

## **Can Our Students Learn English?**

Robert Slaterry

## **Equal Education Opportunities for Children**

Rama Mathew

## **Feedback in Second Language Classroom**

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## **Bi-lingual Stories for the Young**

Shefali Ray

## **Interview**

Rachna Sethi in conversation with Rimli Bhattacharya and her M. Phil. students



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# From the Editors

The process of teaching and learning is in a constant state of flux. The paradigm changes from hour to hour and day to day, in response to the needs of the learning situation with the teacher making adjustments, adapting and modifying the plan that he/she had earlier thought to be just right for his/her students. This dynamism is what adds lustre to the activities and processes in the classroom wherein the teacher and the learners engage collaboratively in meaning-making and seeking new insights. The new insights will contribute to the development of the teacher into a more reflective and flexible person.

One, thus benefits from participation in meetings, seminars and conferences of professionals of the field, as these provide the fora for floating new ideas, evaluating new methods, speculating strategies and activities and above all, providing perspective to the different processes presented. Since every learning situation is unique in itself, it is reasonable to believe that any activity or method cannot be replicated on another situation without the required adaptation and modification. Many a teacher falls into the trap of attempting to replicate an immensely successful learning situation he/she has witnessed or discussed in a professional forum. The result is not as satisfactory as expected, leading to alienation and rejection. It is true that professionals learn from each other, but they would do well to realize that it is the idea that needs to be taken forward or the concept which needs to be realized in a specific context. Herein lies the teacher's use

of individual resources and creativity-and some amount of hard work.

The adaptation process would ideally take into consideration the status of the language, the proficiency of the learners, the environment and culture of the learners, their self-concept, the facilities offered by the teaching institution and the time available and last but not the least the teacher's own comfort level with the language. If the adaptation is preceded by reflection, with all the other things just said, taken into account, the

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end-result is bound to be meaningful, new and unique. Though in principle, it shares the same ideology and the concept as the original method or activity, it becomes not a clone but a robust variant of the earlier one.

One can then conclude that experience and experiments contribute to the growth of any professional and when shared can give rise to further reflection and insights. FORTELL tries to create one such platform, where English teaching professionals at various levels can share their findings and insights with colleagues, all in an attempt at meaning-making as to what teaching English as a second language is, as to what deconstructing a piece of literature written in a different age, a different society and culture means, as to what the perception of effective communication is amongst professionals.

FORTELL has been working assiduously trying to keep afloat its Newsletter that serves as the common meeting ground for English language teaching professionals from different backgrounds who are working at different levels of language learning or teaching literature with the single aim of making the effort worthwhile. It is sincerely hoped that by looking afresh at innovations and experiments, we would be able to enrich the repertoire of language activities and processes with new ones that are both meaningful and effective.



Rachna Sethi



Shefali Ray



Barun Misra

\* The views expressed in the articles by the authors in this issue do not reflect the views of the editors.

## Articles

# Can Our Students Learn English?

Robert Slaterry

Why is it that there are so many programmes of "Spoken English"? Why is it that even in small villages English medium schools are started and in the towns more and more "prestigious" English medium schools have sprung up and parents are rushing to get admission for their children? Why is it that even lowly paid persons like rickshaw pullers, when asked, say that they would like to send their children to English medium schools? It seems that more and more people feel that if they are to get good jobs they must know English. But if it is true, then what will happen to our students who, in Hindi medium schools, have attended 6 periods of English a week for 10 years and apparently still cannot speak or write English correctly or with confidence read an English newspaper? What has gone wrong? And what can be done to help our vernacular medium students to gain competence in English?

In order to see what has happened, we have to look at a number of areas: the syllabus and the textbooks, the teachers, the students, the administration, the method of teaching. Let us look at these areas one by one.

In teaching a subject, the teacher has to know the syllabus and according to the syllabus she has to teach. In some Boards, for many classes up to at least class 8, the school has to follow a syllabus but can choose any suitable textbook. In the Jharkhand government schools and aided schools, it is the opposite. The

textbook is set and that becomes the syllabus. The teacher has to cover the textbook! There is little flexibility. And unfortunately the textbook has been set not in Ranchi but in Delhi, unlike the procedure in some other states. It seems to have been written for students who either are in English medium schools or are from families that have some background of English. The lessons in the textbook are too difficult for most of our students who have one period a day of English. The words and expressions used are often ones that are not used in common speech or common writing. Some of the lessons and stories in the textbooks are very good stories, lessons, but they could easily have been written in simpler language. One of the key motivational factors in learning is the student's self confidence and self esteem. A student who can read the lesson quite easily and who enjoys the lesson builds up her self confidence and her interest in reading English. The present textbooks do the opposite.

The next area is the teacher. I once visited a government middle school and noticed that English words had been wrongly written on the black board. I pointed this out to a senior teacher and he said that that class was being taught by a para teacher. In many of our primary and middle schools, sometimes as many as 50% of the teachers are para teachers. They are untrained, and normally have only passed the Board exam. And are even the trained government



teachers capable of teaching English well? Many of them may have passed English in the Board exam by memorizing answers to questions that luckily came in the exam. They cannot be blamed because they have come from the same system in which they now find themselves, unsuitable textbooks and unsuitable methods of teaching.

Next let us look at the method of teaching. I have visited many schools and have sat in on many English classes. The sad thing is that for a great deal of the time, the students listen not to English but to Hindi. Even simple instructions like “sit down” “come to the board” “open your books” are told in Hindi. Long explanations are given in Hindi even in the upper classes. Word meanings are given only in Hindi, and long lists of new words are written on the board with their Hindi equivalent. Lessons are read out accompanied with line by line translations into Hindi. There is no attempt to get the students to try to guess the meanings, to encourage them to look up meanings in their dictionaries which in fact they haven’t got, no attempt to role play the lesson or story. Even simple sentences which the students do understand are translated into Hindi. So the majority of the students go through a whole lesson without speaking one word of English. Then how can they be expected to speak? And if they are forced to write, how can they be expected to write except by translating from Hindi and writing: “I am go” “I am come” instead of “I go” “I come”?

Another problem is a misunderstanding of the questions at the end of a lesson. Normally at the end of each lesson or story, questions are given. The students are meant to read the text and then write the answer. Instead what often happens

is that the teacher writes the answers on the board and asks the students to copy down and memorise the answers. By the end of the year, the students have at least 150 answers to memorise because in the exam no text is given to help them answer. The questions are understood by the teacher to be subject matter questions and not comprehension questions.

Another weakness in the teaching methodology is that words are taught but not sentences. The teacher at the end of a lesson writes many new words and their meanings in Hindi on the board. The student fills her notebook with hundreds of words. But words are of little use unless they can be expressed in sentences. Instead of writing so many new words on the board, it would have been far more profitable to write two or three words and put these words in a number of sentences. Moreover, we know that active learning is better than passive learning. It would be much better if the government that supplies free textbooks supply each student with a simple English – English - Hindi dictionary so that the students can themselves look for the meanings.

What about the students? Practically all of them come from a family background where there is no English. On top of this, quite often their mother tongue is not Hindi, so they have the added influence of their mother tongue on their English. They have a desire to learn English but gradually they get discouraged by the textbooks and the method of teaching. They soon feel that English is too difficult. They conclude that they cannot learn English. Their only hope, as they get close to the Board examinations is to get a second grade key that supplies the answers and try to memorise them. Or if the parents are better off, the students are sent

to get tuition and get even more confused.

