In this issue

- Inclusive Practices
- I cut Onions because I don’t have Tear Glands
- Pedagogy and the Discourse of Inclusion and Human Rights of the Disabled
- Disability and Pedagogy in Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s Black
- Lessons in Disability: Acceptance and Inclusion
- Why Literature?
- Native Speaker Fallacy: A Recipe for Confusion (and Ridicule!)
- Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom
- Interview with Dr Hemachandran Karah

www.fortell.org
"Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning."

Mahatma Gandhi

They were pioneers in the field of educational reform, policy and pedagogy. Read about them on the reverse of this poster as well as on our website @rsgr.in/educationists

Ratna Sagar SALUTES THE GURU-SHISHYA PARAMPARA OF THIS ANCIENT LAND ON TEACHER'S DAY, 5 SEPTEMBER 2013
CONTENTS

Editorial
Articles
Special
Inclusive Practices
Kirti Kapoor
I cut Onions because I don’t have Tear Glands
Lakshmana Rao Pininti
Pedagogy and the Discourse of Inclusion and Human Rights of the Disabled
Guntasha Kaur Tuli
Disability and Pedagogy in Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s Black
Richa Chilana
Lessons in Disability: Acceptance and Inclusion
Shubhangi Vaidya
Archana Parashar

General
Why Literature?
Ashok Celly
Native Speaker Fallacy: A Recipe for Confusion (and Ridicule!)
M R Vishwanathan
Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom
Ramanujan Parthasarthy

Reports
Rhapsody: Literature festival of ZHDC
Aman Kumar
Interrogating English Studies in India
Anavisha Banerjee
IATEFL 2014
Sabina Pillai

Interview
C. Nisha Singh and Manjari Chaturvedi in conversation with
Hemachandran Karah

Book Reviews
Untouchable God
Reviewed by Preeti Gupta Dewan
Talking About Detective Fiction
Reviewed by Shilpy Malhotra

READERS’ RESPONSE
I would like to warmly compliment Prof. G.J.V Prasad and Ms. Rachna Sethi for recording a highly perceptive interaction in the previous issue of FORTELL (issue 28, January 2014) on the topic ‘Interdisciplinary Approaches in English Studies’. This piece reflects the visibility and emergence of the study of English Literature in the context of other Arts and Social Sciences. The engaging narrative manifests its force in the pedagogical reformulations which confront the current issues faced by the Departments of English Studies in Indian universities.

The interview clarifies aspects of a loaded term like ‘interdisciplinarity’ in the context of its usage in the teaching of English language and literature and other disciplines. Also, it discusses at length another engaging but intriguing issue related to adaptations of Cultural Studies in English Departments in our country. Cultural interactions are emerging to provide a forum for this activity which is becoming an interface between arts and social sciences.

The comparative advantages of interdisciplinary studies in the context of interrelations of languages and literature with Fine Arts and Social Sciences are becoming increasingly important and it offers a new area of humanistic learning. Besides, as we know, Translations Studies too has taken on new avatars and has renewed and reformulated its relationship not only with English studies but also with Indian languages and literatures.

I would therefore congratulate FORTELL for not only maintaining the regularity in bringing out the issues when we are facing financial constraints but also for including such seminal interactions on engaging topics which attract readers’ attention and evoke perceptive responses.

Dr. Chandra Mohan, Advisor, International Higher Education, Central University of Gujarat
General Secretary, Comparative Literature Association of India | c.mohan.7@hotmail.com
Fortell in this issue is focused on the pedagogical status, needs and future of the disabled. A much ignored area not a long time ago, identification and meeting of specific and different learning needs of the disabled, specially language, has picked up pace at the national level. Yet, the existing position and actual experience speaks volumes for the attention and work that pedagogy for disabled needs from both able-bodied and the disabled. This need of the hour reflects in the overwhelming response we received to our call for papers on ‘Pedagogy and Disability’ for this issue.

The articles in this issue assess the current pedagogical methods and suggest changes that will set the future course more positively. Kirti Kapoor traces the milestones in the journey towards inclusive education for the disabled. It sets the tone for this issue by giving an overview of the historical development of pedagogical frameworks and policies for the disabled through segregated, integrated and inclusive phases. Lakshmana Rao Pinninti takes the cue for sensitizing people to inclusive pedagogy for students with disabilities citing examples of students with visual impairments. The article underscores the need to develop inclusive attitudes and values among the non-disabled so that an inclusive ethos can be created both inside and outside learning environments. This is reinforced in Guntasha Kaur Tulsi’s field based research that provides a glimpse into actual state of special schools as they exist. Richa Chilana brings the issue of disability and pedagogy to fore, and examines critically the implementation of alternative teaching methodologies, even as it makes a case for inclusive curriculum and classroom. An insider’s experiential perspective as a stakeholder in the exercise, Shubhangi Vaidya complements Archana Parashar’s article where she elucidates on use of alternative communication methods to enhance learning in autistic learners. The interview with Hemachandra Karah attests the concerns outlined as he takes us through his own educational journey as a disabled and emphasizes on addressing specific problems in disabled pedagogy head-on.

In our general section too, stereotypes are challenged with Ashok Celly’s rhetorical questioning of the traditional supremacy of the schools of rationality and reason which have always opposed liberal humanities specially the study of Literature. M R Vishwanathan makes a strong case for native Englishes have come of age while Ramanujan Parthasarthy talks about facilitating language learning by adopting peer-feedback as an apt tool to give feedback to students on their performance.

Overall, the issue discusses pertinent and relevant issues in English Literature both from the vantage point of the disabled and able-bodied. It was a pleasure to compile it. We hope the issue will be a milestone in the long road ahead of us!

Chandra Nisha Singh
PhD, retired as Associate Professor in English at Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi in 2012. She was the OSD at the Equal Opportunity Cell, DU for more than 3 years.

Manjari Chaturvedi
Manjari is Assistant Professor of English at Maharaja Agrasen College, Delhi. She is pursuing her PhD on representations of Nana Saheb from JNU, Delhi.

SUBSCRIPTION FORM

1/ we would like to subscribe to 2 issues (January and July) per year of FORTELL for a period as indicated below:

Please put a tick (✓).

**STUDENT**

- ☐ Annual Subscription: Rs.250
- ☐ 5 years Subscription: Rs. 2000

**INDIVIDUAL**

- ☐ Annual Subscription: Rs 500
- ☐ 5 years Subscription: Rs. 2000

**INSTITUTIONS**

- ☐ Annual Subscription: Rs. 750
- ☐ 5 years Subscription: Rs. 3000

**Details of the subscriber**

Name: ____________________________  Designation: ____________________________  Qualification: ____________________________

Institution: __________________________________________________________

Postal Address: ______________________________________________________

City/State: ____________________________  Pin Code: ____________________________  Mobile: ____________________________

Phone: ____________________________  Email Address: ____________________________

**Details of the cheque/draft**

Name of the Bank: ____________________________  Cheque/DD no: ____________________________  Date: ____________________________

Amount: ____________________________  Signature: ____________________________

FORTELL July, 2014 | Issue no. 29
Inclusive Practices

Kirti Kapur

Two decades ago, the UNESCO supported World Conference on Special Needs education led to the creation of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. The key premise of the action plan was to encourage schools to “accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions.” The statement further states that children who are “disabled… and… from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups” need to be catered to by the school system (Salamanca Framework, 1994). Inclusive education is thus an umbrella term that encompasses educational practices across institutions that are sensitive and responsive to diverse populations of children.

In the Indian context, policies on Education (NPE 1968, NPE 1986, POA-1992 etc) have spoken about how ‘integration’ can be a means to ensure inclusiveness in the school system. The challenge however remains in shifting the onus from the parents and the child to make her/him fit in to making an unchanging school system more dynamic. Creating a community of acceptance is perhaps foremost relevance then when we talk of inclusiveness in education. The following paper therefore will present analyses and approaches to inclusive education using the following working definition - “Inclusive education is the pairing of philosophy and pedagogical practices that allow each student to feel respected, confident and safe so he or she can learn and develop to his or her full potential.” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development-Canada 2014) The paper will also examine how education can be made more effective for students with disabilities especially in an English language classroom.

The evolution of the discourse on inclusive education in India has seen three major phases - segregated, integrated and inclusive. In the first phase, students with disabilities were taught separately from their peers. The separation was not just physical (classrooms, infrastructure etc) but also in terms of curriculum and syllabi. Many developing countries including India responded to children with special needs by setting up dedicated, albeit segregated, special schools and sections. This approach was detrimental to the idea of community participation and only seemed to perpetuate the divide that was existent in other spheres of life. In response, a more integrated approach was sought to be adopted. Herein, students with disabilities shared the same space and resources as their peers. However, this too was unfulfilling because it was the students who were expected to ‘fit in with pre-existing structures, attitudes and an unaltered environment.’ (AIE 2012) Curricular flexibility was below par and aids to learning limited or scarce. Though such functional integration was necessary, it had severe limitations because it could not achieve social integration which is the express aim of inclusive education.

Today, advocates of inclusive education have consciously and deliberately focus on a ‘social model’ of disability which does not focus on the limitations of the individual but looks at how the environment – social, physical and cultural can be made more accessible to the individual with disability. There are programmes and initiatives in so far as educating the girl child and mother tongue based education is concerned, but inclusion of children with special needs requires the attentions of all the stake holders. Using this as a founding ethic, contemporary initiatives in inclusive education look at the services that can be provided to the student with disability. A social constructivist approach to the needs of children with disability can help make a case for changing not just the infrastructure but also curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment processes, teacher orientation and co-curricular activities. In fact, studies have shown that “systems that are truly inclusive reduce drop-out rates and repetition of grades and have higher average levels of achievement, compared to systems that are not inclusive.” (Salamanca Framework 1994) Also, by adopting the ‘engagement model of inclusion’ in the teaching-learning process, the student will be ‘involved with social and academic aspects of learning…[with] a stronger emphasis on the interaction between social and psychological factors’ (Cooper & Jacobs 2011). In this context inclusive education also fosters “…a school culture of respect and belonging…. [and] provides opportunities to learn about and accept individual differences, lessening the impact of harassment and bullying” (Salamanca Framework 1994).

