

2016-01-01

Interview : A Special Interview with Dr Willy A Renandya National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Recommended Citation

Subphadoongchone, Pramarn (2016) "Interview : A Special Interview with Dr Willy A Renandya National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore," *PASAA*: Vol. 51, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/pasaa/vol51/iss1/1>

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A Special Interview with Dr Willy A Renandya
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In this issue of PASAA, we are very honoured to have an opportunity to interview Dr Willy A Renandya from the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Dr Willy A Renandya is a language teacher educator with extensive teaching experience in Asia. He has given numerous plenary presentations at regional and international conferences, and published extensively in the area of second language education. His latest publications include *Motivation in the Language Classroom* (2014, TESOL International), *Simple, Powerful Strategies for Student Centered Learning* with George Jacobs and Michael Power (2016, Springer International), and *English Language Teaching Today: Linking Theory and Practice* with Handoyo P Widodo (2016, Springer International). He also maintains an active language teacher professional development forum called Teacher Voices: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices/>.

Drawing on his wealth of experience in ELT and second language teacher education, Dr Willy A Renandya shares with us his perspectives on teacher professional development, an area that has gained increasing interest among language practitioners and researchers.

1. Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for our journal. Before we start, you could perhaps tell us a bit about you and your work.

Thank you Ajarn Pramarn. It's an honour for me to be interviewed on issues related to teacher professional development.

I am a language teacher educator currently teaching at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Prior to teaching at NIE, I worked at SEAMEO Regional Language Centre (RELC), where I had numerous opportunities to work with English teachers and lecturers from many countries in Asia. For the past 20 years, my work has revolved around working with pre-service as well as in-service English teaching professionals in the Asian region, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

In addition to teaching, I regularly give invited presentations at local, regional and international conferences and conduct practical workshops and seminars in schools and universities in the region. I find it professionally rewarding to work with teachers and to help them develop professionally.

My work with classroom teachers is a great source of inspiration for my books and papers. My works are pedagogical in nature and address important concerns and issues that classroom teachers are most concerned with. My most recent books include the following:

- Renandya, W.A. (2014). *Motivation in the Language Classroom*. Alexandria, Virginia: TESOL International Association.

- Jacobs, G. M., Renandya, W. A., & Power, M. (2016). *Simple, Powerful Strategies for Student Centered Learning*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Renandya, W.A., & Widodo, H.P. (2016). (Eds.). *English Language Teaching Today: Linking Theory and Practice*. New York: Springer.

2. What do you see as the top three challenges facing EFL/ESL teachers in the 21st century? And what role does professional development (PD) play in dealing with those challenges?

My top three challenges:

- a. The use of teaching methods which are more in sync with 21st century trends. Some of our teachers still prefer teacher-fronted methodology, which is now considered antiquated. While this teaching methodology is not without value, research shows that it has limited impact on student learning. Going forward, teachers would need to adopt a more student-centered methodology where learners are given more opportunities to take charge of their own learning and to explore more diverse learning opportunities both in and out of the classroom. The latter, learning beyond the classroom, is now receiving greater attention in L2 teaching. A recently published book edited by Jack C Richards and David Nunan “Learning Beyond the classroom” (Routledge, 2015) is a case in point. The chapters in the book contain useful ideas that L2 teachers could use to explore wider learning opportunities outside the classroom.
- b. Use of ICT in teaching. In some countries such as Singapore, the use of ICT is already widespread. Teachers use ICT in their daily teaching. However, this is probably

not the case yet in some countries in the region. The jury is still out there as to whether ICT can improve (speed up) the acquisition process. We don't have hard evidence yet to make the claim that ICT improves language learning; but what we do know is that if teachers don't use ICT, our ICT-savvy students may have negative perceptions about our teaching methods, which in turn may result in them losing interest in learning the language.

- c. Integration of 21st century skills in L2 teaching. Skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking are valued in today's world. Teachers are well-advised to infuse these skills in their English language classes. We are not just teaching students to develop proficiency in English but also preparing them for the real world out there where collaborative and critical thinking skills are of paramount importance.