What can be done? First of all the administration has to look seriously into the situation. At the state level, the education department has to set a syllabus and then suggest possible textbooks. The syllabus and textbooks should be set by English teachers who are teaching in ordinary Jharkhand board schools, not university professors or teachers in English medium schools. The English syllabus of the teachers’ training colleges has to be reworked. It has too much theory and not enough practical points. The paper on “Teaching of English” in teacher preparation courses should be of a high standard. The periodic training given to teachers, already in service, should be monitored. In schools, the heads of schools should take English teaching seriously and monitor the teaching.

The teaching methodology should be revamped. Some suggestions have already been given in this article. One of the key things is to ensure that students get a chance to speak in each class. For this teachers should be familiar with cooperative learning, either in groups or in pairs. Rather than teaching irrelevant matter and words, sentences that come in daily conversation should be regularly taught. As far as possible, the teacher should speak only in English in the English class. The school should have in the school library a stock of simple English story books and comics. If facilities are available, simple English stories on CDs can be made available. At least once a week, the school assembly can be conducted in English.

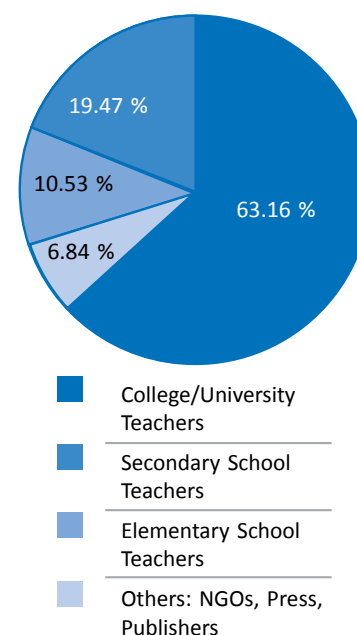
It is surely possible that with a proper syllabus, suitable textbooks, a well thought out examination pattern,

regular in-service training of teachers, serious pre-service training of future teachers, monitoring by heads of schools and education department officials, we can in ten years, enable a good majority of our Hindi medium school students to get to a competency in English.



*Robert Slaterry, Jesuit priest, Australian by birth, Indian by citizenship, worked in Hindi medium schools in Jharkhand for 32 years, presently researching the teaching of English in Hindi medium schools*

*Profile of FORTELL's Life Members*



## ANNOUNCEMENT

Articles (not exceeding 1500 words), Reports, Language games, activities, Letters to the Editor, Book Reviews etc. are invited for the May 2010 issue. Last date for submission is March 7, 2010.

Please send your contribution along with your photograph and a brief write-up about yourself, in not more than 25 words to

Dr A.L.Khanna, Coordinating Editor, Contact address: amrit.l.khanna@gmail.com

# Equal Education Opportunities for Children:

## The case of English and mother tongue for the marginalized children

*Rama Mathew*

In this write up, I would like to examine the issue of language for the marginalized children, both mother tongue and English, which every child in school is expected to study as a subject and learn. There are two strands that are of interest: one is the issue of mother tongue (L1 hereafter) as the medium of instruction and the other is the adding of a second language (L2 hereafter) to the primary school curriculum.

### Education in the mother tongue

In the case of children whose L1 is different from the regional language, for example, tribal or migrant workers whose L1 might be a dialect or another language, the medium of instruction is not their L1 but L2. Since their L1 is not a school language, they have to often begin their education on a clean slate as it were. Learning in one’s own L1 at least in the first three years of school education is desirable for many reasons: it helps i) children to see the sound-symbol relationship thus facilitating literacy skill-development, ii) in the development of concepts since they can relate what they learn in school with their life outside, iii) in the development of the capacity to think with the help of L1. Research all over the world shows that the longer the child has L1 as the main

medium, the better s/he will be at learning different subjects including additional languages. With regard to language development, the child has to learn to read and write only once in life, and it is easiest to learn it in a language that one knows well. All languages share a common underlying proficiency and therefore the proficiency in the language s/he knows best is easily transferred to other languages.

Given this understanding, our children who do not come with dominant languages, and are already from marginalized communities, further suffer from language deprivation which affects their school education. Since much of what happens in school is alien to them, they often drop out not having learned much of the regional language, different subjects or ‘school-knowledge’. Adding another language such as English (L3 in their case) compounds the problem further, since children are required to study two unknown languages from the time they are enrolled in school, before they have developed literacy skills in the L1.

Since the Indian constitution provides for education in the mother tongue for minority communities, the situation that obtains in



actual contexts especially for the marginalized children who are already disadvantaged, needs serious attention.

As regards children whose mother tongue is the regional language, their medium of instruction is their mother tongue and the second language is English. In the case of those who opt to study through the medium of English (the number of children going to low-end private schools are astoundingly large even in rural areas) especially when the home environment and outside school exposure do not supplement/support education through English, with impoverished teaching methodologies and teacher absenteeism, the situation is rather serious: a large number of such children do not develop competence either in their L1 or L2 and often drop out midway or finish school with inadequate competence to pursue any course of study or vocation. Therefore, the provision of equal opportunities is problematic in terms of implementation especially in the case of the marginalized children.

**English as a second language**

The importance of English, first as a result of colonization and now as a global language (in industry, international communications, science and technology) has led to English occupying a hegemonic position in relation to other languages. There are strong international pressures on governments for children to learn English from lower grades because it is perceived to be a symbol of enhanced status, and ensures social and economic benefits such as access to higher education, increased job opportunities and social mobility. As a result many states in India now begin the teaching of English from Class 1 itself.

The decision to lower the starting age is based on two assumptions:

that younger children find it easier to learn (one more language) and that learning the language for a longer period of time ensures higher proficiency in the language. While these assumptions are still contested in academic circles the world over, governments have gone ahead with policy decisions and implementations which have far reaching implications for everyone concerned. Although it is possible (and necessary) to question the validity of this policy decision itself as premature and uninformed by current research in the area, this presentation will consider the policy as ‘given’ or as fait accompli and begin the analysis from that point.

Introducing English to younger learners in primary schools in vernacular medium schools, if a bit simplistic, aims to fulfil the goal of equal access. The National Knowledge Commission, (2006: 1) in its report reiterated this point: “English has been part of our education system for more than a century. Yet, English is beyond the reach of most of our young people, which makes for highly unequal access”. The Central government (for example, NCERT) and State governments have responded to this demand by developing the syllabus and necessary text-books for use in government schools. Even teachers feel quite strongly that children should be taught English at the primary level; in fact, many of them say that it should be introduced from the nursery classes. Teachers in Orissa favour an early introduction of English for some of these reasons: ‘helps learn with almost no pressure’; ‘proficiency will be better’; ‘will not be afraid of English’; ‘if children from English medium schools can learn, why not our children?’ (Mathew and Pani 2009).

The issue of equal access is, it seems, addressed in policy. What about implementation? Equal access in this case means that learners in government schools should have equal opportunities as their counterparts in other schools to develop English language proficiency. While we have had this provision even when English was introduced in a higher class, for example, in Class 5, 6 or sometimes earlier, they didn’t learn it well, because of well known reasons, of which the most important, in my view, and as research indicates are the following:

- a. Teachers’ poor language proficiency and knowledge of second language pedagogy
- b. Assessing English as a content subject and not what the learner can actually do in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening in new situations.

With English introduced at lower levels, the question we need to ask is whether these two questions have been addressed. Are we able to provide adequate exposure to the English language and create opportunities for using it in natural, meaningful situations? It seems that there is a basic minimum competence that teachers ought to have which they can deploy with the help of child-friendly books, without which learning English cannot happen and we have umpteen instances of this. The answer, then, seems to be clearly in the negative.

