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Getting on the autonomy train – a life-changing experience

It all started in 1993, when I heard of a new destination in language teaching – “pedagogy for autonomy”. I bought my *ticket* with the usual enthusiasm, but I had no idea that I was taking one of the biggest steps in my professional life. The *autonomy train* departed from the University of Minho, in Braga, Portugal, driven by Flávia Vieira and her team.

They offered a 30-hour *journey* to teachers of English, and the thirty *passengers* who embarked on the discovery of new pedagogical horizons had the opportunity to have a global view of the landscape and record the most relevant episodes along the way.

One year after this first adventure, Flávia invited me to join her team at the University. I left the secondary school where I had been teaching English and German for 18 years, and started teaching a FL Teaching Methodology

course, and doing pedagogical supervision of student teachers in training.

This second stage of my *journey* was much more demanding than the first one, but also much more rewarding, because besides having access to *guides* authored by recognized authorities in the field, such as Anita Wenden, Barbara Sinclair, David Little, David Nunan, Henri Holec, Leni Dam, Leo van Lier, Leslie Bobb Wolf, Peter Voller, Phil Benson, Philip Riley, Richard Smith, Terry Lamb, just to mention a few, I had the privilege to meet some of them in some international *stations* along the way.

Last September, the *autonomy train* incidentally stopped at the secondary school I had left, which represented a new challenge to me. As I didn't want to put an end to my *journey*, I immediately tried to find company for going on. I managed to form a group of about twenty colleagues, from different disciplinary areas, with whom I have been organizing a few small *trips* to some of the most representative *places* I visited while *travelling* as a member of Flávia's *crew*.

We haven't gone far, due to a number of constraints, but I believe I have brought a small seed of change to a rather conservative context. In fact, never before had I gone on such interesting pedagogical *outings* with colleagues from disciplinary areas like Mathematics and Philosophy.

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Taking the Bull by its Horns: Zakia Sarwar's Pro-Autonomy Approach to Large Classes in Pakistan (Part I)

Richard Smith

Introduction

Zakia Sarwar is well-known in Pakistan and internationally as the 'mother' (one of the founders, and the leading light) of SPELT, the

Society of Pakistani English Language Teachers. She devotes much of her time to this association, but until quite recently she has also been a research and professional development consultant at the Centre of

English Language, Aga Khan University. She is also the Chair of the Committee on English Language Teaching in the national Higher Education Commission, which is now introducing Applied Linguistics into universities at BA level onwards for the first time since the country's inception in 1947. As a teacher educator and researcher, her main field of interest has been developing innovative methodology and materials for large classes, which constitute a widespread challenge in Pakistani education.



I interviewed Zakia at her home in Karachi in November 2007, at the end of the 23rd SPELT conference (where I had been invited to give talks on learner and teacher autonomy). Below I use excerpts from the interview as a basis for profiling Zakia's work in the same field. I shall also refer to the session she and Fauzia Shamim facilitated at the conference, the articles and book chapters Zakia has published, and subsequent correspondence I have had with Zakia via email. First, though, a little more about SPELT and its annual conference.

The Society of Pakistani English Language Teachers (SPELT)

SPELT has existed as a professional forum for language educators since 1984. Most of its 1000 members, spread across the whole country, are involved with the teaching of English as a foreign/second language, but it has recently widened its membership to teachers of Urdu. SPELT organizes professional development programmes, encourages teacher-research, collaborates with government agencies to develop textbooks, networks with sister organizations worldwide

and actively promotes environmental, peace and human rights issues. One unique feature of the association is its 'travelling conference', which begins in Karachi and takes international speakers to Lahore and Islamabad by way of (in 2008) Multan and Abbottabad. This enables greater participation from teachers who would be unable to travel away from home for economic or cultural reasons.

Large class teaching

Apart from SPELT, Zakia's other major contribution to ELT in Pakistan and elsewhere has been her practical innovations in the area of large class teaching. To put this in context, while most English teachers in the world face an everyday reality of large class teaching, the problems involved have rarely been tackled in mainstream ELT literature. An exception was the work of the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes project led by Dick Allwright (Lancaster University) and Hywel Coleman (University of Leeds) back in the 1980s. In summing up some of the findings of the project, based on questionnaire responses from Indonesian, Japanese, Nigerian, Senegalese and South African teachers, Coleman (1989) listed four of the major problems teachers in large classes face (cited in Sarwar 2000):

- 1) feeling self-conscious, nervous, uncomfortable;
- 2) disciplinary and class management problems (noise level etc.);
- 3) difficulty of giving attention to individual students;
- 4) difficulty of evaluating oral/written work of so many learners.