So, how can the educational system strive to be more inclusive? The foremost intervention would
be in the teaching-learning processes. Adopting a socio-cognitive-constructivist perspective can help approach the curriculum from a more open position. This would also enable the teacher to revise and adjust it according to the needs of her students. Of course, the idea is not to “reduce the curriculum but to redefine it” (Borsani & Gallichio, 2008). A curriculum is the “culturally organized selection of skills, values, contents, methods, procedures to be learned and taught” (ibid.) and the teacher is the mediator who interprets and implements its contents. As a result, the teacher development programmes need to be initiated to help develop skills to handle inclusive classrooms. The narratives and experiences of teachers as well as the case studies of learners’ attitudes to peers with disability can also provide vital cues for reflection and appropriate tailoring of teaching modes and practices. Action researches on the same lines as well as extensive focus on social integration can be made part of pre-service and in-service training programmes. This will not only improve the confidence levels among the teachers but also empower them to cater to the specific needs of their students because “…teachers themselves are faced with a steep learning curve if they are to work effectively”. (Edwards & Easto, 2013)

III

According to the National Curriculum Framework-2005, “…it is important to recognize the inbuilt linguistic potential of children as well as to remember that languages get socio-culturally constructed and change in our day-to-day interactions” (NCERT 2005). The document further states that, “recognition of the linguistic abilities of learners would encourage them to believe in themselves and their cultural moorings.” (ibid.) The English Language teachers, therefore, need to take the initiative of investing in their own understanding of children’s varied abilities. They also need to develop a deeper understanding of “development disorders and impairments and their warning signs, so that they can recognize child’s special educational needs.” (Savic, 2007)

What is important to note is that these may not just be sensory or intellectual disorders but could also be behavioral and emotional disorders. Teachers must evolve a strategy for early identification of learning issues and develop strategies accordingly. An “inclusive English Language classroom is the one where teacher creates the context in which all the learners feel valuable and have opportunities and confidence to try, where both linguistic and non-linguistic skills are valued and everyone can contribute even with the smallest contribution.” (ibid.) It is imperative that instruction does not presume sameness of experience. The teachers must also be open to providing remedial instruction if need be.

The English Language teachers can also empower their learners through curricular adaptation. They may choose to:

Supplement materials: By using teachers’ notes, pictorial support, audio-visual materials, physical activities to facilitate better comprehension, inviting specialists in the field to co-conduct some activities

Simplify materials: By varying the pace of the input, use of greater emphasis in instructions, allowing additional time in completing activities.

Alter materials: By going beyond the prescribed syllabus to incorporate materials more suited to the needs and abilities of the child by using more diverse sources like popular media, folklore, biographies of persons with disabilities etc.

Use group work / peer work as a strategy to create an environment of sharing and learning together.

Using role-play, drama, art activities to ensure participation. Voice and Speech exercises for voice articulation and expression; speech-related activities (loud reading with expressions) can be taken from the texts in English.

Inclusiveness can be made a part of the ongoing assessment by developing projects on ‘accessibility’. Asking the students to analyze the school premises in terms of design or even the syllabus in terms of comprehensibility will not only help develop language skills but also promote analytical thinking as well as provide valuable feedback towards improving the overall experience of education for every child.

IV

As language teachers, one has to be conscious of the fact that the language that is used is free from words, phrases or tones that reflect prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups and doesn’t deliberately or inadvertently exclude people from being seen as part of a group. Inclusive education should ideally be regarded as a value-system or philosophy and not as a project or programme. Limiting it to a few schools or spaces will be counter-intuitive to the entire movement. Modifying education, so that inclusiveness cuts across all stages of education, is imperative. Further, since the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 guarantees every child access to
education including those from ‘disadvantaged groups,’ there is scope to highlight the fact that successful inclusion can only be the outcome of a collaboration between homes, schools and the state. Eventually, community support is essential to meet the needs of children to remove bias towards inclusion. “Parents of students learning English must be viewed as capable advocates for their children and as valuable resources in school improvement efforts” (Cummins, 1994). There must be a promotion of a culture that accepts differences and fosters reliance.

References


---

I Cut Onions because I don’t have Tear Glands

*Lakshmana Rao Pinninti*

‘One of the greatest problems facing the world today is the growing number of persons who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities.’ (UNESCO)

Disability has been viewed in two perspectives: medical and social. The former understands disability as an attribute of an individual and the latter, in contrast, a product of society. The social model maintains that it is the society which prevents people with impairments in participating in all spheres of life and impairment would not become disability if the society provides equal access to them. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that ‘persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (p.4). The above views suggest that disability is a complex mixture of individual impairments that are unavoidable and societal factors, which the society concerned can address through legislation and execution of it.

The social model gave rise to inclusive education, which was adopted by India in the 1990s in accordance with the international developments. National Curriculum framework (NCF) 2005 states that, ‘a policy of inclusion needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout our education system’ (p.85). The participation of all
children, ‘especially the differently abled children from marginalized sections, and children in
difficult circumstances’ requires to be ensured in
‘all spheres of their life in and outside the school’
(NCF 2005, p.85). The concept of inclusion as
envisaged by NCF 2005 goes beyond education
and people with disabilities and includes other
spheres of life and other marginalized sections
as well. It is not just about building schools to
welcome and enable children with disabilities to
participate in education but, more importantly,
about developing inclusive attitudes and values
among the non-disabled so that an inclusive
ethos can be created both inside and outside
school. The National Focus Group’s Position
Paper on Education of Children with Special
Needs states in its executive summary that
‘implementation of an inclusive curriculum would
require a number of changes in present day
teaching practices, curriculum content, evaluation
procedures and available resources ... would also
involve curricular modifications and the use of
human and technological support’. Consistent
with the NCF 2005 and the Position Paper, the
National Curriculum Framework for Teacher
Education 2009 stresses the need for sensitising
teachers to the philosophy of inclusive education
and orienting them to ‘the different kinds of
adjustments that schools have to make in terms
of infrastructure, curriculum, teaching methods
and other school practices to relate teaching to
the needs of all learners’ (p.13). The discussion
that follows is an attempt to respond to that call.
Though, the examples given below focus on
students with visual impairments, they have a
philosophy that can be applied to the others as
well.

Disability-sensitive Language
Different words have different meanings, and
different meanings have different effects. A
stereotyped language, which assumes stereotypes
about disabilities, will have a detrimental impact
on both students with and without disabilities.
Expressions such as ‘Are you blind?’ and ‘Are
you deaf?’ are used to chide someone who fails to
employ common sense. Additionally, stereotypes
such as ‘handicapped’, ‘crippled’, ‘confined’
and ‘wheelchair-bound’ are common in English.
Such stereotypes, especially by teachers, hurt
the sentiments of people with disabilities and
negatively shape the language usage and the
thinking of people without disability. The teachers
of English may draw the attention of the students
and the colleagues towards these stereotypes to
create awareness among them. As a student, the
author heard words like ‘relaxation’ and ‘extra’
repeatedly instead of ‘additional’ for describing
the right of people with disabilities to have
additional time for completing a test. Ideally,
the author would prefer the term ‘additional’ to
‘relaxation’ or ‘extra’ as it implies their right to
have more time.

Multi-sensory approach
The multi-sensory approach in teaching benefits
both the students with and without disabilities.
The teachers, following this approach, speak as
they write on the board, turn to face students
with hearing impairments so that they can lip
read, provide models, whenever possible, so that
the students can touch and feel, use appropriate
intonation and pitch patterns and modulate
voice along with facial expressions and gestures
according to the situation. Perhaps, a teacher of
English may associate the colour ‘white’ with
snow or the moon. However, associating ‘white’
with a ‘tooth’ can be inclusive both for the
students with visual impairments as the ‘tooth’
is accessible to them and for the students with
hearing impairments as it is a sign for the white
colour in the Indian sign language.

The Multi-personnel Approach
Following a multi-personnel approach can offer
solutions to some of the challenges faced by the
teachers in educating the students with disabilities.
The teachers can seek support from the parents,
the family, the classmates, the colleagues, the
administrators and the community. The student
concerned, the peer group and the family can be
significant agents of education.

Individual: The students can be asked to maintain
an Individual Educational Plan, a document
containing information about the students’ levels
of functioning and goals. The teachers can report
the educational services provided and required to
achieve those goals and information about how
the students’ disabilities shape the process of their
learning and performance. This document helps
the students in knowing about their progress on a
particular goal and about what they need to do to
achieve it. This also helps the educators to plan
the learning opportunities if the students change
either their schools or the board.

Peers: According to the socio cultural theory
of language learning, peer interaction plays
a significant role in language learning which
eventually shapes the mind. Hence, peer
interaction and cooperative learning can be
considered resources for an inclusive classroom.
Involving peers to explain and discuss what is
happening in and around the classroom may
enable the students with disabilities to participate
in the activities. For example, if the class goes on a field trip, the students with disabilities may also be included so that their self-esteem is improved. Involving, rather than excluding, the students with disabilities in everyday activities of the class can develop a positive attitude among the students without disability towards the students with disabilities.

**Family**: The process of socialisation and inclusion of children begins right from the family, and the children with disabilities are no exception. Some family members tend to react either with rejection or over protection which prevents the child to participate fully in the socialisation process. Such circumstances offer an opportunity to the teachers to counsel the parents and the siblings to respond positively, rather than negatively, to the situation. The parents may be encouraged to identify and reinforce the strengths and competencies of their children, not to compare them with others and to provide ample opportunities for the use of life skills such as eating and dressing. The children with disabilities develop a great deal of confidence by performing these life skills independently; although these seem simple to the normal children. The author experienced an incident that happened in a seminar where a student with visual impairment narrated with confidence and pride how he used to cut onions in his free time to help his parents run a ‘tiffin shop’. When he said that he chose to cut onions as he does not have tear glands (acknowledgement: his words inspired the title), it touched the hearts of the audience who responded with claps.