The case study of two states, i.e. Delhi and Orissa (ibid) and other studies presented at the International seminar held last year in Bangalore give us a glimpse of this (Enever, Moon and Raman 2009): Teachers’ classroom use of English is generally restricted to words and sentences from the textbook and routine instructions such as ‘keep quiet’,

‘open your books’. Teachers read out parts of a text that is to be taught from the prescribed Reader and explain it in Hindi. Explanation in simple language, examples, easier words, comparisons are all devices used in Hindi to get the text across to students. There are numerous instances where the English class looks and sounds like a mother tongue class. Good teaching is generally defined in terms of how well the teacher can explain the meaning of the text so that it becomes accessible to them; it is also one where there is silence, with students copying large chunks of text either from the text book or the blackboard which they willingly do with ease. As regards writing, the teacher gives ready-made letters, short compositions etc. that students copy and memorize for exam purposes.

Secondly, have we moved away from treating English as a content subject, i.e. looking at the text-book and the ‘lessons’ as an end rather than as a means to provide practice in the use of the language. Even if we do away with Board exams at Class X level, the crucial question is of assessing language use-skills rather than text-based knowledge, which has a strong wash back on teaching/ learning in the classroom. Therefore until the State and Central Boards make this change, there is no way in which we can get teachers to change their methodology. Interestingly, even the National Knowledge Commission emphasizes this point: “...assessment should be based on proficiency rather than specifying achievement targets that reward mastery of single texts acquired through rote learning”.

While these two issues are the most critical, there are other equally important ones that hinder equal access vis-à-vis the quality of education seriously: teacher

attitudes to disadvantaged children (many teachers reveal a negative attitude about the educability of poor children), teacher absenteeism, inappropriate and unattractive text books, child-friendly books in the library which is accessible and so forth.

**The way forward**

A very welcome spin off of this provision of equal access is that we can challenge head on the hegemonic power of this cultural capital (Bourdieu 1992) by making the right to English a reality for the marginalized. In order to change the symbolic power to real power of English, we will need to de-elitize English and consciously tone down the aura that goes with it. As English language specialists we are obliged to provide access to English so that we entrench its dominance. On the other hand, if we deny access to the language of power, it creates an unfulfilled longing for real competence in the language further entrenching the marginalized. In theory, then the policy addresses the notion of access paradox (Lodge 1997 cited in Joseph and Ramani 2006).

However, implementation of this notion is rather complex and it is clear that we are at least not ready in physical terms to deal with it. While we would like everyone to learn English, the role of English in a multilingual context such as ours seems rather ambiguous and there seems to be little concern for the devastating effect English teaching has, especially at the lower levels, on local indigenous languages, which Pennycook (1994) calls linguistic genocide. We will need to encourage additive bilingualism (or additive multilingualism) where we can learn L2 and L1 with equal competence, as the work of NMRC (National

Multilingual Education Resource Consortium) demonstrates in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

There are other ‘pedagogic’ issues we need to address: L2 literacy skills have to be introduced gradually and after learners are fairly conversant with oral skills. This means that the first two-three years of instruction would have to largely focus on speaking and listening. Also, the quality of L1 teaching has to improve substantially. Needless to say, mother tongue medium education in primary schools suffers from similar problems, if not to the same extent, even though the linguistic competence of the teacher is not in question. Further, although using L1 as resource in the initial years of L2 teaching is viewed sympathetically in informed circles, with teachers of low proficiency, the danger is that the use of L1 becomes the preferred strategy. Therefore teachers need L2 competence as well as guidance in using L1 in a more principled and planned manner.

To achieve equal access through the introduction of English without sacrificing indigenous languages, we will need to ensure the following: i) adequate number of linguistically and pedagogically competent teachers with a sympathetic attitude to such children and their learning capabilities; ii) books that enable learners (and teachers) to learn to wield this tool effectively; iii) an assessment scheme that does justice to individual differences that learners bring to the classroom and builds on their strengths, which includes their mother tongue(s). This may seem unachievable given the magnitude of the situation, i.e. equipping thousands of teachers and educating millions of children after the policy has been implemented. A way forward seems to be the kind of work many organizations are



engaged in: focused, small-scale efforts in not-so-large settings which can serve as prototype models for large scale implementation. Other characteristics of work that is viable and productive would be to take up collaborative projects that would bring together different stakeholders such as education authorities, teachers, and researchers. An overriding feature that has legitimacy and sustainability is investment in the teacher, in concretizing notions such as the reflective practitioner, action researcher, and professional activism.

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Rama Mathew is Professor, University of Delhi.

What is the shortest word in the English language that contains the letters: abcdef?

Answer: feedback. Don't forget that feedback is one of the essential elements of good communication."

## Feedback in Second Language Classroom

Nupur Samuel

Feedback is crucial to teaching and learning to write in a second language (SL). There are different approaches to teaching writing—here when I talk about feedback, I refer to the process approach – where emphasis is on the process of writing itself. It is a multiple drafts approach where writers keep purpose and audience in mind while writing and emphasis is on communication rather than on form or correctness. Before I go on to discuss feedback, let us look at the steps involved in process writing; (these are not linear but recursive)

1. Brainstorming (gathering/ discussing ideas)
2. Jotting down points
3. Organizing notes & drawing up a rough plan
4. Making a first draft
5. Revising draft after obtaining feedback from teachers/ peers
6. Making a second draft
7. Editing (paying attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation)
8. Writing a final version

In India, where resources are limited, the teacher along with the textbook may be the only authentic source of the language. Research suggests that

teacher written feedback is highly valued by SL students (Hyland, 2007), especially those from directive cultures who expect teachers to notice and comment on their errors. Hence, it becomes important for a SL teacher to know what factors influence the kind of feedback they give and what they need to know in order to make their feedback more effective. There are three kinds of feedback: teacher written feedback, teacher oral feedback and peer feedback. In this article, I will focus on the most common form of feedback in our Indian classrooms: teacher written feedback.

Feedback is frequently misunderstood by the students because they find it vague and inconsistent. "Why did I not get the same marks, though my answer is the same as hers!" "Why did you not give me 'good' in my paper though I have written what I wrote in my notebook?" - are some questions that our students frequently ask, making us feel like inadequate and unjust. To the students, a simple tick mark, grades, marks and vague teacher comments such as "good", "rewrite", do not provide any meaningful input. They do not know what they have actually done to elicit either a negative or positive response from the teacher. The story would be

incomplete if I do not reproduce the voice of the teachers here: "Students do not read comments or if they do, they do not incorporate them." "But I have explained this so many times, they don't care!" teachers feel that they have communicated their expectations to the student through their comments and grades. The result is that students keep producing texts with similar errors and teachers keep doing repetitive corrections.

If we want to break this cycle, we need to ask ourselves some questions:

**Do I expect my students to submit a 'finished' text or do they work on multiple drafts that give them the opportunity to incorporate suggestions?**

If I expect a self contained text, I am denying students a chance to improve their written work, instead expecting them to write a better text next time.

**Which aspects of the text do I focus on and why? Do I only attend to surface errors, such as grammatical and spelling or am I able to look beyond these and comment on ideas and their organization?**

Research suggests that teachers should provide feedback on a variety of writing issues such as ideas, organization, grammar, vocabulary and style. Of course, one cannot focus on all aspects in an assignment and need to decide which aspects will

be focused on in a particular task. This could be decided depending upon the needs of individual learners, the developmental stage of the text, specific requirements of a particular assignment, overall expectation of the course. These decisions could be taken jointly with the students, but it is more important to inform them about them, so that they know what to focus on.