Some teachers are already incorporating 21st century skills in their teaching. Others however may need help developing these skills and integrating them in their teaching. Schools can work with the relevant authority in the Ministry of Education and also with universities to organize targeted PD workshops for teachers who need to learn more about 21st century skills.

3. As a teacher and teacher trainer, can you please share with us your professional journey, particularly how you stay current in the field?

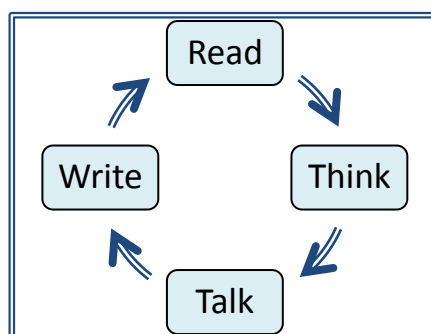
I am fortunate to have been working with good and generous ELT colleagues in my career. They have been instrumental in helping me develop professionally. I am also fortunate to have been working in institutions with a very well-stocked library. I can find almost any reference materials that I need for my teaching and research in the library.

Reading is one of the main ways for me to stay current in the field. I always make it a point to find current and relevant readings for my courses and also for my research. After I finish reading, I would normally share some of the insights from my reading with my ‘professional learning buddies’, who are members of an online professional development group called Teacher Voices (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices/>). The discussion that ensues helps me consolidate and also refine my understanding.

I am not alone in suggesting that reading is good for one’s professional development. Alan Maley, a renowned ELT expert, also believes that reading offers a lot of benefits for teachers. He says that reading:

“...helps teachers to be better informed, both about their profession and about the world. This makes them more interesting to be around – and students generally like their teachers to be interesting people. For our own sanity we need to read outside the language teaching ghetto. For the sake of our students too.” (2009, para 16)

More recently I’ve been going through the Read-Think-Talk-Write cycle more systematically to help me stay focused and current in my areas of expertise. This cycle is described below:



- a. **Read.** I am more focused in my reading now as I realize that there is a huge body of literature on ELT out there and I can’t possibly read all of it. So I’ve been reading books, papers etc.

that relate more directly to my teaching and research interests (i.e., extensive reading and listening). Of course, I also read other interesting books on ELT in order to keep me updated of current developments in the field.

- b. **Think.** It's not a good idea to just take other people's ideas at face value. Some ideas are good and based on solid empirical grounds, but others may not be as good and may just be conjectures or assumptions with little empirical support, if any. There is then a need to be critical and questions people's ideas and assumptions. We can ask questions such as: Are the ideas supported by research? Are they applicable in other teaching situations? Will the ideas work equally well in my teaching contexts? Can the ideas be easily adjusted to suit local contexts? Etc.
- c. **Talk.** I then share with understanding and thoughts with other people, with colleagues during an informal chat, in a staff seminar and in conferences. This has proved useful as I then get to revise, refine and expand my initial thoughts after talking to people and hearing their reactions and opinions.
- d. **Write.** Once I have gone through the first 3 steps, the last step, writing, flows quite naturally. This step is quite demanding and requires a lot of time and energy. But after repeated experience with writing, it becomes more manageable. I write conference papers, position papers, thought papers which I then publish in pedagogically oriented journals. I also write book chapters and whole books.

4. Many teachers may be in the dilemma that while they want to take part in PD activities, their heavy academic and administrative workload seems to stop them from doing so. Do you have any suggestions for them?

I can understand their dilemma. This happens in many other countries too, including in Singapore. Teachers in Singapore

are entitled to some 100 hours of PD activities per annum with all the cost paid for by the Singapore Ministry of Education. Most make use of their entitlement, especially beginning teachers who have just entered the teaching profession. But the more experienced teachers are so busy with teaching and administrative work that they find it hard to make full use of their 100 hours of PD entitlement.

I think school administrators and the Ministry of Education can work together to identify important PD areas that teachers need the most. Teachers are pragmatic people; they will be happy to set aside time to attend workshops that address their most pressing needs.