**Ability-driven instruction**

In educating the students with disabilities, the teachers may concentrate on the students’ abilities and strengths. For example, research suggests that people with visual impairments perform better on perceptual auditory tasks and memory tasks as compared to the sighted people since ‘some auditory functions including language processing and auditory short-term and long-term memory have been found to be more efficient in blind humans as compared to sighted’ (Hotting & Röder, 2009, p.168). An example of the ability-driven approach is the news item published in 2007 about the Belgian police that recruited six blind people as detectives based on their *sound* auditory perception for guiding the police to detect and identify criminals through analysing wiretap recordings. The implication from the above two examples is that voice modulation and intonation of the teacher can be a great resource for students with visual impairments. For instance, ‘gushing’ can be pronounced with force and speed on ‘sh’ sound in pronouncing ‘gushing blood’ so that they can internalise the concept by associating it with the sound.

**Assessment**

The stakeholders in education across the world have always been obsessed with normalisation and standardisation in assessment. But, in an inclusive classroom, teachers may search for alternatives in assessment such as performance-based assessment procedures. Would it be justifiable if a teacher conducts an oral test for a student with hearing impairment and a written test for a student with visual impairment? Since English is an unphonetic language and the students with visual impairments are exposed to limited written language, expecting accurate spelling from them is a demanding call. Instead, the teachers may look for alternatives that are user-friendly. Moreover, modules such as ‘phonemic transcription’, ‘information transfer’, ‘picture description’ and ‘spelling’ have visual component and so they may be considered cautiously.

**Recreational activities**

Recreational activities, including games and sports, can boost the confidence of the disabled students. The school personnel may avoid bias against them when they participate in their favourite games and sports. The talent and skills of students with disabilities may be identified and honed individually. The school personnel may avoid stereotyping, for example, the students with visual impairments are guided to play chess as they are known to be successful in chess.

**Inclusion literature**

Education has been recognised as a tool for reducing inequalities within society. Developing material, which does not stereotype disabilities and which includes inclusion literature, may develop an anti-disablist society. It is necessary to have literature about disabilities, known as inclusion literature, as part of syllabus to address the dearth of inclusion literature in textbooks. Inclusion literature could prove decisive in developing a positive attitude towards people with disabilities and among students and teachers without disability. Even if such literature is not available in textbooks, the teachers may use inclusion literature, sometimes, in the class to break the monotony of reading the regular textbook. A list of resources of inclusion literature can be found at [http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring98/andrews.html](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring98/andrews.html) (link valid on 25 April, 2014).
Pedagogy, the Discourse of Inclusion and Human Rights of the Disabled

Guntasha Kaur Tulsi

This paper will begin with an exposition of the necessity of the recognition of human rights of the disabled within the Indian context. It would, then briefly, look at the situation of the absorption of the disabled at the school and the college levels. One will focus on the constant dilution of the absorption of students with special needs (as one moves to higher levels in education) from the secondary to the higher educational levels and on the employment situation that has not been able to absorb them sufficiently. The focus would then shift on to how the ELT skills of the college teachers need to be developed to take cognizance of an array of handicaps that students with special needs have to face in the class in the form of visual, loco-motor, or physical disabilities.

The disability situation in India has certain specific angles to it which would be the starting point for this paper. Usually, birth defects on grounds of someone either being visually or hearing impaired or intellectually challenged are not treated with that amount of comprehensive seriousness as recommended by the global standards.1 Furthermore, as noted by G.S. Karna in an important work titled United Nations and the Rights of Disabled Persons: A Study in Indian Perspective, in India the problem is also often compounded by the fact that a lot of the
disabled, actually, belong to the poorer sections of the society. In such a situation, there is neither any medical awareness about the importance of adequate therapeutic care from the earliest years in childhood nor much incentive in proper educational rehabilitation of the disabled. Quite often, this has also meant that there doesn’t exist much of a possibility of sufficient livelihood options for the disabled children, who then usually enter into adulthood with similar kinds of anomalies and helplessness.

Within the Indian school education system, the recognition of the rights of the disabled children usually comes under the “Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995”. The disabilities absorbed at the level of school education system, in India, are usually comprehensive in nature, with some rudimentary provisions made for various forms- visual, locomotor, auditory, mental retardation, or autistic. However, the sorry situation can be gauged from the fact that only about one per cent of the disabled children actually get to go to schools.

In this light, some field work based evidence would be of help. A visit to Mano Vikas Kendra, a school for children with special needs located in North Delhi, brought some interesting observations to the light.

The school consists of around 200 to 250 children with various forms of disabilities such as the slow learners, the intellectually challenged, the autistic and the visually impaired. It runs in the form of a special school-cum-rehabilitation centre with the presence of provisions such as an early intervention centre, a physiotherapy unit, teaching made through special audio-visual aids and a special vocational centre. The achievements of some of the students of the higher wing seemed to be more than impressive, but there were clear indications of the lack of livelihood options for these students after school with any absorption of the severely intellectually challenged or the hearing impaired obviously beyond possibility.

Most of these students belonged to the middle class or the lower middle class families with the case of one severely intellectually challenged student who had crossed thirty years of age but continued to do minor vocational tasks in the school in the absence of his parents, being unable to find any suitable means of alternative employment. Furthermore, there were observations made from the pedagogical point of view: it was pointed out that every special education class should have at least two to three special educators for a recommended intake of not more than 12-13 children. In this regard, some inadequacies were pointed with respect to the government run special schools, e.g. the dearth of special educators per classroom and the lack of infrastructural enabling environment in the light of the severity of disabilities faced by some of the students.

Understandably, from the school education to the higher education level, the absorption of disabled students is both less than satisfactory and limited and also depends on the severity and the type of the disability. It is usually the visually and the physically handicapped (VH/PH) categories that make it to the higher education level. A personal engagement on the part of this researcher/academician with a few prominent colleges of the University of Delhi did bring to the fore an increasing amount of sensitivity which higher education has, fortunately, started displaying towards students with multiple forms of disabilities. It is recognisable in the form of the existence of the ‘Equal Opportunity Wings’ in the colleges, the provision of enabling infrastructural environment such as ramps, special toilets and tactile paths, the provision of Braille aided material and specifically designed labs and class rooms to suitably enhance the learning ambience for these students.

However, this is certainly not a universal scenario and the problems at the higher education level are compounded by slightly less than required sensitivity on the part of the concerned pedagogues. This is especially more relevant in the context of ELT and the ELT teachers at the higher education level. From the perspective of the two pioneering universities in Delhi: the Delhi University and the JNU, English language teaching ranges from training the students in the basic skills of reading and writing through the utilisation of some basic prose or poetry texts (usually confined to the students of B.A Tool/Programme) to the teaching of specialised courses in literature or cultural studies under the aegis of English teaching programmes.

A short survey conducted by this researcher amongst VH/PH students exposed the basic inadequacies that English language teaching faces in the colleges. These usually vary from the disabled student’s inability to comprehend or keep up with the pace of the lectures, inaccessibility of English teachers in terms of the language used, the absence of prop aided teaching, the lack of special focus on the specific nature of disability that a student might face in the class and an absence of examples to facilitate understanding in language teaching.
The suggestions made by the students were of the nature of providing additional help as a supplement to classroom teaching in the form of recording of lectures of language classes to the possible and increased usage of audio-visual aids to enhance the comprehensive nature of these lectures. Some of the students emphasised on the advantages of bilingualism or on conducting an English language class in two languages such as English and Hindi, so that slow learners could benefit from the same. There was also the case of a student with minor dyslexia in one of the language classes who suggested how he required additional help in improving his handwriting techniques since that proved to be a major hurdle in his learning process. Some of the VH students also pointed towards their inadequacy to keep pace with the lectures in an English classroom in the face of their inability to write or their dependence on the Braille systems. The VH/PH students highlighted the need for the development of language and translation software so that they could be in a position to improve the base of their English language skills which were inadequate from the school level.3

There was also an emphasis made on lack of remedial sessions and absence of vocation centred learning or learning conducive from the employment perspective as far as training in English language classes or cultural studies is concerned. The students pointed out that the teachers’ role was often confined to reading from the textbook and providing a standard set of explanations with very little focus on improving English language skills of the students or on enabling them to write better. Here, an example can be cited of the Jawahar Lal Nehru University which has been conducting exclusive workshops on teaching or improvising the language skills of the visually or the hearing impaired through the utilisation of advanced techniques in sign language or exclusive sessions on English language for Academic Writing. All of this, understandably, becomes all the more necessary as the students quite often do not know even the basics of academic writing. The problem is due to the assumption that these students have most of the basic language skills and, therefore, do not require either remedial intervention or a revisit of the basic skills in academic writing or pronunciation. The students also pointed to a lack of personal involvement on the part of the teachers with the background and profile of these students so that the necessary interventions could be made on any of the desired lines—economic, psychological, or remedial.

There has been a provision of reservation for the disabled in the Indian higher education sector. In addition, there has also been an apparent amount of greater focus and sensitivity displayed towards these students through consecutive Five Year Plans. However, despite these provisions, the ground realities are different and disturbing. There continues to be a relatively lesser absorption of the disabled students from the school to the college levels. Within the context of the ELT classes, there is very little emphasis on personal intervention in the students’ specific situations which could put a check on the increasing absenteeism or a drop in the level of engagement in the classroom. Sadly, very little attention is paid to train these students, genuinely, in language skills which would actually translate into meaningful employment or improved social equity.

A greater sensitivity and a step towards that extra mile forward would definitely lead to a relatively conducive situation in which a deep engagement would translate into meaningful pedagogy for the disabled at the higher education level, with increased chances of their absorption within the existing employment situation.

Notes

1 As observed by G.N. Karna, the most important outcome of the observance of IYDP (1981) was the adoption of World Programme of Action, concerning disabled persons (1983-92), which represented a global commitment to creating full participation and equal opportunity for disabled persons. (Karna, 1999, p.121)

2 The visit was made by this researcher on April 30, 2014, at around 11:00 A.M. with major directions in the school provided by Ms Jhanna, the head; and Ms. Yamini, the school counsellor.