**What role do I ascribe to praise, negative remarks and suggestions? Am I too effusive with praise or too critical of my students' mistakes?**

Hyland and Hyland (2006) suggest adopting a flexible approach where teachers have a balance of praise, criticism and suggestions in their comments. Research has shown that though SL students consider positive feedback important, they do not appreciate vague praise which they regard as insincere. On the other hand, they value criticism when it is paired with a suggestion, or comment that they can act on.

**What do I expect my students to do with the feedback?**

As a teacher of writing, I expect my students to produce a revised draft after they have received feedback. I said 'teacher of writing' to point out the distinction between language teachers who focus on surface errors and teachers of writing who focus on content rather than form.

If you have noticed, the answer to this question takes us back to the beginning: the process writing approach. Feedback is ineffective if it does not lead to the future development of the students' writing skills. It is important to be aware of what writing means to us as teachers of SL, what is its purpose and role in our classrooms and what our expectations from our students. It is equally important to know what our students understand by writing, what are their expectations from us as SL teachers, from the language class and also from the tasks. Only a collaborative effort can make feedback fruitful and effective. After all, it is an essential element of good communication.

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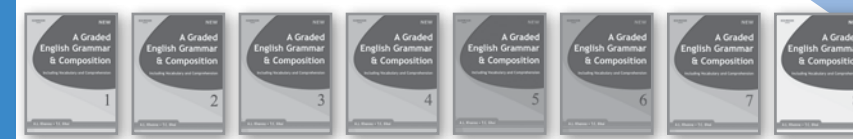


Nupur Samuel is a Ph.D. scholar at the Department of Education, University of Delhi. Her research area is second language writing and assessment.

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# Bi-lingual Stories for the Young

Shefali Ray

It was the year 2000. I was faced with the challenge of training 1800 teachers of the municipal primary schools in the major aspects of language teaching and learning. The teachers had never taught English since English had not been a subject in primary school before.

The challenges were many. To mention a few:

- the teachers' own English language use had become rusty out of sheer disuse;
- the learners had no other exposure to the language apart from the precious 35 minutes at school;
- facilities and support material were reduced to the barest essentials;
- the only method the teachers felt comfortable with was the translation and drill method; and
- the time at my disposal was only 30 hours of training hours for every batch of fifty teachers.

I wished to give them the concept of 'introducing language in context'. And what better way than getting to know the language through the world of stories, songs and poems! I wished the teachers to build their own repertoire of stories and rhymes to use in classes I and II. By then no formal teaching-learning materials had been developed.

On sifting through my stock of stories and poems, I discovered that the common children's stories and rhymes in English were linguistically

and culturally removed from the lives of our target group. The language carried nuances of the native speaker's life style, to which the learners were not able to relate. There must be stories to which they can relate and to which they can respond, using their own experiences, I thought.

That day my bi-lingual story was born. I sat and wrote a story based on their lives, most of it in Hindi but the vocabulary I needed to teach was in English. To explain these, I took the help of a drawing teacher to make the pictures, which I would flash whenever and wherever the word in English occurred in the story. Apprehensively, I went to try it out on class I children in a nearby MCD school.

It was a winter morning. Children sat on mats in a classroom where a lone bulb was trying very hard to add light and cheer. But when I announced that I had brought a story for them, their faces lit up enough to light up the very room in which they sat. They were enthusiastic but I was apprehensive. How would my bi-lingual story go down with them?

I had gone to class armed with my story, a few props, pictures of the objects and a lot of hope.

The major details of my story were like this:

**Story line: Malati's Alarm Clock**  
(In Hindi)  
Malati had an alarm clock that

stood on her window sill and shrilly but cheerfully reminded her to do many things which included getting up in the morning, getting ready for school, going out to play or doing her homework. One day it is lost and Malati's day goes haywire. She looks for her clock asking the boys and the girls in her neighbourhood, she even asks the birds and the squirrels on the tree near her window. None can help her.

Ultimately she discovers it with a young monkey who had picked it from her window sill. He plays with it but drops it the moment its alarm rings to mark her playtime in the evening.

*English vocabulary:* girl, boy, window, clock, birds, squirrels, birds and monkey

*Pictures:* of a girl (Malathi), other children, a window, an alarm clock, birds, a squirrel and a monkey

*Questions:* In Hindi. The answers of the questions were largely the words in English to which the child had been introduced.

*Predictive text:* These were sentences in English which recurred during the story. By the end of the story the children had learnt by heart the two sentences.

"Have you seen my clock?"

"Sorry, I/we haven't."

*Other activities:* Miming to guess the character.

The storytelling began with a preliminary discussion in Hindi

on activities like going to school, or catching a bus or a train in the morning for which one needed to set an alarm. A few children imitated the ring of the alarm much to their own delight and that of their mates.

Following this, the title of the story was announced and the story telling began. It was largely told in Hindi with the words in English being used at relevant places. This was accompanied by the flashing of the relevant picture. I said these words loudly, clearly and in a slightly exaggerated manner to make them distinguishable from the remaining language of the story. Often, as I asked questions in the middle of the story, I found an occasion to repeat the words and flash the relevant pictures again.

Each word was repeated more than twice within the story line and then once more during the mid-story discussions.

At the end of the story these words were repeated another time with the help of the pictures.

Question time arrived. I had so crafted the questions that the answer elicited would be the word in English. Once in a while, a child gave the answer in Hindi but soon they caught on. I repeated the answers putting the English word within its context in Hindi.

Similarly the predictive text was visited upon with questions like, "What did Malati ask the .....?" and "What did he/she/they answer?"

Now it was fun time for the children. I mimed the actions of a monkey, the ticking of the clock, a girl by showing plaits with my hands, a boy by showing a cap on the head, the flight and twitter of a bird and the nibbling posture of the squirrel. Children were to guess what or who

I was. At times they came up with words in Hindi and but soon learnt to say the words in English.

By the end of the storytelling the class was agog. Many were repeating the new-found vocabulary while some began clamouring for another story. On my part, I beamed from ear to ear. My storytelling was a success.

Encouraged thus, I got together a team of enthusiastic teachers from the MCD schools and together we crafted about ten stories for the children of classes I and II. This was accompanied by writing poems for the children-poems which touched their lives. All this was then placed in a book along with other language games. The book is called "ELT is Fun" which the SCERT published in the year 2001.

To revisit the storytelling and assess the gains of the listening experience, I wish to add that:

- the story was related to their lives and identification was easy;
- the story was told in a language familiar to them and hence they remained within the comfort zone;
- the number of words in the new vocabulary were presented in context and repeated in different ways to help retention;
- since the story was told in an animated manner the children were engrossed in the story, chiming in, once in a while, saying the new words and the sentences, not realizing that it was something new they were learning; and
- it was a language activity in which they did not have to perform or measure up to a certain standard, as is usual in all classroom activities.

Teachers of young learners can try this experiment in the initial days of second language learning and adapt it to suit their clientele. This will serve as a bridge between the home language and the new language and between the familiar and the unfamiliar, as well. There is, however, a word of caution. The bi-lingual story provides the first few steps towards learning a new language. It is necessary to wean the children from the bi-lingual story to the substantial diet of rhymes and stories in simple English, as soon as they begin to feel comfortable with the new language.