Another idea would be for PD providers to consider organizing on-site or school-based PD activities. When workshops are held in their own schools, teachers don't have to travel far and as a result, become more motivated to participate in the PD activities. In addition, research shows that school-based PD activities tend to be more effective because teachers have an opportunity to work with external experts to tackle real (rather than hypothetical) classroom issues.

Online PD is becoming more and more popular nowadays. This can be done at the comfort of their own office or even at home. All they need is just reliable access to the Internet. They can participate in free webinars (e.g., IATEFL often organizes free webinars for teachers) and take free online courses (e.g., MOOCS).

If they are on FB, teachers can easily join online professional development groups. One of the most popular FB professional development groups that focus on L2 learning is Teacher Voices. This group is professionally managed and moderated by a team of dedicated language teacher educators. Members can take part in discussions or just read posts on various topics related to L2 teaching (e.g., curriculum and materials development, teaching methods and assessments) and

L2 research (e.g., current issues in ELT research, research methods, new publications etc.). For a more detailed account of the benefits of joining Teacher Voices, please refer to Siregar (2014) which is available here: <https://blog.nus.edu.sg/eltwo/2014/08/27/teacher-voices-a-virtual-forum-for-elt-professionals-2/>

5. Many scholars in our field lay critical emphasis on the importance of reflection as a tool for PD. Some recommend that teachers use a PD log to record activities they have done. What do you think about this?

I fully agree with them. John Dewey once said that experience is important; but what we do with that experience is even more important. Reflection is an excellent tool that we can use to help us make sense of our experience in the classroom, to draw insights from our classroom practices, and to consciously think about ways of improving our future pedagogical practices. Teachers can keep a teaching journal or an online blog where they can carefully write down as objectively as possible what happened in their lesson, and then do a simple content analysis (perhaps with the help of a critical friend) to assess what they have done right or wrong and to plan for some future actions.

6. Apart from keeping a PD log, what are other strategies that teachers can adopt so that they can be reflective and then develop professionally?

I could think of several ideas here. One is video-taping their own lessons. This can be done once or twice in a term. The first session can serve as a baseline of sort where the teacher can identify specific aspects of their teaching that may need improving. Following some targeted changes in the design of their lessons, the teacher can then plan a second recorded session. Hopefully, they can now see some noticeable improvements on some aspects of their teaching.

Another idea is to invite a colleague (e.g., a more senior but friendly teacher) to sit and observe the class. It is important that they use an observation checklist that they have developed together so that relevant and useful comments can be provided at the post-observation meeting.

Asking students to provide regular feedback on teaching can be a useful tool. Students often have different ideas about what constitute good teaching so we need to understand their perspectives when we prepare and deliver our lessons. Care should be taken though as students can be very critical and may give comments unrelated to your teaching. A structured feedback form is usually more useful than an unstructured one. And even with a structured form, it is always a good idea to show students how to use the form.

7. Teachers are also encouraged to conduct research as it is regarded as one of the most powerful forms of PD. For many EFL/ESL teachers, teaching is always the priority while doing research seems to be last in a long list of tasks. What is your advice for busy teachers interested in starting their research project but seem to put it off until they feel they have ‘more time’?

Broadly, there are two types of research. One is more theoretical and academic in nature, while the other is more pedagogical. I think the latter is more relevant and doable for teachers as it takes considerably less time to carry out. Pedagogically oriented research is also known as classroom-based research or action research.

The nice thing about action research is that it serves two purposes. First, it helps teachers understand important factors that affect language learning in their own classroom. So in the long run, this should improve the overall quality of their teaching. Second, it provides excellent opportunities for teacher professional development. As they read relevant literature, they get to know

more about the theoretical as well as the practical aspects related to the topic of their investigation, thus helping them develop deeper and broader understanding of important classroom-related issues.

