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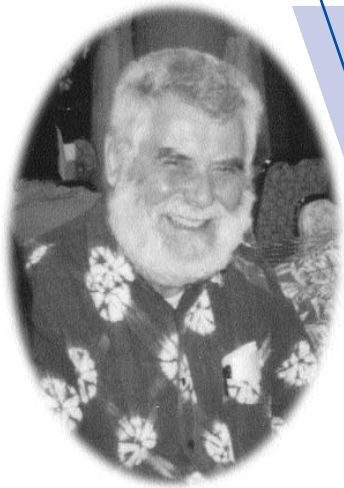
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THE LANGUAGE TEACHER'S VOICE



An Interview with Alan Maley

by Jim Kahny

Alan Maley has been involved with ELT for nearly forty years. From 1963 to 1988, he worked for the British Council in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, and India. He was director-general of the Bell Educational Trust in Cambridge from 1988 to 1993, and senior fellow at the National University of Singapore from 1993 to 1998.

He is currently dean of the Institute for English Language Education, and director of post-graduate programs in TESOL at Assumption University, Bangkok. He has worked with Japanese secondary school teachers of English as a frequent guest instructor at the International Summer Workshop for Teachers of English hosted by the Language Institute of Japan. He has published over thirty books and numerous articles, and is the series editor for Oxford Resource Books for Teachers (Oxford).

In his recent book, *The Language Teacher's Voice* (2000, Macmillan Heinemann), Professor Maley offers tips and advice for teachers on developing and maintaining their voice, to make it a more effective tool for classroom teaching. In the interview that follows, he discusses issues

related to the voice and language teaching.

• *You refer to the voice as the teacher's "most valuable asset."*

Yes, I do. After all, what is the one thing teachers do most often (rightly or wrongly!)? They talk. And they talk for long periods each day, for many years. They rely on their voices to a prodigious extent. And with their voices they not only transmit information, but mood, atmosphere, emotions... Their voices are an endless resource, a priceless asset. I have a favourite quotation from the Indian novelist Amit Chaudhuri, "the human voice, this tiny instrument inside the throat, endeavouring to carry a world inside it." The way we use this instrument can open up whole new worlds to those who listen to us.

• *What prompted you to write a book on the language teacher's voice?*

It's a long story. When I was working for the British Council in Madras, South India, in the mid-1980's, I noticed that many teachers had chronic voice problems, such as sore throat, hoarseness, weak and tired sounding voices, and repetitive throat infections. It wasn't that difficult to work out why, as most of them were working long hours with very large classes, in hot, noisy and dusty environments. I was lucky to be able to invite Patsy Rodenburg over to run some workshops for us. Patsy was voice coach of the Royal Shakespeare Company and taught theatre students at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama too. She was, and still is, an inspiring and experienced voice teacher. Watching her work on the teachers' voices in Madras was the beginning of my fascination with this wonderful instrument of ours—the voice.

Some years later at the National University of Singapore, when I had informed myself better about voicework, I was offered the chance to teach voice to theatre studies students. In the three years I taught that course, I learnt more about the human voice than in the rest of my previous life. It was after that experience that I decided to write a book for language teachers. Most teachers were, and still are, woefully ignorant about their voices, the greatest resource they have. If you don't look after your voice and it packs up on you (which is a very common occurrence, incidentally), you can't go out and buy a new one.

That's it! But if you not only take care of your voice, but also work on making it more expressive and interesting to listen to, you can observe the change in the quality and energy level in your classes. After all, why should any student be expected to listen to a dull, tired, flat and lifeless voice?

• *How would a teacher know if his or her voice needed improving?*

I think many of us may have a vague sense of unease about our voices. Of course, if we have persistent hoarseness, or feel voice strain, or have the sensation that we have to really make a huge effort to make ourselves heard, we ought to know that something is wrong with our voice. It's not uncommon either for us to listen to ourselves and say, "I sound so boring, so flat and uninteresting..." But it's amazing how long we can go on without this awareness dawning. One problem is that we become habituated to our voices as they are. In a way, they sound "normal" because we have

got used to them sounding like that. But "normal" is not the same thing as "natural." (Many writers on voice make this distinction—for example, Kristen Linklater in her book *Freeing the Natural Voice*.) But all of us can improve our voices. After all, actors spend several hours a day doing just that. Teachers, on the whole don't. I think it's a matter of raising awareness in the first instance.