During the whole process of developing these stories I had the occasion of attending the SLELTA meet at Colombo in September, 2000, where I taught some Hindi words to Sri Lankan teachers using this bi-lingual story. Much to my delight they came up to me on the last day of the conference speaking words like 'ladka', 'ladki', 'ghadi' and 'bandar'. They also reassured me that they would work on similar stories in their own language. Now I was sure that this method would work.

I would like to mention a similar experiment which was conducted by Dr. A.L.Khanna and Mrs. Falguni Chakravarty in August 2007, in Udaipur. This workshop, conducted under the aegis of Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur, was for the instructors of Activity Centres of Hazira and NFE teachers of Sewa Mandir.

A short story in Hindi was read aloud interspersed with the English names of certain objects. The participants were then told to identify the objects that were named in English from a set of pictures. This was then followed by another activity wherein participants were told to

write another short bi-lingual story using the same names in English.

The participants thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the experiment of the bi-lingual story, for they found it to be a simple tool to help the beginner

to pick up the English language.

In conclusion, I hope teachers and English language teaching professionals who have used the bi-lingual method at the introductory stage of second language learning,

would share their experiences for the benefit of all.



*Shefali Ray is an English Language teaching professional who has been faculty of SCERT and is currently an author and resource person for the Oxford University Press.*

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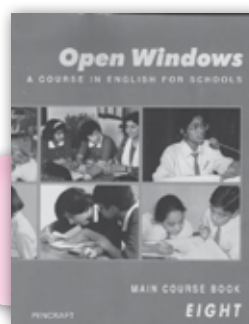
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# Handling Mixed Ability Classes

## - Perspectives and Teaching Procedures

Madhulika Jha

A mixed ability class or a mixed ability teaching system is one in which pupils with differing abilities are taught together in the same class. However, students in any classroom can be said to be of mixed ability as they form a group of individuals, wherein each individual is, to some extent, different in terms of knowledge, language, culture, level of confidence and ability.

Teaching a mixed ability classroom is a challenging task, for the teachers need to cater to the needs of the individual students that are essentially different in more ways than one. This challenge is more pronounced in single teacher schools which essentially function in single rooms, where the children not only have different knowledge levels but also belong to different age groups and who need to learn different subjects. It is usual that a teacher has to teach in a class in which the pupils differ in their maturity, learning speed or learning ability.

To be able to do justice to the children in such a class requires knowledge of the problems that may arise and the knowledge of techniques that can help deal with these problems. This becomes all the more challenging with the introduction of multi-level and multi-grade classroom teaching. Teaching a mixed ability classroom refers to an inclusive policy whereby students are grouped together rather than set apart according to the levels and

in a wider sense in line with the Salamanca Statement. People like Coombs (1994) hold another view. He says 'Some of the most egregious sins against equity of access are committed in the name of providing for individual differences'.

### Teaching Mixed Ability Students: English Language Teaching

For a language class, mixed ability means a marked difference in the language proficiency of the students. According to a study by Magdalena Říhová, 'even in the "language classes" where the children are specially chosen for their good aptitude for learning languages, the pupils' learning styles, attitudes to learning or interests will be different' (Říhová, 2007). One of the most difficult situations for the language teacher is to teach a group that includes students of different levels, of varying learning ability, or even both. The class has to be structured in such a way that no group of students feel that they are wasting time waiting for the others to catch up or, alternately, that they need to catch up with the other members of the group who have gone ahead. How can we design a lesson to meet all the varying needs? 'A differentiating instruction is the means by which we can attain this. It means providing the students with multiple options for the process of gaining information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they have learned so that each student can learn

effectively' (Tomlinson, 2001).

Mixed-ability in a language class will also refer to the classes in which there is a very clear difference in language proficiency among the students. These differences will be at the level of the receptive and productive skills, fluency and accuracy, grammatical knowledge, size of the vocabulary, pronunciation and accent, etc. As an example, let's look at a mixed level EFL group including students from upper-elementary to mid-intermediate levels. Say, the next area to be covered in the course they are following is the present perfect for past to present events. The sentence is 'He's worked here for the last five months. For the upper-elementary students this is a completely new structure, and they're going to need a systematic presentation as well as a lot of controlled practice before they can go on to freer activities using the structure. But for the mid-intermediate students, the lesson is only a revision and consolidation.

Compounded to this are the other differences that exist, like differences in learning styles, speed and aptitude, study skills, background knowledge and knowledge of the world. Some of these differences may be linked to age, sex, upbringing, level of maturity, and interests, etc. We will also find classes in which there are different levels of motivation. Some of the students may have a very positive attitude towards learning English while others may see it as just another school subject. Good classroom management skills are absolutely essential in the mixed-ability class since organizing and running our classrooms efficiently and effectively will translate into maximum opportunities for all students to learn.



### Strategies for Teaching Mixed Ability Class

1. Differentiated instructional method requires analyzing the needs of the students. Once this is done, the teacher will be able to coordinate the students into functional learning pairs and groups, as and when needed, based on their skills and learning pace. On the basis of the compatibility with their individual learner profile the groups will do tasks that the students themselves select or the tasks that are assigned to them by the teacher within different working arrangements. A balance, however, requires to be maintained in a situation like this. This balance will vary to a degree for each student, based on the student's maturity, the nature of the task, classroom conditions, etc.
2. We should make a conscious effort to provide the weak and introverted students with the opportunity to participate in classroom activities by establishing eye contact, nominating weaker students to answer easier questions, checking whether they have understood instructions and by closely monitoring them during pair and group work. Giving the students open ended tasks or questions is another effective way of involving all the students. As this activity has a variety of possible correct answers instead of a single answer, it will allow each learner to perform at his/her own level. Lessons for all students should be engaging. In fact (Means, Chelemer, & Knapp, 1991) many learners who struggle would find learning more natural and sensible if they

were consistently presented with problems, issues, dilemmas, and unknowns that required them to use more of what they have learned.

3. Requisite of such a situation is to be able to make the students feel noticed and valued. Recognizing good behaviour and encouraging effort and good work is important. Saying "Good" and "Well done", smiling and nodding to express approval, all help to boost motivation. While monitoring, the focus would be on the positive aspects of the performance rather than on the errors. Similarly, rewarding what is good rather than punishing what is undesirable go a long way in encouraging the learners. For example, if some students are distracted from the task on hand, one would draw their attention to the task while commenting positively on the classroom behaviour of the students who are concentrating on the task.
4. Motivation is an essential factor affecting learning. In a mixed-ability class, the weaker learners are often those with the least motivation which is further reduced by a sense of failure or fear of failure, since they find the subject difficult and make slow progress. Successful learners, on the other hand, are often those who are more motivated from the beginning and their sense of success motivates them to further tasks.
5. Another aspect is contextual embedding, wherein one raises the students' awareness of how much English there is around them and/or how many people speak English. An English notice-board with changing displays could be set up for this purpose.

These displays will help in creating a visually interesting and motivating environment. Even if the students don't have any particular external motivation for learning English, mere enjoyment in an interesting lesson can provide powerful motivation.

6. Relating the language to the students themselves is important as this will make the language more meaningful and memorable for all of them. We can personalize any new language by involving the students to speak on different subjects that has a personal voice in it. This can include vocabulary of animals by putting the list of animals in accordance with the degree of likeness, etc (Tice, 1997). By personalizing the tasks all students can participate voluntarily which will give them a rare opportunity to express their ideas, feelings and experiences.