3 These observations have been derived from a short personal interview based survey conducted by this researcher across two prominent colleges in the University of Delhi in the months of March-April, 2014; and a talk with some teachers engaged in the running of EOC wings in these colleges.

References


Disability and Pedagogy in Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s Black

Richa Chilana

Bhansali’s Black is loosely based on Helen Keller’s The Story of My Life and emerged out of Bhansali’s fascination with the ways and means employed by parents and teachers to reach out to the hearing impaired children—“How do you start the communication? How do you keep it going? What takes other children a year to learn takes ten years for them to absorb” (Ramnarayan, 2005). The film shows how Mitchell’s teacher Debraj Sahai takes her from darkness to light and it concludes with her graduation in arts from a prestigious university. It is narrated by the adult Mitchell; it is thus, a film in which disability occupies the center and the non-disabled people are pushed to the periphery to look at life inside out. The film shows the challenges before a teacher who tries to teach language to the differently abled, the need for innovative, alternative pedagogical approaches and the need to bridge the “politically charged chasm between ‘special help’ and regular teaching” (Berberi, Hamilton and Sutherland, 2008, p.30).

The disability theorists, who espouse the social model, vigorously argue about the difference between impairment and disability. According to the Union for the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS), impairment is defined as the loss or dysfunction of a limb, organ or function of the body while disability is a disadvantage imposed on one’s impairment by the society. Shelley Tremain points out that the social modelists discuss disability within the purview of Foucault’s juridico-discursive notion of power - a belief that power is imposed from above or by an external authority. But, following Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, Tremain (2006) argues that power is about government, not a confrontation between adversaries—“Discipline is the name that Foucault gives to forms of government that are designed to produce a ‘docile’ body that is, one that can be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (p.187). Black begins with the production of this ‘docile’ body. Mitchell is an unruly, wild child who is disciplined by her teacher. The first time her mother sees her eating with a spoon and with a napkin spread over her lap, she is overwhelmed with gratitude for her teacher who has transformed her into a ‘lady’. Before she learns language and before she learns the meaning of words and things, she is to be disciplined to be “subjected, used, transformed and improved.” Black, considers this lesson a prerequisite, the first step in the movement towards knowledge. Although the film shows innovating teaching strategies, it does not qualify this notion of disciplining students, of making them learn without breaking their spirit.

Many disability theorists and teachers have spoken about how impaired hearing/vision/speech leads to many problems in learning, socialisation and intellectual development. The inability to hear and participate in class room lectures can cause immense frustration for the disabled students. Hence, the most crucial goal in teaching the disabled is advancing their language skills (Westwood, 2009).

The film devotes a lot of space and time to the way Debraj Sahai teaches language to Mitchell - a blind, deaf and mute girl and how he gives her shabd ke pankh (wings of words). Whatever she touched/felt / ate had a name and a meaning; he teaches her those names and meanings through signs. We see how she learns the relationship between thorns and pain, water and thirst, but she struggles to fathom the relationship between words and their meanings. This teaching methodology also makes us realize the tremendous challenges faced by language teachers when they have to deal with non tangible/abstract concepts like think/love. In The Story of my Life, Helen Keller shows how her mentor, Anne Sullivan circumvented this challenge. She vividly describes how she was struggling to string beads of different sizes - two large beads followed by three small ones and so on. She made many mistakes and Sullivan patiently corrected her. She finally understood the mistake she had made and for a while she concentrated on Sullivan’s lesson and tried to think how she should have arranged the beads. It was at that moment that Sullivan touched her forearm and spelled the word, “think”; “In a flash I knew that the word was the name of the process that was going on in my head. This was my first conscious perception of an abstract idea.”
Sahai, reconfigures and redefines words and worlds for Mitchell - black is, according to him, not the colour of darkness but the colour of celebration and the colour of the graduation robe; disability is not a deficit or an impairment; it is a stage we all will reach if we live long enough. Elizabeth Hamilton talks of how her pedagogy “de-emphasises the behaviourist, rehabilitative, occupational and even technological aspects of blindness in favour of the humanistic” (Berberi, Hamilton & Sutherland, 2008, p. 25). Debraj, in a similar vein, underscores the similarities between the disabled and the able-bodied by speaking of disability as a stage and not a medical condition. The latter half of the film shows how Mitchell uses the same pedagogical approaches to teach Debraj who is in an advanced state of Alzheimer’s. It is a definition which goes beyond the medical, the rehabilitative and the social model of disability.

The film also shows how the word, “special” metonymically symbolises the exclusionary practices of educational institutions. Debraj wanted Mitchell to study in an inclusive classroom. When he approaches the Principal of a prestigious University, he finds the idea of Mitchell studying in his college preposterous. According to Simi Linton, the word “special” is an example of what Freud called “reaction formation”, in which an individual embraces ideas or behaviour which is opposite to their true feelings to protect their ego from the anxiety of their real feelings (Davis, 2006, p. 164). Because of Mitchell’s zest for knowledge and her determination, she finally gets admission to this University. The film depicts the challenges as well as the joys of inclusive teaching. In a lecture, when Mitchell listens to her teacher talk about aspirations and the dreams that we see with our eyes, she vehemently disagrees—“aankhein sapne nahi dekh, marr sapne dekhna hai. Main aankhon se nahi dekh sakti phir bhi main sapne dekh sakti hoon” (Eyes don’t dream, the heart does. I can’t see but I dream.) This shows how an inclusive approach goes beyond accommodating a disabled student; it also broadens the horizons of our thinking by bringing new perspectives to the classroom.

An analysis of this film and films like this is enabling in terms of the light they throw on the urgent need for innovative and alternative pedagogical techniques for teaching language to the disabled students. It depicts the frustration of not being understood, of not being able to communicate with others and the crucial role that language and communication play in social, intellectual and personal development. More often than not, the disabled is considered the un-teachable. Debraj Sahai chastises ‘special schools’ by arguing how they teach students to make baskets and mats. The film makes a strong plea to dissolve the barriers between us and them, regular schools and special schools and strongly champions the idea of inclusive classrooms. Above all, it shows how teaching a disabled student in a mixed classroom is not an isolated activity; it enlightens the disabled and the able-bodied alike.

References


Westwood, Peter. (2009). Sensory impairment: hearing and vision. What teachers need to know about students with disabilities. Australia: ACER.
Lessons in Disability: Acceptance and Inclusion

Shubhangi Vaidya
svaidya2404@gmail.com
Shubhangi Vaidya, PhD, teaches at the School of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Studies, IGNOU, New Delhi. A sociologist by training, her research interests are in the domain of disability in a cross-cultural perspective, the contemporary family and gender studies.

The discovery that one’s child has a life-long developmental disability is a life-changing one, profoundly affecting the life-script and heralding a voyage of discovery and learning that no classroom can ever teach. This article is a reflexive take on my engagement with disability as the mother of a young man (17 years old at the time of writing this article) diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and the search for an appropriate and enabling education which respects and celebrates his difference. The aim of the article is to provide a parental perspective to pedagogic discussions on disability and inclusion. The parents are stakeholders in their children’s educational journeys and especially in the case of children with special needs and also act as interlocutors and advocates. They can serve as valuable allies in fostering a nuanced understanding of disability, not merely as a set of ‘defects’ that need remediation, but as a different way of being in the world that needs the space to flower and flourish.

‘Let’s start at the very beginning’, which, as the famous song informs us, is a very good place to start. My son V was diagnosed autistic in the year 2000 at the age of three. He was lucky to get an early diagnosis, because Autism Spectrum Disorder is a relatively lesser known diagnostic category in India and is frequently equated with ‘mental retardation’ or psychiatric disturbance. The core symptoms- a ‘triad of impairments’ in the areas of language or social communication, social interaction and imagination - are often dismissed as the consequences of the child’s ‘introverted’ nature, bad parenting or cultural beliefs that boys are generally late speakers. Autism is a ‘neurodevelopmental’ disorder resulting in atypical brain development, whose signs and symptoms usually become apparent when by the time a child is two to three years old; i.e. the period when language and sociality develop at a rapid rate in a typical toddler. It is known as a ‘spectrum’ disorder because of the different degrees of severity with which the symptoms manifest in an individual; while some people on the ‘spectrum’ are able to get by with a minimal degree of support, others may have severe disabilities and high support needs. (www.autismspeaks.org).

V was an alert, inquisitive baby whose motor milestones were age appropriate. He was an unusually silent baby though and did not babble or point or use other non-verbal means to communicate or share attention like his elder brother did. He would scream at the top of his voice and throw terrifying tantrums when he was thwarted; a fact that was reassuring and unsettling in equal measure. However, as time went by, it became quite clear that there was something decidedly unusual about him. At first, we thought he might be deaf. Why did he not respond to his name and appear immune to what was going on around him? We dismissed the idea when it became apparent that he was extremely attentive to sounds that attracted him like a certain television jingle. Although he did not seem in the least bit interested in other people including his own brother, he would ‘use’ them for his own ends; climbing on top of them to reach a jar of sweets or guiding their hands towards the door of the fridge when he wanted water. “This baby knows what he wants and knows how to get it!” a friend said jovially. We laughed uneasily. He did not babble ‘baba’ or ‘dada’ or ‘mama’ unlike other children; his first words were from a TV commercial for a chewing gum. “Bee bee Baabo” (big big Babool) he sang, to our amusement and delight. However, contrary to our expectations, his speech did not “take off” and even on his second birthday, he did not speak the words a ‘normal’ toddler usually does.

