

enough, the link had fallen apart somewhere along the line.

The third and last forum held on the concluding day was on Teacher Development. It was a real honour for me to be the moderator here, not just for the fact that we had an august panel of teacher educators, but because two of the discussants, Soreya Huda and Mobasherra Khanum were old class-friends from Dhaka University.

The discussants spoke of the lack of extensive programmes on the teaching of English. They informed us that, even institutes which provide teacher training, as well as in-service training for school teachers, do not stress the teaching of the English language and that one could become a teacher in Bangladesh with no formal academic training. Though most of us knew that intuitively, it was a shock to hear it from the podium. Another truth that was voiced was that despite the call for and desire to make classes more communicative, language classes were still lecture rooms. "Most teachers do not like the communicative method," a couple of participants pointed out. And would we if we did not have some knowledge of what it involved nor the communicative ability ourselves to use it effectively in class? We also have to ask ourselves, do we have the best teachers at the primary and secondary levels? This is where minds are formed and foundations forged. The tertiary level can only build on that and chisel the forms into sharper focus. But we are also aware of the direct ratio between salary and quality and that is one area I do not wish to visit at this moment.

I noticed a definite parting of ways between the presentations in the initial stages of the conference and the concluding part. On the first day the emphasis had been on the importance of starting the teaching of English language at a very early age but as the conference progressed, the focus moved to the importance of quality education. For me this was *déjà vu*: I'd been there. In a presentation, at exactly the same spot, some ten years back on the standard of ELT in Bangladesh. I had suggested, with relevant statistics supporting my argument, that we start English from grade 3, instead of grade 1. The protest from a number of academics was quite violent. It is sad that the same issue needs to be focused on and discussed a decade later. Have we not moved at all? It's facile to say we need English from day one. It may seem like "a good thing." But what about the logistics? Where are the qualified teachers we need to teach the millions of students? No one in management or mid-management who has the difficult job of headhunting can be unaware of the fact that the trained English language teacher with proficiency in English is an endangered species in Bangladesh. The focus

needs to be on teacher training. As groups of teachers become trained, they can in turn disperse and train other teachers. This would have a ripple effect and in a few years time our body of trained teachers would expand. If the initiative had been taken a decade back we would not be at the same crossroads again.

The concluding speaker was Professor Sirajul Islam Chowdhury, I listened to him entranced with the rest of the packed auditorium as he lucidly brought language and literature together. Can one teach language divorced of culture? Is language not a vehicle of expression of the people and culture and is not literature a picture to that culture? It was Friday and close to Juma prayers, yet the audience sat spellbound.

It's noticeable that quite a few members of the audience eagerly asked BELTA to provide ongoing teacher education. This is missing the point, teacher development is not dependent on outside factors. It's a life-long process, and involves any activity aiming to achieve personal and professional growth for teachers. It can be something as mundane as observing colleagues' classes, or as casual as reading academic journals and books, and as formal as attending conferences. In my opinion BELTA had taken the most important step: it had brought English language teachers from all parts of Bangladesh together and given them a forum to express themselves. To know that they are not alone, the problems they have are not individual ones, and it's not true that there is no solution.

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Over lunch we did the immediate post-conference discussion (this would continue for the next few days). The good, the bad and the "what should have been done," were minutely dealt with. I over heard the remark: "But what did we get out of it?" perhaps not too much in the way of the latest teaching/learning methodology. But even in international conferences like TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) or AWP (Association of Writers and Publishers) one does not necessarily come away, with pages of notes, or feel intellectually more knowledgeable. What one gets is the ambeance of the conference, the discussions in the corridors, the meetings with people you know, the making of new friendships and a list of new contacts. And BELTA 2004 more than satisfied my craving for that. In my heart I thanked the people responsible for reviving BELTA and giving me the opportunity to be a part of it.

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