### The Teacher's Role in a Differentiated Classroom

Mixed-ability classrooms that offer differentiated instruction make good sense for teachers, as well as students. For many teachers, offering differentiated instruction first requires a paradigm shift. Teachers who become comfortable with differentiated classrooms would probably say their role differs in some significant ways from that of a more traditional teacher. When teachers differentiate instruction, they move away from seeing themselves as keepers and dispensers of knowledge and move toward seeing themselves as organizers of learning opportunities. While content knowledge remains important, these teachers focus less on knowing all the answers, and focus more on "reading their students."

### Conclusion

The purpose of all these activities is to make the classroom a good fit for both students who struggle to learn and those who learn with ease, for students' needs vary and a same size fits all approach will not suffice. By providing a learning environment that is safe and challenging for each student the students' self esteem will grow as they strive to achieve understanding they initially considered out of reach. This whole exercise should follow the KWL chart that initially focuses on the level of students and assess the needs and then give what is necessary. Brain researchers Ornstein and Thompson state that there is evidence to prove that a brain loses capacity and "tone" without vigorous use, in much the same way that a little-used muscle does (Tomlinson, 2001). This means a challenging activity to

achieve a goal will help the student increase the brain power and vice versa. Studies by Carole Ames and Jennifer Archer proved that Goal setting interventions that are aimed at getting students to establish realistic but challenging goals may be further enhanced when a mastery structure is in place (Archer, 1988).

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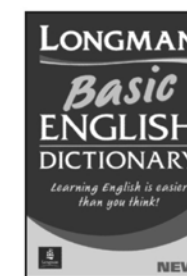
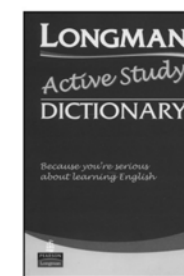
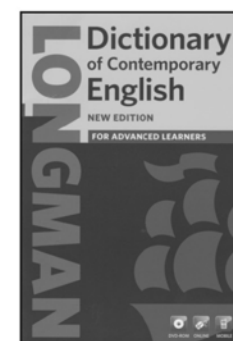
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## Language, Translation and Culture

*Barun Kumar Mishra*

A talk on “Translation” was organized by FORTELL in collaboration with Rajdhani College on 25th November, 2009. The session began with a welcome message by the Principal Dr. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit which was followed by the talk by Dr. Sukrita Paul Kumar, a well known poet, critic and translator.

She started with emphasizing the importance of the mother tongue and the need to maintain its dignity. Under the dominance of English, the mother tongue often lies dormant. In the hierarchy of languages, there is superiority and elitism attached to English language and there is a simultaneous denial of dignity to Indian languages. She stressed on the fact that instead of preferring one language over the other(s) there

is a need to realize and appreciate linguistic plurality in India.

She said that this was not to deny the usefulness of English in terms of its global reach and for purposes of translation. However we need to be conscious of the historical processes of colonization that brought English to India. There is a tendency to become “mimic men” as Naipaul calls it in trying to imitate a so called superior language and culture. The deep-rooted inferiority about our language(s) becomes the burden that we carry around. There is a need for decolonizing our mind set and attitudes towards our languages.

She moved on to discuss the role of translation in a multilingual society like ours. She said that it is a very interesting exercise to

look at the meaning of the word “translation” in different languages and it variously means carrying over, recreation, betrayal, shadow, mimic and coming after. In India we have a multi-lingual and multicultural consciousness

In the very process of translation, linguistic and cultural transformations take place; and we need to be aware and sensitive towards the cultural transportations in translating texts. Language politics has always been a major concern and we need to move away from the irony-tower position allocated to English. Through writings in Indian languages and translations we need to address, express and empower ourselves. And in this process, language and culture are married to each other in a way that there can be no divorce. The session ended with an interactive session with the students



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## Developing Speaking and Listening Skills in English: A Workshop

*Nandita Saxena*

### Developing Listening and Speaking Skills in English

A workshop on Developing Listening and Speaking skills in English was conducted at The Air Force School, Subroto Park, New Delhi for 40 teachers of the Primary Wing, on Saturday, 21st November, 2009 by the resource person, Mrs Falguni Chakravarty a freelancer ELT practitioner and author.

The focus areas of the workshop were:

- Developing Speaking Skills
  - Focus on pronunciation of the different sounds through intensive drill
- Practice in vowel and consonant sounds, word patterns, words with silent ‘r’.
- Conversation skills
- Listening, understanding and carrying out commands
  - Short commands using action words like jump, clap, skip, hop, yawn, smile, laugh etc. followed by more complex commands using a wide range of activities.
  - Announcements, listen and draw, listening and comprehending a process, etc.

The participants were divided into groups and there was intensive practice of all the activities within and across the groups followed by brief presentations thereafter, giving every participant a chance to speak. The activities were supported by handouts.

The objectives of developing listening and speaking skills in learners from a very young age were first elaborated by the resource person, after which the interactive session commenced.

### Feedback

Based on the participants’ responses to the questionnaire which was administered to them at the end of the session, all the activities conducted by the resource person emerged as being very useful, interesting and practical. The participants also agreed unanimously that each and every activity was easy to administer in the classroom with their respective level of learners.

*Nandita Saxena teaches at Air Force School, New Delhi*





## Re-locating Byatt's Children:

### A Review of *The Children's Book*

Saloni Sharma

#### The Children's Book

By: A S Byatt (Chatto & Windus  
614 pp)

I found Byatt's latest, *The Children's Book*, in the children's books section of a major bookstore in the city, jostling for shelf space with Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series. Surprise turned to exasperation at the ignorance which unthinkingly, unblinkingly, categorizes a major literary volume with soppy teen-vampire romances. The tragedy was not that the title was privileged over the content but that merely a title like 'The Children's Book' was sufficient to deem the book non-serious and definitely not a part of the fiction/classic/contemporary aisles. Children's fiction has come a long way from its didactic beginnings but unfortunately has still not secured a place as a serious literary genre even within most academic circles. Byatt's book, among other things, shows a concern for the necessity of writing for children, of engaging the imagination and of telling stories. It brings to life the traumatic transition between the closing years of the Victorian age and the political, social, cultural turmoil leading to the World War I. The book, despite its unfortunate insertion in the children's section, is not written for the child reader but tells the story of a disparate group of children growing up in these difficult times.

Byatt begins her tale in 1895, at the South Kensington Museum (now known as the Victorian and Albert), as what looks like a boy's

adventure story. Julian Cain and Tom Wellwood, privileged children of a liberal England, explore the basement of the museum, looking for a truant Philip Warren- quintessential working class, runaway, and observer of the excesses of the English art intelligentsia. The move from quirky boyhood to the complexities of man-woman relationships, class interactions and social prejudices is swift and economical with the introduction of two of the major players, Oliver Wellwood, the writer of children's books and Prosper Cain, the Special Keeper of Precious Metals at the museum. Olive is the originator of the 'Children's Books', individual books written for her posse of children; her children with her banker-turned-social-revolutionary husband, Humphrey Wellwood, Humphrey's children with Olive's sister and his mistress, Violet, Olive's children with other lovers. The world of Byatt's dying 19th century is liberal, promiscuous, amoral; challenging, complex and self-governing.

The fictional, in this case, becomes a mirror image of the real. Byatt unabashedly exposes the hypocrisies of the Victorian world. She delves into the breakdown of the family as a social unit through the confused paternity of the Westwood children and the incestuous exploitation of the Fludd girls by the immensely talented and intensely disturbed potter/sculptor Benjamin Fludd. The hollowness of traditionally revered concepts like 'Motherhood' is similarly laid bare when Byatt has Violet question



the idea of a 'real' mother, a strain which is picked up and agonized over by Dorothy, Olive's daughter with the German puppeteer Anselm Stern. Philip, apprenticed to Fludd, becomes another tool for showcasing the gradual erosion of family ties in a world increasingly governed by personal ambition at the cost of interpersonal relationships.