An observant pediatrician, during the course of a routine visit (in which I blurted out my concerns) suggested that I take little V to a child psychologist for an informal meeting. The psychologist had two little girls of her own and the three children played on the living-room floor while their mothers sat down for a chat. Observing the three toddlers at play, the stark difference between them struck me with the force of a body blow. The little girls excitedly showed their toys and tried to engage the ‘bhaiyya’ in play; he, on the other hand, was indifferent, and scarcely seemed to notice that they existed. He was fascinated by the wheels of their tricycle which he spun with intense focus and concentration and appeared to be in a world of his own. This ‘social disconnectedness’, in such
marked contrast to the overwhelming sociality of the little girls, is typical of the autistic condition. It would still be a few months before he received a concrete diagnosis, but the writing was clearly on the wall.

Acting upon the psychologist’s advice, I tried hard to draw V into ‘our’ world. I would sit down at his level, follow his interests, devise little songs and rhymes, make funny faces and try to catch his attention. ‘The wheels of the bus go round and round’ was our favourite song. Using his fascination for toy cars, I tried to teach him new words. ‘When you read, you begin with A, B, C, goes the song quoted earlier, but in V’s case it was a bit different. By the age of five he learned to read whole words without ever formally learning the alphabets. The walls of our apartment were covered with his early attempts at writing; he was fascinated by the words ‘Aggarwal’ (which he saw displayed on ‘nathal’ shops in the neighbourbood) and ‘Venus’ (a cassette brand) and would obsessively write these words copying the distinct fonts and shapes of the letters with uncanny accuracy. It was apparent that he had a good visual memory and spatial skills even though he seemed unable to do the things that his age-mates learnt in order to “pass” the nursery admission tests, e.g. telling the names of family members, naming common fruits and vegetables etc. He could however reproduce his favourite advertising jingles and was more interested in the brand names of cars, soaps and soft drinks than the boring fruits and vegetables.

When the time came for admitting V to school, it became quite apparent that no ‘regular’ school would admit a child who could not speak ‘normally’ or sit still for a minute. He was prone to running away unmindful of danger and simply would not ‘listen’ or respond to what was being told to him. My experiments at admitting him to “regular” play schools, in the hope that he would learn social behaviour from his peers, had met with mixed results. Before he was diagnosed, we sent him to the neighbourhood play-way. The ‘Aunty’ there told me as kindly as she could that he was not ‘normal’; he was not even scared of ‘Uncle’! Another play school, run by an experienced retired nursery teacher, was a happier experience for the child; he was treated with affection and gentleness, but they too were baffled by his oddities and did not know how to address them.

We were convinced that the child needed a setting where his difference would not be stigmatized or construed as ‘deviance’; where trained and dedicated personnel with a clear understanding of the challenges of autism would work with his strengths and help him deal with his difficulties. The handful of ‘regular’ schools that claimed to practice ‘inclusion’ at the time were either too expensive for a middle-class family to afford or simply too far away. Some of the special schools we explored catered to mixed disability groups and were clearly not equipped to deal with a child with autism. We were lucky to eventually find a setting that opened its doors to V and helped him and his family to deal with the everyday challenges that a complex condition like autism brings in its wake. V was admitted into the day programme of ‘Open Door School’, a model school for children with autism run by the Delhi based NGO, Action for Autism.

Our decision to admit him into a special setting raised many difficult questions. Why did we want to ‘label’ such a young child ‘disabled’? Would he not ‘deteriorate’ in the company of other children with autism, especially those whose difficulties were very severe? Were we not depriving him of the opportunity to be with the so-called ‘normal’ children and the ‘normal’ society? These questions, but emerged out of an understanding of disability that viewed it as a ‘lesser’ state of being; a devalued identity that must be hidden away from the world or resisted at all costs. It implies that being amongst ‘normal’ children is the most desirable goal for children with disabilities and that good role models can only be found amongst the non-disabled. It implies that ‘special’ education is necessarily inferior and less valuable and just a means of ‘warehousing’ children who are ‘un-teachable’ in the mainstream classroom. As my understanding of disability and engagement with Disability Studies as a domain of scholarship deepened over the years, I realized that ‘inclusion’ in its real sense is a philosophy premised on acceptance and respect of difference. The exclusionary practices can and do exist even within the mainstream or ‘inclusive’ settings particularly in the absence of adequate sensitization and training of teachers and a school system where ‘toppers’ are rewarded and felicitated and the so-called ‘duffers’ ridiculed and punished (the 2007 film ‘Taare Zameen Par’ beautifully captures this reality).

V has been at the Open Door for the past thirteen years. He is a smart and confident young man who is “different and proud of it”. Years of patient work in both: the individualized and group settings, using structured teaching methods and the most appropriate methodologies for children with autism, have yielded results. These methodologies were
s suitably adapted to the local cultural realities and resources, and were thus, not exorbitantly expensive or impracticable to transact. The continuity of practices at home and at school was emphasized through frequent, intensive interactions with the parents and the thoughtful IEPs.

The school has opened up his world and expanded his horizons. He has made life-long friendships with the peers, the teachers and the volunteers, has a strong sense of identification and belongingness with his ‘Centre’ and has ample opportunities to participate in the community through field visits, excursions and participation in competitions and camps. He paints, cooks and enjoys music and has had the honour of rendering a song for the President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherji at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on the President’s birthday on 11th December 2012. Poignantly, the song he sang was Tagore’s ‘Ekla Chalo Re’, a singularly befitting choice for those who walk the path less trodden. Above all, he has never once been made to feel that his ‘disability’ makes him an inferior or less important person; rather, he has been taught to embrace his identity and make a common cause with the others like him.

As a parent and educator, life with V has taught me much. It has made me reflect deeply upon our received and, sometimes, unceritical notions of disability, exclusion/inclusion and pedagogy. ‘Inclusion’ that translates as mere physical inclusion, or accommodating the children with different needs under a common roof with scant regard for the particularities of their needs and backgrounds, must be critiqued. Creating a respectful and non-judgmental space, in which children of all backgrounds and abilities can learn together, demands both attitudinal and pedagogical preparedness for which rigorous and intensive teacher training is required.

In the domains of language and literature, which this journal specifically deals with, a condition like autism provides the teacher much food for thought. How should one transact the complexities and nuances of language with children whose impairments in social communication virtually define the disorder? The persons with autism, even the highly verbal ones, have difficulties with pragmatics, social conversations and conjecture (Lord and Paul, 1997). They also have difficulties with narrative. According to Tager-Flusberg (2004), even the persons with autism, who develop fluent grammatically correct language, can have difficulties with its functional use such as asking for help or asking questions to seek information. The autistic children may experience difficulties in constructing and comprehending stories, drawing inferences and imaginative thinking, with the result that they may find themselves excluded from the rich experiences of language learning and creative activities. Yet, language comprehension is an intrinsic part of learning literature, history, geography, math etc, and this aspect has to be addressed to ensure that it does not impact their overall learning.

A truly ‘inclusive’ classroom factors in these specificities and plans teaching-learning activities that benefit not just the child with difficulties, but all the children. A tall order indeed; but it is a part of the challenge and excitement of the teacher’s vocation.

In this article I have shared some personal experiences and reflections of parenting a child with disability and how these helped me better understand the philosophy of inclusion. Conditions like Autism and other learning disabilities are becoming increasingly salient in contemporary times with the expansion of education, awareness and information. V benefited from a ‘special’ setting which he could access due to his spatial and social location. Yet thousands of children are deprived of even the most fundamental facilities and opportunities and cannot wait for the creation of special services that will address their needs. Inclusion into the already existing school system is the only practical alternative; teacher sensitization and training, and the creation of inclusive learning environments are the need of the hour (Vaidya, 2010). Only then can we ensure that a generation does not fall through the cracks; ‘Kho na Jaaye Ye Taare Zameen Par’.

References


Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first. The group designations such as “the blind,” “the retarded” or “the disabled” are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. My paper focuses on the problems and challenges in communication faced by Autism Spectrum Disorder children. Autism is a disorder of neural development characterized by impaired social interaction and communication, and by restricted and repetitive behaviour. Typically, there is a particular difficulty in acquiring expressive communication skills.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, autism is diagnosed on the basis of three primary areas of impairment: social functioning, language and communication, and repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests or activities (1994). The research on autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders suggests that the social and communication impairments are unique and specific deficits, which define the autism phenotype.

Social skills represent the ability to accommodate or adapt to the ongoing situations and social interactions. The symptoms defining social impairments in autism include “a marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors, such as eye gaze, facial expression, and gestures to regulate social interaction”; “a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests or achievements with other people”; and “a lack of social and emotional reciprocity” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p.70). These symptoms characterize the nonverbal social-communicative behaviors of children with autism, and they, along with imitation deficits and atypical play behaviors, are the most important diagnostic indices of autism (Baron-Cohen, Allen, & Gillberg, 1992; Osterling & Dawson, 1994).

Social interaction, Communication, and Play are the three major areas in which individuals with autism demonstrate deficit and unique patterns of behavior. Being successful in communication with the child with an autism disorder does not only involve an understanding of how they communicate but also requires an understanding of why they communicate. In understanding the purpose of the child’s communication you can help the child find more ways and more reasons to communicate.

Most children with ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) will have difficulty interacting with others. This is because, in order to be successful at interaction, the child needs to respond to others when they are approached by them or be able to initiate interactions. Although many children with an ASD are able to do this when they want something, they tend not to use interaction to show people things or to be sociable. It is important to remember that communication and interaction do not have to involve the use of language and speech. Many children with an ASD are delayed in their use of language and shy away from using speech. Therefore, other methods of communication need to be established before speech and language will follow.

Often, the parents of children with ASD feel that they are unable to communicate and interact with their children and are unsure of how to do so. The children may appear not to hear what is said to them, fail to respond to their name and/or be indifferent to any attempts of communication that are made. The use of everyday opportunities and play can encourage communication and interaction in a child with ASD.

