

The Ideal Situation: To Be Located in Your Own Country and Be a Part of the Conversation—An Interview with Suresh Canagarajah

Interviewer: Karen Englander, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

Suresh Canagarajah—scholar, activist, professor, immigrant—is a professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at Pennsylvania State University in the United States. Just recently he completed his tenure as Editor of the premiere TESOL journal in the United States, *TESOL Quarterly*. Originally from the country of Sri Lanka, Dr. Canagarajah did his graduate studies in the United States, and then returned home. When war broke out in 1994 in his country, he was rescued by the Red Cross and came back to the U.S. Dr. Canagarajah has won more than a dozen awards for his scholarly work which includes six full-length books, chapters in 40 books, more than 30 articles in journals in English and another five in his first language of Tamil.

For those of us who live and work in the “periphery” (i.e. *not* in one of the English-speaking center countries of the U.S., Canada, United Kingdom, Australia), he is an especially remarkable scholar. His work is always attentive to the perspectives of the nonnative English speakers and the issues of being located in the geo-political periphery. As he says in his own words, “I am an activist for peace and social change. I am also a critical practitioner, who cares about connecting education to justice and empowerment.”

Since I am a member of the editorial board for *MEXTESOL Journal*, I sought his permission to interview him. He agreed! Suresh, as he asked me to call him, sat with me for lunch and we had the following conversation, which is slightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Karen: Thank you, of course, for joining me here. Could you talk a little bit about your trajectory, from being a student in Sri Lanka to your first published work?

Suresh: My first published article was in *TESOL Quarterly*. The good thing was that I did my Ph.D. in the United States, so in a sense I was kind of familiar with what was expected in the journals, and what the conventions were.

But the real difficulty was refocusing from Sri Lanka. The library of course was not up-to-date. I was just lucky that the Asia Foundation donated *TESOL Quarterly* free of charge for a couple of years, but then they stopped doing that. The last issue that we had was five years old and the articles by Alistair Pennycook, and Bonny Norton were in that (1989) issue, so I call it sheer luck that my article starts from their article, you know the idea that there are two ends of a continuum on critical thinking.

So I was fortunate in having those journals there, because two years later I couldn't have published. The conversation had moved on, and as I was still in Sri Lanka I wouldn't have known what people were talking about. I wouldn't have been able to frame my article relevantly for *TESOL Quarterly* any more. But the issue was also relevant to classroom conditions in Sri Lanka, so it had some local teaching conditions and still I had the opportunity to deal with conditions and discussions that were going on here.

Karen: You've written about your decision to leave Sri Lanka and come to the United States in order to participate more fully in those academic conversations. For Mexican researchers I think often we face that kind of dilemma as well: Can we be fully participatory in the current conversations if we are based in the "periphery" which Mexico is, or is it necessary to move to the "center"?

Suresh: I think if it was possible to remain, I would have liked to remain in Sri Lanka and still be part of the conversations. But there were a lot of things that were against me. For example, I would have liked to come for couple of months to the US for a sabbatical or some kind of exchange program just to participate in the conversations. But the travel conditions are not very friendly or easy to get out, and it's very expensive to travel.

Mexicans, they may not have the same kinds of difficulties I am talking about. Maybe they can go for conferences, participate in things that are going on out there. So I guess one of the struggles for change that remains is how to make academic knowledge accessible to local scholars in other countries, to Mexican scholars.

The fact of moving from Sri Lanka meant that I could not still write about things such as about a multilingual context. So I don't write about Sri Lanka anymore—in the sense of Sri Lankan teaching conditions. I write about Sri Lankan diaspora issues and migrant issues, or issues of globalization and migrations conditions. In moving away from Sri Lanka, I also moved away from the things I would like to discuss.

So the ideal situation is still to be located in your own country and be a part of the conversation. I would expect Mexican scholars to remain here because there is something energizing about being in your own community, around the teaching conditions that you always experience.

Karen: Are there things that local scholars bring to international conversations that are valuable?

Suresh: Oh, yes, yeah.

Karen: Could you talk about that?

Suresh: Well it is one of the very ironic things that American teachers and journals are concerned about diversity and how to deal with diversity, but that's not a new topic for local scholars. They've always been dealing with this issue in teaching English to Spanish-speaking students. They're dealing with bilingualism and the diversity of indigenous communities all the time. So that kind of knowledge can bring an important perspective.

What I've been arguing is that this local knowledge is relevant to international discussions. I think that local scholars are bringing a lot of experience and a lot of insight from the conditions they have been facing. So they can inform the discussion in the international scene and it's relevant, also.

Some people have said that local knowledge is just an add-on to what we are discussing. TESOL or applied linguistics will be at the base, and you just add these exceptions or these local conditions. So I've been saying it's not just an

add-on, it's very central to the argument. In fact, it is even more relevant to international discussions now than before, because in a sense we are beginning to rethink a lot of things that we were teaching about or publishing about. Being a local scholar is much more relevant to the international discussions than you imagine!

Karen: Another place that I think is so significantly different is, you know, I did my TESOL studies at the University of Toronto and one of the things that we were told was, "No, of course, you don't need to know the language of your students, and it would be impossible anyway to know all the languages of all your students because there might be 45 languages among the 30 students your class". Teaching in an EFL context we have a homogenous language group, more often than not, so I would think that we have at least the opportunity to, at least, challenge some of the precepts about what constitutes good language teaching in terms of use of the use of first language in second language teaching.

Suresh: Yeah, it's true that local scholars bring different insights [our food arrives].

Karen: I read your blog (<http://www.personal.psu.edu/asc16/blogs/TQeditor/>) and one of the things you talked about was what you called "negotiating publishing practices". And you talked about that periphery scholars, and US graduate students for that matter, often focus on writing rather than networking. You said they "ignore the social practices that surround scholarly texts". Can you elaborate on that?