For those who are already keeping reflecting teaching journals, the entries in the journal can actually serve as data of their research. They just need to learn how to analyze the entries using some commonly used methods (e.g., simple content analysis) to summarize and make sense of their reflections. The results can then be shared with their colleagues in a staff seminar or with other teachers in a more formal forum (e.g., seminar or conference). This type of research should not take up too much of teachers' time and is an excellent way for teachers to get started on their research.

8. Do you have any recommendations, particularly for early career teachers, on how to develop professional knowledge and grow as teachers? Many of them may want to explore different paths to their professional progress. Others may not know where to go for help and support when they have some problems, and then end up leaving the profession.

Teaching is a highly demanding job, both cognitively and emotionally. There is so much to do in school: preparing lessons, marking student papers, helping students with special needs, doing remedial lessons for those who lag behind their peers, dealing with difficult students, not to mention the endless administrative duties that they have to do. All these can be emotionally draining, especially for beginning teachers. So teacher burnout is quite common among this group of teachers. What can one do to avoid teacher burnout? Here are some suggestions:

- a. Don't teach the same group of students for too long. If you have been teaching Mathayom (secondary) 5

students for 3 years, then ask that you be assigned to teach Mathayom 6 students.

- b. Teach different courses. If you have been teaching reading for a few years, try teaching speaking, listening or writing the following years.
- c. Teach a new course. Yes it takes time to put together a new course, but this is an excellent way to break monotony in your job. It is also an excellent PD activity as you will need to read books, consult more knowledgeable colleagues, synthesize a lot of information, search for relevant materials for the new course.
- d. Get a new job. After years of teaching in the same place, you may feel that you have stopped growing professionally. When this happens, you might want to consider relocating. Working in a new place can be very refreshing (though not without challenges) and give you a renewed energy to flourish intellectually, emotionally and socially as well.

9. For those with many years of teaching experience, they may perhaps get 'stuck' at some point in their career. Oftentimes, they may experience teacher burnout. What should they do in order to stay fresh and remain motivated?

My suggestions in no. 8 above are quite relevant for experienced teachers. But here are additional ideas:

- a. Take sabbatical leave and spend it in an overseas university. At NIE, we welcome senior university faculty members from other universities to spend one semester with us. Typically, these visiting faculty members spend their time in the NIE library, participate in our monthly staff seminar, give guest lectures to NIE students, or sit in some graduate courses.

- b. Pursue a higher degree programme locally or overseas. It can be very refreshing to go back to school and become a student again. In the process, you get to learn new things and have an opportunity to meet new people who may go through the same burnout experience as you.
- c. Take unpaid leave (paid leave if possible). This can have financial implications, but if you have the means, it is not a bad thing to do. Take 3 months' leave and do things unrelated to your teaching job. If after 3 months, you begin to miss your students and school, then you know that you want to go back teaching. You know that teaching is in your 'blood' and you are ready to go back and face new challenges in your teaching.

10. And our last question, what role do institutional policies play in helping their in-service teachers to sustain their PD?

Institutions play a key role in ensuring that teachers continue to develop professionally in their work place. Teachers need to upgrade themselves in order to meet the changing needs of their students. And this can only be done via sustained professional development activities. Some of the things schools and universities can do include the following:

- Giving teachers time off to participate in PD courses organized by the local ministry of education
- Giving teachers time off to do their own self-directed PD activities (e.g., every 1st day of the month)
- Providing resources (e.g., books, journals, teacher magazines) for teachers
- Giving teachers opportunities to do their further studies (e.g., MA in ELT)
- Increasing teachers' salary. With a higher salary, teachers don't have to do side jobs in order to make ends meet.

They can instead focus their attention on increasing the quality of their teaching

- Making PD activities an integral part of teachers' KPI (Key Performance Indicators)

Our interview with Dr Willy A Renandya has raised our awareness of the importance of teacher professional development. We hope that our readers will find the interview not only inspiring but also practical for their professional pursuits.

The Interviewer

Pramarn Subphadoongchone is a lecturer at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. He read his PhD at the University of Leicester, UK. He is currently the editor of *PASAA*.

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