The way in which the child communicates needs to be observed in order to develop their communicative strengths and needs. For example, if the child is not using any sound or speech, rather than communicating with him/her through words, try using gestures. The child with ASD may use some of the following to communicate with others: crying, taking the adult’s hand to the object they desire, looking at the object they
desire, reaching, using pictures and echolalia. Echolalia is the repetition of other people’s words and is a common feature of the child with ASD. Initially, when the child uses echolalia, it is likely that he is repeating words that he does not understand and is doing so with no communicative intent. However, echolalia is a good sign as it shows that the child’s communication is developing - in time, the child will begin to use the repeated words and phrases to communicate something significant. For example, the child may memorize the words that were said to him when he was asked if he would like a drink, and use them later, in a different situation, to ask a question. The stage of communication, that the child has reached, depends on three things:

a) Their ability to interact with another person
b) How and why they communicate
c) Their understanding

A child with ASD will find processing information a difficult thing to do. This is because he may find it difficult to understand the world around him. Even when the child with ASD does understand a situation, he may not understand the words that go with that situation. Sometimes, it is easy to assume that the child understands what is being said to him because he appears to follow instructions. However, the likelihood is that the child will know what to do when instructions are given in certain contexts because they have done it numerous times previously.

There are several ways in which to enhance a child’s comprehension of what people are saying to him. The adult can limit the amount of words that he uses to communicate with the child, but still communicate the relevant information. He should use key words that are specific to the context of the situation, repeat and stress them and use gesture such as pointing, to accompany them.

If the child has only recently begun to use speech as a means of communication, the adult should use single words to communicate with him, for example, labeling favourite toys and food. When using this method of communication, it is important to label things when they are immediately given to the child. If the child’s attention has shifted onto something else, the word will lose its meaning. Pausing in between spoken words and phrases can also help the child with ASD to understand what is said to him. The adult should use pauses to give the child time to process what has been said to him and to give him an opportunity to think of a response.

Using gestures to accompany language can also encourage the child to understand what is being said to him. For example, when offering the child a drink, the adult should gesture the action of drinking by pretending to hold a glass in one hand and bringing it to his mouth as if he were taking a sip. A similar thing can be used for eating. Over exaggerated facial expressions can also be used along with the shaking of the head for “yes” and “no”, and a waving of the hand for “hello” and “goodbye”. When talking to the child about people, for example “grandma is staying”, it helps to present the child with a photo of who is being spoken about.

The other visual methods that can be used to increase understanding include picture timetables, line drawings, cue cards and object/picture schedules.

Using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) supports

AAC describes any form of language other than speech that assists a child in social-communicative interactions. There is a large range of AAC devices available for children who have no speech, and these children themselves are very diverse. Therefore, it is essential that a team of appropriate individuals evaluates different AAC options with the parents of a child with ASD, before a decision about their use is made. The criteria that need to be discussed before an AAC device is implemented include, cognitive and motor abilities, learning style, communication needs and literacy ability.

The use of AAC devices for children with ASD can be particularly helpful. Those children with ASD, who have no spoken language, often resort to challenging behaviours to meet their needs and feelings. The use of an AAC device can give them a primary means of social communicative interactions with others. If it is decided that an AAC device is appropriate for the child, it is the responsibility of those around him to model the system.

Different types of AAC devices, that are suitable for the child with ASD, include:

- Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS, Frost and Bondy, 1994)
- Sign Language
- Interactive Communication Boards
- Communication Cue Cards
- Conversation Books
- Voice Output Communication Aids.
Sign Language
There are several different sign language systems, and when using sign language with a child with ASD, it can be beneficial to use a total communication approach. Total Communication is the use of combined speech and sign so that the same language structure is modelled for the child in two modalities. The use of total communication helps to highlight key word meanings and language comprehension.

Interactive communication boards
Interactive Communication Boards contain visual symbols organized according to the topic. They can be created in different sizes and formats depending on the activity and environment that they are needed for. They can be both portable and stationary - one board is designed to stay in one location. The selection and organisation of the symbols, that are used, need to be motivating and chosen to enhance functional communication for the child.

Cue cards
Cue cards are primarily used with verbal children. They are used to remind the child what to say and to provide him with an alternative means to communicate. They can contain one or more messages in pictorial or written form and can replace verbal prompts. They are therefore, particularly useful for children who are reliant on verbal prompts. Cue cards can work well in situations where the child with ASD needs to express a message in a stressful situation.

Voice output communication aids
Speech output devices give non-verbal children a ‘voice’. A team of relevant professionals should determine the most appropriate technology option. Once this has been established the team, then, needs to decide on an appropriate vocabulary selection, the layout of the device, the size of the symbols and the principal situations to encourage the child to use the device. There are a wide range of devices available including simpler ones for people who do not understand visual symbols. In order to use these devices, the child will need an understanding of cause and effect. The combined use of AAC, social supports, organisational supports and visually cued instruction can enhance the social communicative interactions in children with autism.

References


Who's who in FORTELL

| Patron:               | Prof. R.K. Agnihotri                      |
| Advisors:            | Prof. R.W. Desai                        |
|                      | Prof. Rajiva Verma                      |

Executive Committee

| President:          | Dr. A.L. Khanna                         |
| Vice President:     | Dr. C. Nisha Singh                      |
| Secretary:          | Ms. Rachna Sethi                        |
| Treasurer:          | Mr. Barun Kr. Mishra                    |
| Joint Secretaries:  | Dr. Kusum Sharma                        |
|                      | Dr. Prem Kumari Srivastava              |
|                      | Ms. Zahra Ramish Rizvi                  |
|                      | Ms. Manu Gulati                         |

Executive Members: Dr. Vijay K. Sharma

- Dr. Vasant K. Sharma
- Mr. B.L. Singhal
- Dr. Tasneem Shahnaz
- Ms. Ruchi Kaushik
- Ms. Tulika Prasad
- Ms. Mona Sinha

Seminar/workshop Dr. Mukti Sanyal

Coordinators: Dr. Prem Kumari Srivastava

- Ms. Manu Gulati

Website: Ms. Gitanjali Chawla
Why Literature?

Ashok Celley

John Stuart Mill was an extraordinarily brilliant child – what one would call a child prodigy. He learnt Greek at the age of three and zealously tutored by his intellectually formidable father James Mill acquired enormous learning at a very early age. Mill grew into an influential social and political thinker and achieved fame as the author of *On Liberty* among other things. Yet he felt everything was not alright with him. He seemed to lack the capacity to respond to the beauty of natural objects and more importantly, to empathize with other human beings. Perhaps his intellectual brilliance had led to emotional atrophy or, quite simply, his intellectual accomplishments were acquired at the expense of emotional sensitivity. In his *Autobiography*, Mill makes the following observation. “My education had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of intellectual cultivation had made precocious and premature analysis the inveterate habit of mind. I was thus, as I said to myself, left stranded at the commencement of my voyage, with a well-equipped ship and a rudder, but no sail (Robson & Stelling, 1981, p 143).” Eventually, Mill found his redemption in Wordsworth’s poetry which sensitized him not only to the beauty of nature but was also instrumental in the cultivation of feelings he shared with other human beings.

Mill is by no means an isolated case. Charles Darwin the celebrated life-scientists and the author of *The Origin of Species* admitted with some regret, and even a sense of guilt, that he couldn’t “endure to read a line of poetry” and “found Shakespeare intolerably dull” and that his mind seems to have become “a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of fact…”(Schumacher, 1971, p 89).

This is indeed a case of damning self-indictment not very different from that of Mill. Both were victims of lopsided intellectual development; in each case the cognitive faculty had taken precedence over the affective and turned the individual into a robot of sorts or what in contemporary parlance would be called a nerd.

In more recent times, there is the tragic instance of the philosopher-mathematician Bertrand Russell whose daughter Katherine was shocked by her father’s clinical approach in bringing up his children, particularly his brother John who eventually turned insane. Katherine found her salvation in religious faith when her father’s rationalistic credo with its roots in the enlightenment left her high and dry. Katherine’s turning to Christianity and John’s insanity both can be seen in different ways as rejection of Russell’s quintessentially Enlightenment worldview.

Equally revealing is Virginia Woolf’s characterization of her father Sir Leslie Stephen and her husband Leonard Woolf as “ruthless rationalists” (Haque, p 211) for she had found their approach to issues/individuals cold and unfeeling. Regarding her father she observes, “...whole tracts of his sensibility had atrophied...he had no idea what other people felt” (Haque, p 211).

What could have possibly gone wrong with people as different and as distinguished as Mill, Darwin, Russell and Sir Leslie Stephen? And they may well be representative of the British, even European, intelligentsia in this. What Virginia Woolf called “The Cambridge disease” was perhaps a deeper and more pervasive malady and I believe it had something to do with the Enlightenment. The Eighteenth century Enlightenment attached the utmost importance to reason and its most powerful manifestation science. The Enlightenment project was to know more and more and to employ that knowledge to subdue the external world, i.e. nature to man’s advantage. Anything that came in the way was distrusted and suppressed. Disenchantment a la Max Weber became the dominant note of the Western malady. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it, “Enlightenment’s programme was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths and overthrow fantasy with knowledge (Dialectic of Enlightenment, p 1).” Anything that enchanted, say poetry, was suspect and needed to be pushed to the margins, if not altogether discarded. The Enlightenment project led to an overvaluation of reason and devaluation of emotions and imagination. One may recall Darwin’s observation quoted earlier that his mind...
had become “a machine for grinding general laws (Schumacher, p 9).” This is precisely what the enlightenment aimed at. Its God was the machine – orderly, predictable and useful. The western man for the last three hundred years or so has lived exclusively by the left lobe, & has led a two-dimensional existence. Shelley in his celebrated critical work _Defence of Poetry_ pointed out the tragic flaw in western culture when he observed that we lacked ‘the creative faculty to imagine that which we know (Holmes, p 49’.

More recently an eminent Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore and a reputed American thinker J. Pelikan have noted this grave deficiency in Western culture. In his justly famous address “An Eastern University” Tagore had observed: “For, even in the West, it is the intellectual training which receives almost exclusive emphasis. (italics mine) (Celly, p 68).

Similarly, J. Pelikan in his book _Idea of the University_ talks about the contemporary discontent with the typical western university. “An overemphasis on intellectual knowledge many today would charge has made the university sterile and two-dimensional…. (p 37).