Byatt's primary concern seems to be with the artists and intellectuals of the period. She brings to life the decadence of Oscar Wilde, not just by bringing him in as a character for a short scene but also through debates on aesthetics and through the sensual richness of her canvas. Hers is a world alive with colour, and brimming with vitality. The text is replete with visual details, from the artifacts of the museum, to the hand-painted borders on the china Proper Cain prefers; from the glazes and textures of Fludd and Philip's pots to the visual exuberance of the Exposition Universelle de Paris. Todefright, the Wellwood's domestic idyll, becomes the meeting point for anarchists, Fabians, rebels, academicians, writers, playwrights, and artists of various types. Through each of these figures, Byatt explores the necessary contradictions of a creative temperament. Again, the children become the body for

## Book Review

the play of these contradictions. Humphrey's nephew Charles, becomes permanently divided between the identities of an upper-class, conventionally brought up banker's son and a free-thinking, liberal, rebellious Marxist. He comes to define himself as Charles/Karl, representing a dichotomy as well as integration.

Literature for children is another area that Byatt tackles with creativity and insight. Each of Olive's children has a book dedicated to them, bound and illustrated, organic in structure, progressing as the children grow up. The stories have an uncanny parallel with the lives of the children. Tom's story has as its protagonist, Lancelin, a prince who as a baby has his shadow stolen by a rat who escapes into the underground. Like Lancelin, Tom is on a quest for the duration of the book, searching for his real self. In an act he regards as the deepest betrayal, Olive adapts the story for the stage, changing Lancelin's name to Thomas, stripping

the socially recalcitrant Tom of any buffers, resulting in a tragedy. Other than Olive's books, Byatt also refers to the likes of Edith Nesbit, Kenneth Grahame and J.M. Barrie. The protagonists are shown at a performance of Barrie's Peter Pan where Tom reacts negatively to the several degrees of separation between the plot and the actual experience of childhood. Olive and her circle cerebralize the use of fantasy in literature, noting its ability to sell. Her children, on the other hand, live out these fantasies, reacting vehemently to the violence and the beauty of Stern's marionettes, and creating their own utopia in a fancifully built tree house.

Byatt's takes her children and their families through a journey of growth, self-assessment and constant self-enquiry, leading then to the beginning of a war that changes all normative, challenges all certainties. The futility of war, the vulnerability of hapless victims, and the sharing of the universal experience of loss are

certain lessons the text seems to be espousing. The end when it comes is almost melodramatic in its twist of scattered families miraculously coming together but it does hold out hope for the future, a future free of disabling differences and distances.

Like her earlier *Possession*, *The Children's Book* also manages to re-create an era and inspire its often-neurotic, excessively obsessive and intensely individualistic characters with a very believable life. Though often pre-occupied with the idea of creativity and the compulsions it necessitates, the book always steers clear of a moral or pedantic stand and pulls the reader into the fabric of its flawed yet brilliant world. It is a book that belongs to an entire generation and for me is easily the best read the Man Booker shortlist has had to offer this year.



Saloni Sharma is Assistant Professor, Department of English, Zakir Husain College.

## ELT Events

### February 2010

- 13. (North America) Hawaii TESOL, Leeward Community College, Pearl City, Hawaii, USA. E-mail jamesm@byuh.edu. Web site <http://hawaiitesol.org>.
- 20. (North America) 7th TALGS Conference, "Research Meets Practice," East Carolina University, Bate Building, Greenville, North Carolina, USA. E-mail talgs@ecu.edu. Web site <http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/engl/talgs>.
- 25-27. (Europe and Eurasia) Hildesheim University and the Young Learner & Teenager SIG, IATEFL, Children's Literature in Language Education, "From Picture Books to Young Adult Fiction," Hildesheim University, Germany. Web site <http://http://www.childrenslit.de/>.
- 26-7. (North America) Illinois TESOL / Bilingual Education, "Changing Times, Changing Lives," Holiday Inn Select, Naperville, Illinois, USA. E-mail convention@itbe.org. Web site <http://www.itbe.org/convention.htm>.

- 27-28. (Asia and Oceania) 6th CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching, "One World: World Englishes," National Institute of Education (NIE), Norodom Blvd corner Suramarit street, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. E-mail info@camtesol.org. Web site <http://www.camtesol.org>.

### March 2010

- 4-6. (North America) Tennessee TESOL (TNTESOL), "All Aboard for ESOL," Downtown Chattanooga Marriott and Convention Center, Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA. E-mail tntesol2010@yahoo.com. Web site <http://www.tntesol.org>.
- 11-13. (Asia and Oceania) TESOL Arabia, "Transformations in TESOL," Zayed University Convention Center, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. E-mail jkennedy@hct.ac.ae. Web site <http://www.tesolarabia.org/conference/>.
- 12-14. (Europe and Eurasia) TESOL-Spain, "Building Bridges: New Competences in the EFL Classroom," Universitat de Lleida, Campus de Capponet, Edifici Polivalent. E-mail

convention2010@tesol-spain.org. Web site <http://www.tesol-spain.org/convention2010>.

- 13-14. (Europe and Eurasia) TESOL Greece, "Living and Learning in a Brave New World," Hellenic American Union, Athens, Attika, Greece. E-mail chair@tesolgreece.org. Web site <http://www.tesolgreece.org>.

### April 2010

- The 44th IATEFL Annual International Conference and Exhibition will be in Harrogate 7th-11th April, in the Harrogate International Centre.

### May 2010

- 7-8. (Europe and Eurasia) 2nd International ELT Conference, Maltepe University, Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail elt@maltepe.edu.tr.
- 29. (Asia and Oceania) The Ninth Annual Wenshan International Conference, "Meeting the Challenges of Serving the New Generation," Taipei, Taiwan. E-mail wsconf@nccu.edu.tw. Web site <http://www.english.nccu.edu.tw/seminar/actnews.php?sn=9>.



*Rachna Sethi in conversation with Rimli Bhattacharya and her M.Phil. students, Debolina Dey, Paromita Patranobish and Shelmi Sankhil.*

**Rachna:** Apart from writing papers as part of M.Phil course on children's literature with Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya, you have also undertaken project work. Can you briefly tell us about your project work? How was it moving beyond the text and classroom? How did you deal with crossing-over of forms and genres?

**Debolina:** We, a group of four, went to the government home for boys in South Delhi [names of children withheld to protect them]. Our main mode of interaction with them was through the two plays that we did with them. They were not really "scripted." In our attempts to create something we worked through pedagogies and myths of families, childhood, and of course mythology. We went with a fluid concept, we asked for their responses to conceptualize the play. But we were genuinely confused with the selection of story. Is it going to be a film, a text, or their family stories? The children are not orphans, but homeless boys...

**Paromita:** And when we did the play with them we often became tyrants! So the entire model of the classroom was being replayed. While the play offered us a lot of scope for new kinds of experimentation, it also created a disciplinary paradigm.

**Debolina:** Earlier they called us didi, but during the rehearsal of the play they treated us as ma'ams! Not all of their fabulous stories were true. It was a wish-fulfilling experience for them also...to express beyond the Home. Their schedule of school and back did not have room for interaction with a "didi" to tell all

their stories, talk to.... Each of the 21 boys was given a character and dialogue.