Suresh: The center scholars do a lot more networking and the peripheral scholars don't do that. But they should do that networking.

I think partly it's a cultural kind of thing. There's an article by [John] Flowerdew with Chinese scholars and he reports that people feel embarrassed to get help or talk about their doubts. They think, "I have to do it on my own". Talking to people or getting help is like plagiarizing, or not being independent.

There is a little bit of that to blame, but also practical problems. When we're on the periphery, we don't have the resources to network very easily. We can't get to conferences. We don't know a lot of scholars on a first-name basis. And people are not pushy enough to talk about their projects. We are finding more and more that those things help a lot in publishing: like knowing what particular issue a journal is interested in publishing these days. Is there any particular subject they feel they should be promoting or discussing more in their journal?

When I was an editor, I was getting a lot more emails from people—completely unknown people to me—people from China or Japan sending me an article and saying, "Can you tell me if that is relevant for your journal?" Some people were writing to me and asking "I am working on a project like this, and is this something your journal is interested in?"

Karen: And that didn't bother you?

Suresh: No, no. Scholars in the center do that all the time, and they succeed. But scholars in the periphery, partly because of access issues and partly because of cultural issues, they think that "We shouldn't be doing that". So I think we should encourage them to consult editors.

My graduate students—and peripheral scholars too—find it very surprising to learn that it's not research that counts but also the networks in getting published. You might have excellent research but eventually it's about your socialization kind of skills: How do you talk about your work?; Whom do you consult?; How do you get mentored?; and What kind of advice you get?.

And they don't teach those things! University instructors teach about academic writing, academic genre, but they don't teach about socializing skills, networking skills.

People need to know that connections are important; in a good sense—not to influence the publication of the whole article—but to get information about what to write about and to get information about what somebody else has done that relates to your work.

Karen: What would you say to someone who writes to you and says, "Dear Dr. Canagarajah, your work has been really important in my thinking and I've written this article that I'd like to attempt to publish. Would you read it and comment on it? Not in your capacity as an editor, but in your capacity as a scholar".

Suresh: I do that all the time. Of course, I tell them, "What I say now is just informal feedback, because when you go through the regular publishing process it will go through blind, peer review because that is the process".

It's also a practical problem of how much can a person read and so how much advice can I give. And some people might send me an abstract and others might send me a whole paper. So I may not read the article but I can give suggestions on how it is framed or how it is written, and I think people appreciate having a range of suggestions on how to deal with something: Is the topic relevant?; Is it something that *TESOL Quarterly* is interested in?; Is it written in an appropriate way?; or Is the literature review appropriate? I can also suggest an editor or lead them to a tutoring or writing center.

A lot of times in the American universities, we give a Ph.D. to foreign students and then we send them back home. So I've written in a few places that we shouldn't stop there. We should actually continue the mentoring and collaboration further on. Because I think that if you don't provide help to publish to the scholar, you're just creating an audience for your own work. You're just saying, "These are my theories, our theories, and these are the things that are important so now when you go back home, you'll now understand me".

Karen: & Suresh: [laughs]

Suresh: I think it part of your responsibility. If you train somebody and help them get their Ph.D., you should help them publish. That would help a lot. There are a lot people who got their Ph.D. in America and they are not publishing when they have returned home. They don't know what to do.

I call it a cultural collaboration that is not there on both sides! Peripheral scholars feel it is bad to ask for help and center scholars have their own work to do. We have to not only produce a Ph.D. but then continue that connection.

Some Chinese scholars actually wrote about that recently. In *TESOL Quarterly* (volume 44, number 4) we had a symposium about publishing and how to make knowledge available. The Chinese scholars said that center authors and editors can collaborate with local scholars, and that behavior can go a long way. They developed the idea that academic writing is jointly shaped, and there is a negotiated co-constructed purpose to publishing.

People should give help and local scholars should ask for it. I've even had people write to me saying, "I hear there is an article you wrote about this and I can't get it in my country, can you send me a pdf?" and I send it out. So I think that peripheral scholars are becoming a little bit freer to write to people, talk to people. Maybe you can let the word out that this is an acceptable thing.

Karen: What is the role of a journal like *MEXTESOL Journal*, which is largely national, not indexed in international databases? What is its role in scholarship, in the academic conversation?

Suresh: It is very important in emphasizing local research, and being a kind of record for research in Mexico and for local conditions. The second part is that its prestige is very limited because it is very local, so...when you call a journal of "local relevance" or "regional relevance", people think it is not very international and maybe it will discourage a lot of authors from writing because they think not a lot of people will read it.

The thing is we need changes on a lot of different sides. For example, we need changes from the center on how to receive journals that are produced here. Journals like *MEXTESOL* should be available in a lot of American universities so that local authors will feel motivated to write for it and others will start reading it. Also indexing is important for a lot of regional journals. That would go a long way in terms of a lot of letting people know about these journals and then accessing it. So it would be possible to be publishing regionally relevant research and still be in a first-rate journal.

I think to get there at the initial stages it may be possible to do some combination of things: that is, international scholars and local scholars writing in *MEXTESOL Journal*. This way, the local scholars are publishing in the same pages as some well-known people. And then gradually maybe their ratio can improve, you know, more of the local scholars will publish with international scholars.

A scholar should have a range of styles and a range of writing outlets. So, I do write in some diaspora Tamil journals.

But at the same time, it is important that peripheral scholars bring their knowledge to the international community. I tell local scholars that you have to try to change things, write, and bring local kinds of things to the task.

Karen: Thank you.

To know more about Dr. Suresh Canagarajah, consult his website: <http://www.personal.psu.edu/asc16/Personal%20Information.htm>