It is time we restored the balance. It is time to give the arts in general and literature in particular their rightful place. We need to recognize and celebrate the fact that literature is different from social sciences. Vive la difference! The strident and somewhat pathetic attempt to jump on the bandwagon of social sciences seems to be a sign of the prevailing cultural malaise, i.e. the cognitive mode has come to dominate the human personality and emotions and imagination have been marginalized. We need to preserve and nurture the distinct identity of literature rather than treat it as an appendage of social sciences. While the social sciences pride on detachment, it would be hard to think of a creative writer who is not emotionally involved with his work or a reader whose emotions are not stirred by a work he values and loves to read. Bergson, the French philosopher attributed a vital role to emotion in the creative process. It may be worthwhile to quote from Angela Haque’s book _Fiction, Intuition and Creativity_. “Bergson believes that for the poet ‘feelings develop into images and the images themselves into words’… Creation, according to Bergson, is impossible without an emotional impetus (p 95).” Writers like Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein and Proust seem to back Bergson’s observation. Stein for instance believed that “a book will never be truer or deeper than your feeling (Haque, p 75).”

Literature no doubt is a way of knowing, but it is knowing in the right hemisphere. ‘Knowing in the blood’, as Lawrence would say. The creative writer apprehends intuitively and communicates through imagery, which makes literature a different kettle of fish from social sciences, history and philosophy and in a sense superior – if one can use such a word in these egalitarian times – to them. That the poets, playwrights and novelists are far ahead of social scientists was recognized even by Sigmund Freud, the high priest of Enlightenment, when he declared that the poets had discovered the Unconscious (O’ Brown, p 62) long before he did, and named his own psychoanalytic discovery as the Oedipus complex after the protagonist in the famous Sophocles play _Oedipus Rex_. Had Freud cared to follow the implications of his own insight, he would have recognized the role of the intuitive faculty in understanding human nature and been somewhat less optimistic about the power of reason.

Again, Wordsworth’s nature poetry, which to the hardboiled realist might have appeared as romantic poppycock, has been vindicated by Deep psychology in our times. Its exponents advocate what the poet expressed in more existential terms long ago, that is, an intimate relationship with nature makes for emotional happiness and well-being.

For instance, Deep psychologist John Swanson observes, “Reconnecting with nature reawakens us to pleasure and beauty that feed us in body, mind and soul”. “This is so strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’. That the poet can look far ahead and instinctively grasp the latest tendencies of a civilization (or a phase in civilization) can be demonstrated by even a little poem like “The World is Too Much With Us”, where the poet laments, ‘Getting and spending we lay Waste Our Powers’. How very contemporary!

To take yet another example, George Orwell in his novel _Animal Farm_ showed far better understanding of what was happening in Stalin’s Russia than the western sovietologists did. So much for the hard core analytical reasoning – the power of the left hemisphere that governs our lives! As Robert Conquest puts it in a review article in _TLS_ (Times Literary Supplement), “In
Russia one quite often hears the complaint, ‘How is it that Orwell understood our system, and so many Soviet experts in the West did not? The answer is that for the Westerners a considerable effort of the imagination was needed to understand an essentially alien political movement and the correspondingly alien political and social order it created. Orwell had the imagination, the experts did not.”

The regression to the pictorial mode that literature indulge in is an implicit recognition that the progress of civilization has been exclusively cerebral, and it is only through literature and the arts that we can recover the lost space that belongs to the right hemisphere, that a happy and wholesome existence would imply not just intellectual growth but also emotional and imaginative fulfillment.

Also, we seem to forget these days – these are highly cerebral times – that the joy one derives from reading a work of literature has as much to do with the form as with the context, with the manner as with the matter imagery, rhythm and even the arrangement of words play a vital role in the generation of total experience, the ‘rasa’. The ‘mellow fruitfulness’ of Keats’s “Autumn” is largely a matter of imagery – visual, auditory and tactile even though one may not be aware of it and an ordinary reader need not be. The emptiness or hollowness of Macbeth’s existence towards the end of the play is communicated through a string of metaphors like ‘brief candle’, ‘walking shadow, ‘poor player’ etc. Which philosophical statement would have the same impact? Eliot’s mythical method is as vital to the vision in ‘The Waste land’ as the use of repetition and Biblical allusions to the sense of wonder and mystery of man-woman relationship in D.H. Lawrence. The magic or incantation that the writer creates by using metaphor and/or rhythm appeals to our senses and through them to the emotions.

Literature capitalizes on the psychic unity of mankind. It impacts the emotional substratum which unites men and women demolishing boundaries of caste, class and race. No wonder the appeal of a Shakespeare or a Kalidasa or a Mirza Ghalib is at once wider and deeper than that of a philosopher or a social scientist. Rightly viewed and accorded its legitimate place it could be our insurance against ‘nerdisation’. In a word, one could either go John Stuart Mill’s way and rejuvenate oneself, or just become a “machine for grinding general laws.” The choice is ours.

Notes

1. “...Feeling which made the good of others and especially of mankind on a large scale, the object of existence...”

2. “What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mine, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings which I was in quest of.” (Robson & Stellinger, 1981, p.151)

3. “Why should he (John) trust those people who left him alone in the dark with his fears, who plunged him into the turbulent Atlantic despite his frantic screams” (Tait, 1977, p 180).

4. “And the green land beckons...” (The Times of India)

References


Native Speaker Fallacy:
a Recipe for Confusion (and ridicule!)

M. R. Vishwanathan

“Professor Henry Higgins: Why Can’t the English? By Henry, look at her, a prisoner of the gutter, condemned by every syllable she ever uttered. By law she should be taken out and hung, for the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue.

Eliza: Aaaaooww!

Higgins (imitating her): Aaaoooww! Heavens! What a noise! This is what the British population, Calls an elementary education.”(My Fair Lady)

In the film Life of Pi, Piscine Patel (Pi Patel) wins millions of hearts with his sterling performance, a brilliant narrative rendered in flawless Indian English, signalling a remarkable turnaround in attitude to non native varieties of English; truly, Indian English has come of age. A victory for linguistic human rights and for Periphery Engilshes! A slap in the face for the purists arguing for native speaker norms.

Introduction

The Native Speaker Fallacy owes its origins to Phillipson’s (1992) ground-breaking work on ideology in English teaching and learning where he identified as fallacious the faith imposed on native speaker norms and models, created under laboratory conditions in the West and certified as universal in applicability, and the belief that native speaker teachers are suitable models for emulation in an ESL/EFL context. An attendant fallout of the native speaker fallacy is the endorsement of phonetics and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm and intonation) as an effective tool to teach learners the spoken language.

A case in point is the teaching of stress, rhythm and intonation to Indian speakers of English in second language classrooms. A lot of effort goes into making learners lose MTI (Mother Tongue Influence) as if it were a sin to speak English with a local accent. It is explained to students that to be able to speak like a fluent user of language, one must get rid of one’s accent and practice speaking like a native speaker, a very common occurrence in language labs in engineering colleges. Again, one variety of English-R.P. - is regarded as the standard variety and the students are trained to speak English in keeping with the demands of that variety.

It is surprising that at a time when theories have emerged that challenge the notion of native speaker, there are pockets of support, ironically, in those very institutions that ought to jettison these anachronistic views and models. Aiming for a standard variety is tantamount to stigmatising local, non native varieties as inferior while not supplying reasoned arguments for upholding the superiority of one dialect/model over others.

The study

My baptism of fire with the English language communication skills laboratory began sometime in 2006 when a multipurpose language lab was set up for the first and the third year students of engineering. On the first day of the lab and subsequently in the other lab sessions, when facing 50 plus students and the prospect of teaching phonetics as outlined in the syllabus, I encountered more than I had bargained for: whispered giggles, confused looks, indifference and even mild annoyance from students. Informal interaction with the students revealed a host of reasons why they seemed cold to the idea of going “native”: difficulty in being able to produce certain vowel sounds (/æ/ as in old, sold, etc / ea/ as in air, hair, etc. ), inability to memorise all the rules of word stress and the fear of being mocked by fellow students for trying to sound phoren. One student summed it up admirably when he wondered aloud why one needed to take the trouble to sound native when plain Indian English was enough to communicate with a fellow Indian, and that the attempts to erase mother tongue influence were simply unrealistic.

An epiphany followed by introspection brought forth this study as I wondered how colleagues in colleges were coping with stress (pun intended) and supra-segmental features and the strain of teaching them.

To investigate the teaching learning of phonetics and suprasegmental features in engineering colleges and to find out if it was helpful to learning spoken English in any way, a survey was conducted in three engineering colleges affiliated...
to a state university in Andhra Pradesh. Three teachers and 120 students participated in the study. Classroom observation was spread over 6 lab sessions (two in each college) and it included interaction with teachers and students where the study was organised.

In college A, the lab session lasted over two hours and the teacher taught students phonetics using chalk and talk to start with. She told the learners that without stress, rhythm and intonation English speech becomes “meaningless.” Then she corrected the pronunciation of a few learners and played a few songs by British bands. One of the songs was “Another day in Paradise” by Phil Collins. It was assumed the song would be used as an authentic material for teaching listening.

Surprise awaited me. The teacher picked out words like “this”, “that”, “embarrassed”, “another”, “twin”, “think” etc. to teach learners how to pronounce /θ/ and /ð/ like a “native speaker”. But from the way she overdid it, it was evident that she was confusing the learners. They were made to sing after the song and repeat the words with precision. “Think” sounded like ‘sink’ and “twice” like ‘twice’. Learners were also asked to correct themselves every time they said ‘this’ so that it sounded more like ‘zis’ and ‘that’ like ‘zat’. The whole exercise appeared futile because learners wondered why they had to say that since everyone understood this and that the way the words were normally pronounced. When asked if she wasn’t being too rule bound and sacrificing logic in the process, the teacher replied with a sharp retort: “I have been asked to do it and I intend doing it my way!” The next 45 minutes saw learners being taught rules of stress. They were then directed to the computer and asked to copy down the rules and terms. She was heard mispronouncing words, saying “adshektive” for ‘adjective’ and ‘vouches’ for ‘voucher’. The observation clearly showed that she had misinterpreted the sounds /dʒ/ and /tʃ/ by separating /θ/ and /ð/ and /t/ and /v/ when she ought to have pronounced them together, as /dʒ/ and /tʃ/ respectively!