In one article reporting on her own innovations, Zakia refers to this description and writes:

'[This] dismal scenario ... plagues most EFL environments including Pakistan where I teach. There is no option under the circumstances, other than taking the bull by its horns and struggling through the challenges' (Sarwar 2000: 36).

The rest of this article (including Part II, which will appear in the next issue of *Independence*) will profile the ways in which Zakia has herself 'taken the bull by its

horns', developing viable strategies to counteract at least some of the problems inherent in large class teaching.

Retrospectively, Zakia sees this work as having fallen into three phases (the second and third phases will be described in Part II). First, though, some insights in her own words, from the Karachi interview, regarding her early career:

Early career

Zakia, can you tell me where you started your teaching career?

I first taught in a public college – that is a strange phenomenon peculiar to the [Indo-Pakistan] sub-continent which covers two years of higher secondary, and two years of undergraduate – ages 14 to 18 or 20.

What kind of a teacher were you back then?

I was always a very proactive person, and I always believed in teacher-student rapport. The very first incident that surprised everyone in college was when I had to go somewhere and I said to the students, 'Look, I've got to go to a conference, will you do the work I set you while I'm away?'. And they not only gladly agreed, but in fact did go and sit in the classroom and worked while I was away on leave. The principal had said it would be impossible, but I've always had faith in my students, I've always believed that they want to learn and that we have to find ways to reach them, and find ways they can learn.

I did this without training of any kind – in Pakistan most English teachers still have a background in literature, and the belief is 'if you know English then you can teach English'.

I'd had a teacher when I was doing my own BA in Political Science who had just come from America – she would divide us into groups and just before exams she would call different groups at different times to come to her. So it was a kind of peer learning and support system. When I began teaching I started to follow the same pattern close to exam time – we'd have a party cum study session with each group.

So I'd always had a relationship with my students and I used to remember all their names, but then the numbers started growing, from about 40 to around 150 (175 when I

retired in 1999). This rise in class size was a general phenomenon because of the spread of mass education. I started losing heart and even decided I would quit teaching.

You know, if you go back to traditional learning in the subcontinent, it was a totally inductive approach: students would discuss things amongst themselves and come back to the *guru* with questions. This goes to show that, even in olden times, good teaching has been about students taking responsibility for their learning themselves and teachers and students having a good rapport. But when mass education came and people started valuing a piece of paper more than learning itself, a lot of things started happening that were contrary to learning. There was a move away from learning to achievement.

Anyway, to get back to the story, I became very frustrated, but my sister encouraged me to come to Australia to study for a Diploma [at the University of Sydney in 1982]. That was the turning point in my life which really changed everything, and my approach to teaching found a new direction.

And how did it influence you?

Before leaving Sydney, my Dip. TEFL tutor had asked me 'What are you going to do when you go back to Pakistan?', and I said 'Well, I guess I'll continue as before and throw everything out of the window that I've learned here!'. I couldn't imagine that conditions would have changed – and I hadn't yet realized the change that had happened to me.

The Diploma did change my approach – I used to think nothing could be done, but when I went back to teaching, I realized I couldn't go back to the standard practice of 'Open books to page 10!'. I knew very well that students had to find answers themselves to take anything in. I think that was the beginning of my work with learner autonomy because I realized that explaining and telling would not work., because a language can only be learnt through use. Of course, I didn't frame my practice as 'autonomy' at that time, but I did call it 'individualization' when I first reported on my research.

Phase 1 of innovation (1983–1985): Ideas for individualized learning

After she completed the Diploma at the University of Sydney, Zakia embarked on a teacher-research project entitled ‘Teaching English as a foreign language with limited resources’ (1983–85). Retrospectively, she considers this as ‘Phase 1’ of an overall project which has taken up her career since then, and which aims to investigate what materials, strategies and approaches can be practically used to teach English in under-resourced EFL environments. (She characterizes these as having large classes, outdated and inflexible syllabi, a faulty assessment system and untrained teachers [Sarwar 2002]).

