

Zakia Sarwar and the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers

Interview by Sarah E. Elia

On May 20, 2016, I had the pleasure of meeting Zakia Sarwar, the “mother” of the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT). It happened serendipitously. I was staying in Boston and emailing TESOL affiliates around the United States and the world just to make a connection and to learn more about their organizations. Among these affiliates was SPELT. My message to SPELT was received through their website and then passed on to Zakia, who replied by saying that she was currently in Boston. It turned out that Zakia and I were only about 20 minutes apart from each other! So, we met for ice cream the next day and had a great time talking about our work in TESOL and sharing ideas about our organizations. Zakia graciously agreed to share her background and insight about TESOL in an interview.



Sarah Elia (NYS TESOL) and Zakia Sarwar (SPELT) together in Boston

SE: You have had a long career in education. Can you share some of the highlights of your career to give us an overview of the work that you have done?

ZS: I started teaching in 1962—a fresh M.A. in English literature, appointed to teach English. It took me time to recognize that being proficient in English and having knowledge of English literature were not enough for *teaching* English. My sister, Ruqiaya Hasan, persuaded me to do a diploma in English language teaching from Sydney University in Australia. My brother-in-law, Michael Halliday, also supported me fully. That one year of learning changed my professional life entirely. Since my return from Sydney in 1983, I have been doing classroom research in teaching English as a foreign language, leading me to develop a model of project-based learning (PBL), which empowers English as a foreign language learners to become confident users of English. A number of my Pakistani colleagues have used the model with very positive results, and one of the highlights of my career is that the PBL model was recently replicated successfully in Nepal, demonstrating its powerful implications.

Another highlight of my career is that I am one of the founding members of the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT). For the last 32 years, my involvement has been so deep and consistent that I have been awarded the title “Mother SPELT.” SPELT is considered to be a model English teachers’ organization in South Asia, where resources are limited and maintaining international professional standards is a huge challenge. It provides a platform for English language teachers to meet and share their expertise, and work toward continuous professional development in the absence of other opportunities for growth.

SE: What are some of the major issues facing education in Pakistan? How have educational practices been developed during your career, what have the challenges been, and what is your hope for the future of education in Pakistan?

SZ: The major challenge in Pakistan is the lack of political will to establish educational reforms and bring Pakistan in alignment with international practices in education. The language policy is ambivalent, and the curriculum and assessment procedures are outdated. There is no policy for teacher education, which is absolutely essential for teaching languages. But, because of SPELT's initiatives, there is awareness that English language teaching requires teacher education, and as a result the curriculum for classes 1-12 has been revised to carry out this understanding. But unfortunately the focus on teacher education is still lacking, so the revised curriculum cannot be transferred into effective ways of learning and teaching. Since change is a process, not an event, it is hoped that the powers that be will take the right steps and take technical help from SPELT to plan out ways of effective teaching and learning.

SE: What are the major differences in education between Pakistan and the United States? What should teachers from the United States know about students from your country?

ZS: I'm not so well acquainted with the American system of education. I think the major difference is that in the United States the education is more focused on inquiry-based learning and giving learners strategies of learning on their own, right from their childhood [. . .] although inordinate stress on "state assessment" in an effort to standardize procedures is doing a lot of harm to the focus of self-learning in America. In Pakistan, the majority of learners have never been introduced to study skills and strategies of learning to learn. Having come from the teacher-led classes and accustomed to spoon feeding from those teachers, it is hard to force these students to find their feet in an environment where they are not instructed in this way. Teachers in the United States could help students to see that they have the potential to learn on their own, providing them with strategies to learn. Teachers also need to be more supportive of students' efforts in the beginning.

SE: Tell us about SPELT's traveling conferences. How was the idea conceived? How has it developed over the years? What are your recommendations for planning an event like this?

ZS: The SPELT traveling conference is one of the group's innovations to deal with the challenges we face in Pakistan. For both financial and social reasons, it is difficult for teachers to gather in one place—so, if teachers can't go to the conference, the conference comes to them. The inaugurating conference takes place in Karachi, where the presenters are put in Team A and Team B; Team A travels to Islamabad, Team B to Lahore, and simultaneous conferences are then held in the two cities. Thus, all speakers share their expertise in three cities, and a lot of local presenters get a chance to speak at an international conference. The local SPELT organizers are groomed in leadership skills as they manage the conferences on their own.

The traveling conference idea was conceived to give maximum opportunities to both local and overseas experts to travel and give the same presentations in three different cities, thus maximizing input and extending outreach. For example, both Lahore and Islamabad wanted to hold conferences on weekends. By holding simultaneous conferences in the two cities, this fulfilled the needs of teachers from both cities. The planning for a traveling conference requires networking and coordination skills—and, of course, teamwork and planning. It's like a jigsaw puzzle to organize the talks and travels of the two teams, and to ensure there is no overlapping in the plan. Here are links to two accounts of our conference: one by [Rosa Aronson](#), the chief executive director of TESOL, and [Sherry Blok](#), TESOL Teacher of the Year 2015.



SE: Why it is important for TESOL affiliates to connect and form relationships? How can this type of connection strengthen our organizations and ultimately provide greater professional development that can translate to more success in the classroom with our English language learners?

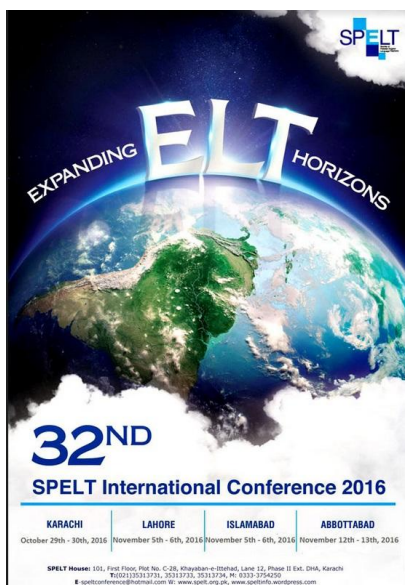
ZS: It is important for affiliates to connect and form relationships because it would connect them to teachers from organizations around the world. This is a rich resource, as it will broaden horizons and provide fresh ideas to those who connect with each other. It will also strengthen and boost morale as teachers begin to see that

they are not alone in the challenges they face. Together through discussion, solutions are slightly more possible. Therefore, these exchanges of ideas and issues can be a source of continuous professional support and development.

SE: What advice do you have for fellow TESOL affiliate members?

ZS: I cannot be so presumptuous as to, as you say, “advise” TESOL affiliate members; I would only say that there is a vast difference between living in a pond and gliding down into the open flow of a river. The opportunities for learning when we get out of our comfort zone into a broader spectrum are immense. This translates well when we look at the opportunities that can be provided through affiliate exchanges. Teachers can do collaborative research, exchange and share ideas, strategies, and experiments, thus enriching each other with skills to become more effective teachers.

Many thanks to Zakia Sarwar for her willingness to meet with me and discuss her experiences with such warmth and enthusiasm. Through our brief exchange, it was clear that Zakia has a great love for teaching English and a passion for improving the standards of education in her home country of Pakistan. She is truly an honor to know.



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