• *What would you advise a teacher who wanted to make his or her voice more interesting?*

What makes a voice interesting to listen to is a complex interplay between a whole range of features. The keyword is "variety." We can vary our voices along a number of parameters: volume (how loudly or softly we speak), pace (how quickly or slowly we speak, and how we use pausing), pitch (how high and low in our voice range we go), modulation (how we adjust the tone of our voice to convey a mood). So the key to making the voice more interesting is to practice varying these parameters. And one of the reasons for looking after our voices—not straining or over-using them—is that a tired voice can rarely be an interesting voice.

• *Can you give an example of a common voice or speaking problem that you've observed among teachers that is easily corrected?*

The first thing to say, I guess, is that there are no "easy fixes" if you really want to work on your voice. If you want to improve your voice, it means changing physical habits, and that is always a long process. However, there are problems, like hoarseness, which are relatively easy to overcome. Hoarseness usually results from talking too much, too loudly and too "forcefully." By "forcefully" I mean straining effortfully to produce an audible voice.

There are several things you can do about this problem. One is obvious: Speak less. And speak more softly. Another is to learn a number of simple relaxation exercises which will free up the muscles in your shoulders, neck and throat. This eases vocal production, and reduces the muscular tension which causes the problem in the first place. Also try drinking a lot of water (not chilled, preferably slightly warm even). This keeps your mucus membranes moist and your throat relaxed.

• *In Japanese schools, classes are often large and noisy. What are some dos and*

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don'ts for teachers?

Try to make a contract with students at the beginning of the year: Agree to listen to them if they will listen to you. Agree on some labour-saving way of achieving quiet when you need it. (The most common one is to raise your hand. As students notice this, they each raise their hands and stop talking.) Above all, do not try to shout over the noise the class makes. That is a sure way to get a sore throat. One way I sometimes use myself is to silently mouth what I am saying. Students usually notice this, and stop talking in order to hear what I am saying. As the silence spreads, I turn up the volume of my own voice.

• *Much of your book is devoted to voicework in class. Why is voicework important to language learners?*

There are at least four good reasons for incorporating voicework in language classes.

Voicework is intimately connected with pronunciation. Becoming more aware of how our voice works to produce sound often helps students over pronunciation "blocks."

Learning how to speak clearly and expressively gives an enormous boost to confidence. Many learners of a foreign language mumble or speak indistinctly to mask their mistakes. Teaching them how to speak out, to reach out to other people with their voice, makes them feel that what they have to say is important and worth saying.

Many of the activities in the book are

good communicative speaking activities anyway. They have a pay-off not only for the voice but for language learning too.

One bye-product of the confidence born of voicework is that this serves the students well in their future careers. Nearly all positions of responsibility carry with them a need to communicate clearly and persuasively with others. Voicework has a clear role to play in this.

• *Can you give an example of a quick voice maintenance activity and explain how it can help.*

The quickest voice maintenance activity of all is—wait for it—to YAWN! When you yawn, the muscles controlling the aperture at the back of your throat are stretched to the utmost. If you can bear to look down your own throat, yawn in front of a mirror and see how widely it opens up.

Another very quick way to get ready for using your voice, is to flop over loosely from the waist and to come up again slowly on a long breath. When you are standing straight again, your body will be in alignment. Then raise your shoulders as high as possible, and let them drop. Do this two or three times. Then roll your head three times to the right and three times to the left. Take three or four deep breaths, pulling the air right down inside you, and releasing slowly. Now, you are ready!

References

Maley, A. (2000). *The language teacher's voice*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.

Alan Maley leads a teacher-training session.