**Paromita:** Theatre was a very liberating experience for them.

**Debolina:** There was a lot of replicating of Hindi films' persona, like "dost" and "dushman." We found out the sorry state of their families from the odds and ends of their interaction with us. Within the Home's space, male-bonding was a common sight.

**Shelmi:** In our group we looked at how children respond to different kinds of material and we selected two texts, one of which was a popular song. We went to two schools, Presentation Convent and Government Sarvodaya Vidyalaya at Rohini.

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**RS:** Is there a canon of children's literature in the West or in Indian universities? And if there is one, what are the gaps and absences that need to be addressed? How do we look at the canon in terms of pedagogy?

**PP:** I think there is definitely an idea of a canon, of the standard text as sacrosanct or given, like the fairy tales of Andersen and even limericks. But at the same time there is also a lot of experimentation in form and looking at other kinds of media. Like, in our course we are looking at films, animation and we are doing some field work. So there is a sense of dialogue between the two.

**DD:** I'll say there's a canon which wasn't in the course and there was the canon in the course: texts which I hadn't read, like Nesbitt. On the

other hand, Aesop which wasn't in the course, but it was a part of my childhood, and that recurred amongst the children of the Home. Panchatantra too. The lines between the canonical and non-canonical got fuzzy, there was the 'sher' and the 'chuha' and the rabbit from the Panchatantra, and they all crept into the play. And it was the children who brought them in.

**RS:** If we move back a little...is Children's Literature really acceptable as a discipline at the university? You are doing it at the M.Phil. level, what about the undergraduate or postgraduate level? At the BA level you have just one text as part of Popular Fiction paper.

**DD:** The only other text that I remember from the BA course that I had also read as a child was *Gulliver's Travels*. But obviously it was not taught as a children's text. The only way in which it came up was at a seminar on fantasy in my second year.

**RS:** Are there Indian universities who offer it as an independent paper at the undergraduate or postgraduate level?

**RB:** Perhaps one or two individuals do. They do not offer an M.Phil. course. Besides, they already have a template of what 'Children's Literature' is and are not very willing to experiment. I think a lot more experimenting is happening at the publishing end of it, rather than in academia. So we are actually talking of two different things—what children should read; and, what can be studied as part of 'children's literature'.

**RS:** You've brought up an interesting



point about publications. A lot of innovation is happening there. Have you looked at this issue in your projects?

**DD:** We looked at books and magazines which were circulated in workshops during the course.

**PP:** We also did these scrapbooks where we were encouraged to work with different publishing formats.

**DD:** The scrapbook gave us an alternative space. In this course we went out and worked with children. Also the class of children we were working with is important... and the books they were reading. They were quite different, mostly government school textbooks.

**RB:** Every year when I teach this course, the focus is slightly different. One year I had Mala Dayal come in to speak of the ideology behind NBT, we have had Taposhi Ghoshal and Anushka Ravishankar. Once, the group project produced an annotated bibliography of Mizo folk tales, with animal characters.

This present group has been the most adventurous, also engaging with bureaucratic structures at different levels. Very often we forget in academia how structures of the state, their institutions and their mediation

opens up the questions of literature as the written word.

**RS:** You are very right. Even when we study literature, the interdisciplinary approach is important. And with children's literature, you cannot categorise and create boundaries. For example, we could have an entire discussion session on the transmission of the epic today, it's no longer the grandparents narrating the story; the modes of depiction and transmission are both being re-defined.

Do you think there is a lot of dissemination of morals through children's literature? Do the children really imbibe these values? The forms have been contemporarised, but have the values become dated for them?

**RB:** Our animations always seem to carry a moral message, provide "wholesome entertainment"... it is very market friendly. I read this quote, "There is Superman and Batman, we have Hanuman."

We go back to the question of choice... what is available to all kinds of children today? What are they imbibing? Are there real alternatives to a limited range of images which get recycled all the time? What is the India that gets represented?

When Northeast was the flavour of the day, they saw a play, Mauruangi,





where the story had changed the Mizo story to call it a Cinderella story. It was quite different actually!

**RS:** What the child can access could be a combination of factors, the market availability, the economic considerations and what the parents would be interested in.

**RB:** There is a whole mentality at work in determining what is useful in the production of the Indian, a savvy Indian who is global but truly Indian.

**DD:** Nowadays mythologies as well as the latest film get formulated in video games. A ten-year old would be playing with Lara Croft, there's a whole market for it. And it's obviously a class phenomenon.

**RB:** They depend a lot on children's literature to create games. It is a conscious attempt to target young adults, growing children.

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**RS:** Is there a gendered reading that we give to the texts...depiction of characters, perpetuation of stereotypes and in reader/audience response?

**DD:** We have characters like Enid Blyton's Georgina who is tom-boyish, but generally the values are clearly demarcated for the male and the female child. I worked with modern Bengali writers for my long paper and both the adventure stories had boys as protagonists. Often the boys become the site for anguish while girls of the same age are shown to handle things better, that is also stereotyping.

**SS:** We looked into the question of authorial intent as we presented texts at the schools, though it is difficult to give generalized views. However class was also an important concern.

**DD:** I remember a boy Roni, 12-13 years old who talked about Son Pari, his fantasy of having a family.

We expect girls to articulate such fantasies, but in this case the boy is an orphan, homeless who expresses wish for a family/home.

**RB:** Even if a story, narrative or form appears to be a gendered construction, a child can potentially do something else with it. We have our notions of construction; we cannot conceive of slippages, shifts. The same boy who can draw a very macho kind of image can also say something which is very "feminine", so it's not an anomaly.

**SS:** The problem is more from our side than the child's.

**RB:** Absolutely. Pop or mass culture works with these strict ideas of what a girl or a boy child will like. The terms of reference may appear to have changed, so you have a girl who can "outdo" the boy, but inside there has been no radical change. Literature is the space for individual engagement. Mass culture is destroying this space. They are always talking of the fashioning of a heroic self above class and gender; they are moralistic in a different way.

**RS:** It's heartening to see that your responses are not strictly academic and theoretical. Your responses are borne out of lived experiences, where sometimes the class question becomes more pertinent than that of gender.

**DD:** The Home where we went, these boys did not have a mother telling them that they should grow up to be so and so. Lot of our gendering comes from that, I am not saying that they are absolutely free of it, but there was a difference of approach. Also there was a very secular culture. Hanuman was not seen as a religious figure but more of a secular hero. There could very well be a girl looking up to him as a model.

**RS:** And how did you pick on the

school and the group?

**DD:** We had an expectation of an age-group. We didn't want to work with boys who are "grown-ups." We thought of classes I to IV, but as it turned out many of the boys in class III or IV were "grown-ups"! Some of these boys were 15-16 years old. And you expect them to be juvenile, and you expect puberty to have set in. But because they were in class III, and they mingle with children from class III, they almost have class III "mentality." They consciously distanced themselves away from the "elder/senior" boys. So, their body language was of class III.

**RS:** For how long did you work on this project? And how does the project assessment count towards the course marks/grade?

**PP:** Two and a half months.

**SS:** Two months, there was a lot of planning and holding of workshops.

**RB:** A lot evolved as they went along. The whole idea was of going outside the classroom. They will be evaluated on class participation, short paper, scrap books, group projects, and a long paper that is 50% of the overall grade. I am happy that the department allowed us to have something like this. Ideally we would want group projects like these to run for a year.

**RS:** Thank you. Projects like these lend greater interrogation and understanding to literature. So many questions arise when we move outside and beyond defined classrooms, syllabus and genres.

*\*This is an edited version of a freewheeling hour long conversation! We hope to carry the discussion on animation later.*



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