

Contribution to the Ralph Russell day

## **Intensive Courses in Urdu and Spoken Hindi** Ian Russell

In this short account I will pay tribute to aspects of Ralph's work for Urdu that had an important impact on a great many people well beyond the walls of the university.

When, in the 60s and 70s, large numbers of South Asian migrants settled in the UK Ralph pressed SOAS to respond to the needs that this situation produced – or, at least, to make it possible for him to respond. Courses in spoken Urdu and Hindi for adults became a clearly identified need. Ralph's first opportunity to respond to this came in 1974 in Bradford. I was a student on that course. Ralph taught with Richard Harris and Claire Bullock – two of his SOAS undergraduate students; (Richard continued to be involved in this kind of teaching for a number of years). For me the course marked the beginning of serious study of Urdu ahead of the two years I was to spend in India and Pakistan. My fellow students then, and many of the people Ralph taught in the years that followed had no immediate prospect of travelling to India or Pakistan. They had other important reasons for learning Urdu – chiefly a desire to speak with Urdu-speaking pupils, clients, neighbours and friends. Ralph prepared materials which would teach students as quickly as possible to say and to understand the things which come within the range of everyday conversation, covering all the essential structures of the language without moving outside that range.

For the next six years Ralph taught courses in many of the main centres where South Asians had settled. He has written of the guidelines he framed for meeting the needs of his students:

- Teach the students what they want and need to know and not what they neither want nor need;
- Make them speak Urdu within the first five minutes of entering the room;
- Make them speak accurately and with a good pronunciation;
- Make them speak fluently;
- Make them read and write a script which observes the principle of one sound one letter.

Missing here are other key principles it is clear Ralph is following when you watch him teach. These include:

- Keep everyone involved;
- Keep them laughing;
- Help them to support each other and to learn from each other.

In his teaching at SOAS Ralph had always spent a lot of time to preparing materials for his students. But they were studying Urdu full-time and the first year of their four-year course was devoted almost entirely to acquiring a good command of the language. For the adults he met from 1974 new materials were needed which were closely tailored to *their* needs. In 1980 SOAS published the course materials he had been using and revising in the preceding six years. In the foreword he wrote: 'Every teacher worth his salt learns all the time from those he is teaching and I owe a special debt to all the students to whom I have taught this course. Its publication will bring it within reach of other students and other teachers. Their experience is bound to suggest areas where there is room for improvement. As always, I shall be very grateful if they will let me know of their criticisms and suggestions.'

It was as the course was being prepared for publication that I got involved in teaching with Ralph and other tutors. Then I began to organise and teach on courses in London. We ran courses in Tower Hamlets each term from 1979 to 1987. It was our good fortune that Stephen Denny, the Head of Modern Languages at Tower Hamlets Adult Education Institute,

came to one of the two or three courses we ran at the Urdu Markaz and offered to help us. He was able to say yes to everything we asked of him.

We were able to advertise free in the Inner London Education Authority newspaper "Contact" which was available to all its employees. Word of mouth took news of the course as far afield as Scotland. Stephen Denny ran an ever-growing mailing list. He agreed to fifteen hours of teaching from Friday evening to Sunday teatime. We taught as many as six groups of up to ten students with different levels of experience. We had one tutor per group and one supernumerary.

We billed each course as an "Intensive Course in Spoken Urdu and Hindi" and we did indeed ask a lot of our students. This involved *us* in teaching that was very rewarding and also very demanding. Tutors had to be up to these demands – including responding positively to the feedback we sought from students. From the outset, in 1974, Ralph had been keen to involve others in the kind of teaching he was doing. On the Tower Hamlets courses, having a supernumerary tutor helped us to induct and support new tutors with some experience of teaching Urdu as a foreign language. In other places there were better arrangements than we were able to make for training tutors who had not taught Urdu in this way before. Alison Shaw's work in Oxford deserves special mention, and one of the tutors she trained often worked with us in Tower Hamlets.

Ralph was only directly involved in teaching in Tower Hamlets very occasionally, but he helped us to check materials we produced, including adaptations and extensions of his materials. He often attended the feedback session that was an essential feature of the course.

In 1985 some three thousand copies of the first course book had been sold and it had been used by a growing number of tutors. Ralph drew on this pool of experience and worked closely with Sughra Choudhry, Marion Molteno, Alison Shaw and myself before he rewrote the course. At the same time Alison Shaw wrote a teacher's guide. SOAS published these materials in 1986. In the foreword to this edition of the course Ralph wrote: "Those who have learned from the course have always included a high proportion of teachers and quite a number of them have gone on to teach from it very effectively. They have brought to their learning and teaching many skills and much experience which I myself lacked....It is above all their experience which has inspired the changes incorporated in the second edition."

It was a very special period in my life when I taught with the hard-working and reflective tutors who were attracted to take on Ralph's kind of Urdu teaching. Ralph wrote "a course like this will, in a sense always be a draft, for experience will go on revealing needs for improvement". I will count myself blessed if – at the age of 89 – I am still as alive to what experience can reveal, and fired with the same desire to improve as my esteemed father.