, the expository kind of writing also improved. I did a survey way back then. I think I polled about 90 teachers worldwide and asked if they believed that improving creative writing

also improved other kinds of writing and 90% of them said, of course, yes. But of course, you can put this in front of people's eyes and show them and everything - but unless they are ready to commit to it themselves, what can you do?

SS: It's a chicken and egg thing, really. If you are not doing this while growing up, then you will not do it as a teacher.

AA: I agree. You have to do it yourself.

SS: I read this research article that said long term, consistent training does help. However, short-term workshops don't do much since teachers come in, listen and then go back to doing what they were doing.

AM: Yes, and this was something we noticed about that group. I said earlier that not everybody came to everything but there was a core group, you know this thing went on for over 10 years, so they would have come for 4 or 5 of these and then they started taking off on their own.

SS: So do you hold workshops?

AM: Yes, occasionally. I mean I'm 81, so I'm getting a bit old.

SS: I told Prof. Gunashekar that I'd be meeting you here

AM: Did he say, "Is he still alive?" (Loud laughter).

AM: I do it not just for teachers but also for others too. There are people who meet for Zen meditation and we'll be looking at haikus with them because there's a link between meditation and writing haikus. I'll be doing that over a weekend.

SS: I've been working with teachers on using mindfulness.

AM: Yes, teachers need to create a space for themselves or else you get wiped out. Teacher burn-out is all too common.

SS: Alan, it's been an enjoyable and insightful conversation this evening. I won't take more of your time. Thank you again for your patience and offering your perspectives for a wider audience.

AM: Oh. that's ok. I'm happy to answer any more questions you have over email.

SS: I will write again soon over email.