During Phase 1 she experimented in her own teaching over a period of three years by laying on a special voluntary class with communicative methodology and materials in a public college, teaching classes of more than 100 each time (Sarwar 2002). The innovations she introduced are described in more detail in an article published some years later (Sarwar 1991/2001), and this is the main source for my summary here.

The course Zakia arranged was a 50-hour remedial one that focused on reading comprehension and writing skills and was not a part of the regular classes, and thus did not have to follow a prescribed syllabus. It was a voluntary, non-credit course, taught for 2 hours three times a week for a duration of about nine weeks. In the first year, 104 volunteers, selected on a first-come first-served basis, agreed to stay on after regular classes had ended in order to take the course. The students were young female adults between 16 and 20 years of age, false beginners who had studied English for about seven years. They had had little or no exposure to English except for studying it as a subject in the Faculty of Humanities.

On the first day Zakia suggested to the class and gained agreement from them that 50 hours were not sufficient for tangible improvement to be made and that students would therefore supplement classwork by following a self-monitored learning programme that included listening, reading and writing. She devised activities they could do on their own and referred to the whole course as a ‘Self-Learning Programme’ (SLP).

One of the most important guiding principles that she developed at this time for large class teaching was that of *building rapport*. As she says (Sarwar 1991/2001), ‘It is only through the proper rapport that an atmosphere conducive to learning can be built up. Also, “humanizing” a large class is perhaps the only way to motivate learning’.

Zakia still feels that all of the following techniques or principles which she began to develop at that time can be successful in building rapport and so ‘humanizing’ large class situations:

- *voluntary learning*: Her first experimental classes were entirely voluntary; Zakia has extended the principle since then to compulsory classes, involving students in decisions about the programme to be followed, i.e. negotiating the syllabus (see Part 2 of this article, in the next issue).
- *background questionnaire*: A questionnaire is filled out by students early on, concerning background, attitudes, perceived needs and socioeconomic and ethnolinguistic community, which provides the teacher with an insight into the students as individuals.
- *group-formation*: Students form their own groups of three or four with friends; the group is given a number, and students are asked both to sit together in class, and to do work together outside class.
- *name tags* on 3”x 4” cards with the student’s group number also. The use of these leads to what Zakia calls ‘the magic of the first name’, describing how as a result of using the cards there was definitely a better rapport between the various groups as well as with her as teacher.
- *profile cards*: Points worth knowing about anyone were brainstormed on the blackboard, and these points were categorized and put in an order acceptable to everyone; students were then asked to prepare their own profile card for the teacher, with a photograph. Prizes were given to the best-presented cards.

Other innovations Zakia developed at this time included a number of activities which students could engage in repeatedly during their own time outside class.

As she told me in our interview, '[For Phase 1] I developed three or four activities which became 'classic' and which can be used to encourage learner autonomy and improve

language proficiency in an under-resourced environment, that are very down to earth and related to problems our students have. For example, listening is nowhere in our curriculum but I firmly believe it's a gateway to all knowledge, so I devised a radio news activity'. The instructions for this activity are reproduced below:

Radio News (SLP #1)

Aim: This exercise will improve your listening skills. It will also improve your note-taking skills.

Step 1: Make the following grid in your English Language Proficiency workbook:

Example	Time	Doer/Person	Event	Place
	Yesterday	Prime Minister	Inaugurated Conference	Karachi

Step 2: Listen to the radio news at a time convenient to you.

Tape only the headlines while listening to it.

Fill in the grid as you listen to the news. See example above.

Step 3:

Put your workbook face down

Play back the recorded news.

Fill in the portions you missed in the first listening.

Play back the recorded news again.

Check your responses and complete the grid as you play the recorded news.

Look at a newspaper to check spellings/compare facts.

(from Shamim and Sarwar 2007 handout; reproduced here with permission)

As Zakia said in our interview, the idea for the Radio News activity came about because she was trying to find a way to expose her students to listening in the absence of resources in the form of specially published materials. She checked and found that most of the students

had radio cassette players, so she asked them to record the news in English and listen to it carefully on a regular basis.

The next activity ('Self-created cloze') was also her invention.

Self-created cloze (SLP # 2)

- Use your English textbook for this activity or ask your teacher for guidance.
- Try to write at least one paragraph every day.

The aim of this exercise is to improve your

- handwriting
- punctuation
- reading comprehension
- grammar
- proofreading skills

Step 1:

- a. Select a paragraph
- b. Mark or underline every 5th word
- c. Copy the passage in your best handwriting; leaving out the marked word, draw a blank line instead
- d. Close the book. Take a break.
- e. Fill in the blanks

Step 2:

Check your work:

1. Have you put in a margin?
2. Have you put in the date?
3. Have you indented the paragraph?
4. Does the writing look neat and tidy?

Open your textbook and check if you punctuated your work correctly.
Check your responses in the blanks.

Check the number of blanks and give yourself one mark for each correct answer.

(Note: If you score below 40% marks, first leave out every 8th/7th/6th word. Move to the next level after you have gained 80% marks).

Use a passage from the textbook or elsewhere, and copy it out, with a blank for every 5th word. After a while, come back to it and attempt to fill in the words. Check with reference to the original. If you score below 40% try doing the same with every 6th, 7th or 8th word instead. Move to the next level after you have gained 80% in marks.

(source: Shamim and Sarwar 2007 handout, reproduced with permission)

Colleagues with whom Zakia talked about her work were doubtful about this deviation from the standard cloze procedure using unseen texts. But she explained that her students were so weak that even after having seen the text and copying it, replacing every *nth* word with a dash, they would still not be able to fill in the words correctly. She also maintained that this variation of cloze would help learners use grammar in context and teach them self-editing, besides aiding comprehension.

Another of Zakia's innovations to encourage out-of-class learning was to set up a class lending library with old magazines and newspapers donated by her friends (most students did not have access to English newspapers or magazines otherwise). Students were responsible for keeping track of materials themselves and exchanging them with each other.

Zakia herself theorized her experimentation during 1985-87 in relation to what she had read about the 'Three Rs' of individualization (Sarwar 1991/2001): Re-education (that is, reconstructing the role of the teacher), Responsibility (learners taking charge of their

own learning) and Relevance (e.g. exploiting materials brought in by students themselves and not, for example, inappropriate materials imported from the west). To these, as we have seen, she had also added her own 'R', that of 'Rapport'.

At the same time as engaging in the above experimentation, Zakia founded SPELT, in 1984. This was the result of a need felt by Zakia and some of her colleagues, including Fauzia Shamim, to experiment and update themselves about ways of teaching languages through sharing ideas with each other, since the Pakistani government did not seem bothered about the plight of education in the country. As she described to me, this was like a child being born (including arrangements for the first annual conference), in that it took up all her energies, so that she could not carry on with her large classes research in a systematic way for some time. She did, though, publish a book with Fauzia Shamim on exploiting materials, and organized the first international large classes conference, in September 1991, in collaboration with the Lancaster-Leeds Large Class Project, attempting to bring into focus

the problems of large classes in under-resourced environments.

Retrospectively, Zakia characterizes 'Phase 1' of her own innovations in large class teaching as a period of experimenting with support for students to learn on their own outside class – putting on extra classes to encourage this even though she had a full workload. As she later wrote,

'Training learners to monitor their own learning is as important in a large class as in a small one – in fact, more important, because in a small class, work can be supervised by the teacher, but in a large class this is virtually impossible. Hence, the best chance that a learner in a large class has is to take responsibility for his own learning' (Sarwar 1991/2001: 131)

Later, Zakia began to turn her attention to normal class teaching, engaging in Project Based Learning. Her innovations in this area, and the way her practice has been successfully spread, will be described in Part II of this article, in the next issue of *Independence*.

(To be continued ...)

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Progress of the Worms (7)

As members and other regular readers know well, a first set of autonomy 'worms' were released from their 'can' on Tuesday, 11th March 2006 at the SIG's Open Forum at the 40th International IATEFL Conference in Harrogate (The original 'can of worms' idea was explained by Carol Everhard in her article 'Autonomy and the language classroom: Opening a can of worms' in *Independence* no. 37 (Spring 2006)). The idea behind the releasing of worms is to generate a chain of correspondence and

literature on each topic as the worm is passed on from one expert, on each particular topic, to another.

In this regular column we've been reporting on the progress of the worms and including the writing sent in by Keepers and those they have sent the worms on to. You can also track the worms' progress around the world so far by looking at our website (www.learnerautonomy.org). In the last but one issue of *Independence* we reported on the start of a new set of worms' journeys, and in this and the next