Canagarajah’s (1999) observations about how many periphery professionals spend undue time “repairing their pronunciation or performing other cosmetic changes to sound native” (1999, p. 84) were true in what had been observed. Her emphasis all along was on getting students to lose their accent, while she herself had an accent that was a cross between a call centre General American and Telugu.

The learners did not relate to what the teacher spoke glowingly of: sounding native. If Canagarajah spoke for the fraternity struggling with accent and pronunciation, he was perfectly correct in this instance since the teacher was telling the researcher how she herself spent a lot of time improving her own pronunciation, though going by what was in evidence it looked more like a *pseudo accent*, and even that, she did not get right going by what she had been doing!

Informal interaction with the students led to amused silence to start with followed by complaints: they were keen to speak but not using R.P.; they wanted group discussions, debates and role plays to enhance their communication skills but not phonetics as it was taught. Many of the students were first generation learners who were only then coming to grips with the spoken language and wanted to speak in broken English just to conquer stage fear.

In college B, the sessions were not as monotonous as in college A; but nevertheless boring and stifling. There were looks of disdain in students who were unsure why they were being drilled in the rules. The entire session was devoted to teaching the rules of stress, learning where to place stress markers, and so on; the phonetic chart was projected onto a screen for students to copy from and then began intense practice in speech sounds.

The students registered their displeasure at having to take part in what they saw as a waste of time; the teacher however maintained that they had to find some use for the software, having purchased it! When it was suggested that moving on to situational dialogues and role plays in authentic situations, such as sitting an interview or participating in a group discussion etc. could be done, the teacher retorted that it couldn’t be done until they learnt intonation!

The situation was reminiscent of an observation so appropriately made in the context of L2 learning by Vivian Cook (1999):

... teachers, researchers and people in general have often taken for granted that L2 learners represent a special case that can be judged properly by the standards of another group. Grammar that differs from native speakers’ *pronunciation that betrays where L2 users come from* (emphasis mine) and vocabulary that differs from native usage are treated as signs of L2 users’ failure to become native speakers, not of their accomplishments in learning to use the L2. (pp 194-195)
In college C, the teacher was not sure of the rules herself. The students were asked to take down the sentences featured in the software they had been using and I was to know later that the very sentences they had copied down were set in the end exam paper! Neither GD nor debates ever figured in the sessions and the students were unhappy that close to 5 months were dedicated to teaching phonetics when the academic year was just 7 months long! The teacher complained that a top down curriculum was to blame while doing little to “tweak” and tinker with the curriculum to make it student friendly and useful.

The classroom observations made it all too apparent that teaching phonetics was not just a waste of breath (literally!) but a waste of useful hours which may have been better used to teach English that students needed to get on in life.

The following recommendations emerge from the study:

**Recommendations**

- Restrict phonetics to the speech sounds; the 44 sounds should be taught minus value judgements about RP/General American.
- Phonetics is useful when using a dictionary; when looking up a headword, students will find next to the headword an entry in slant brackets –the word as it is pronounced by native speakers of English, and awareness of speech sounds will guide them in so far as pronunciation is concerned.
- English is an Indian language; it has been appropriated to meet our needs and therefore it needs to be used like an Indian language, where meaning-making is entirely context based.
- Mutual intelligibility should be the determining criterion in language use and not absolute norms; the English one speaks should be comprehensible to the receiver. L2 speakers are a distinct group who cannot be judged using the native speaker yardstick.
- The speech sounds that English deploys may not find an equivalent in a learner’s L2. In such cases approximation not only becomes necessary but inevitable too. For instance, in Indian English there is a tendency to merge strong and weak forms, /ə/ and /ə/, as well as the short and long vowels /ɒ/ and /ɒ:/, as in cot and caught. In such cases it is the context alone that works in the meaning making process, not pronunciation.

**Conclusion**

It is time to go back to the drawing board and reconfigure our attitude to certain practices and approaches in ELT. This is in acknowledgement of the fact that the periphery varieties are not “deficient imitations of the core norms,” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 198), but legitimate varieties in themselves. It is necessary to call time on ELT principles and practices which instead of aiding language learning end up handicapping the learner.

**References**


---

**Peer Feedback in the ESL Writing Classroom**

**Ramanujam Parthasarathy**

**Introduction**

Writing occupies an important place in any English as a second language (ESL) classroom: students are required to do a great deal of writing. But, unless they are given reliable feedback on their writing, the set writing tasks may not help them much in improving their writing skills. Studies (e.g. Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006) have
repeatedly pointed out that students’ writing does not improve as a result of traditional teacher feedback (TF) which is essentially product-oriented. A survey conducted by the Loyola ELT Centre revealed that teachers rarely used the process approach for several reasons, including lack of time and the constraints imposed by an examination-oriented system. The Centre, therefore, looked for an alternative to TF. On an eight-month-long project (‘Towards an Alternative Form of Corrective Feedback in ESL Writing’), led by me as Project Director, the Centre field-tested its hypothesis about the efficacy of peer feedback (PF) as an assessment-for-learning tool (Black et al., 2003), and demonstrated PF as a viable alternative to TF. In this paper, I attempt a brief description of the project.

**Background**

**Advantages of PF**

During the past two-and-a-half decades, PF in ESL writing has received a great deal of attention in the literature. Compelling arguments have been advanced in favour of PF, especially about the advantages of PF over traditional TF:

a. While PF empowers ESL writers in that there is scope for them to decide whether they can use their peers’ feedback or not (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994), TF tends to appropriate students’ texts and disempower them because it often involves students merely rewriting their texts according to the teacher’s directive feedback (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1984).

b. In a TF situation, the students do not write with freedom because they are conscious that their work will be read and corrected by the teacher. This often reduces the writing to an empty exercise giving teachers what they want. But, in a PF situation, the students know that their reader will be a peer, which encourages them to write with a sense of independence and speak in their own voice in their writings. In other words, PF provides the student writers with something they primarily need, namely, audience (Penafortorida, 2002). That, unlike TF, PF is suggestive rather than prescriptive also adds to the student writers’ sense of freedom.

c. PF facilitates the linguistic, cognitive and affective development of the students (Rollinson, 2005), and leads to a reduction in writer apprehension and an increase in writer confidence (Chaudron, 1984).

d. PF is conducive to assessment for learning, while TF often does not go beyond assessment of learning (Lee, 2009).

e. While the teachers’ use of vague and “rubber-stamp” comments and their excessive reliance on grammar correction in TF often leads to negative attitudes on the part of the students towards feedback (Paulus, 1999), PF, which provides the student writers with more individual comments (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), produces beneficial effects.

f. Disadvantages of PF

g. However, PF has also produced less than beneficial results in some contexts where the students tend to trust TF rather than PF (Zhang, 1995). While, in some studies, the students have found PF less helpful than TF (Leki, 1991), some others have reported less than profitable results on account of what the teachers perceived to be the peer reviewers’ limited knowledge, experience and language ability (Saito & Fujita, 2004).

**Project Methodology**

**Participants**

The participants in our study were all the 699 students of Stream B of the second-year General English course at Andhra Loyola College (ALC). They were divided into 79 groups of eight or nine students each. The seventy-nine senior students of ALC, with fairly good writing abilities in English, volunteered to work as peer reviewers on the project. Each reviewer was allotted one group of eight or nine students.

**Consciousness raising and peer feedback training**

To obviate negative results of the kind reported under ‘Disadvantages of PF’ above, we had a consciousness-raising phase in which I held discussions with the teachers of English on the advantages of PF. This helped us set about the task with a shared understanding. The teachers in turn discussed the efficacy of PF with the students with practice activities. The discussion also focused on the reviewers’ role as collaborators rather than correctors.

The consciousness-raising phase was accompanied by a training phase in which I trained the reviewers in correction procedures and oral feedback techniques in workshops where the written corrective feedback sessions focused not just on grammar and vocabulary, as in the case of traditional TF, but on five aspects of writing, namely, content, organization, language (both vocabulary and grammar), spelling and punctuation, as well as the three broad types of comments suggested by Hyland and Hyland (2001), namely, praise, criticism, and suggestion,
with adequate correction activities and a variety of model comments of the three types for the peer reviewers to analyse. In the oral feedback sessions, the reviewers practised oral feedback strategies using models of corrections and comments.

**Peer feedback**
The teachers of English at ALC set a series of writing tasks for the 79 student groups in the regular classrooms. Once the tasks were completed, the teachers handed over the compositions to the 79 peer reviewers who took two days to correct the compositions using the procedures and techniques the Project Director had taught them. Then they met their respective groups of students in an oral feedback session in which they explained the corrections to the students and gave them specific feedback on different aspects of their writing skills (e.g. content, organization) their compositions exemplified. The students redrafted the compositions at home in the light of the feedback, and selective written feedback was given by the reviewers on the redrafted compositions also. The compositions were then returned to the students, but there was no oral feedback session this time.

**Results**
- Over a period of eight months, the five aspects of the students' writing skills (viz. content, organization, language [both vocabulary and grammar], spelling and punctuation), as evidenced by their compositions, were assessed on a 10-point scale. The assessment showed that, by and large, there was improvement and that the improvement was incremental.
- The compositions were selectively re-marked by a senior teacher of English. The differences between the teacher marking and the peer marking were insignificant. This negligible difference, which is likely even if the compositions are marked by two experienced teachers, indicates that the peer marking is almost as effective as the teacher marking.
- Though the oral feedback sessions did not display “a myriad of communicative behaviors” (Villamil and de Guerrero, 1996, p 69) involving arguing, justifying and clarifying, they did not threaten to be a one-way street either with the reviewers offering directive feedback. The sessions were lively with the dialogue promising to be collaborative.
- The perceptions of the students about the improvement, if any, in their writing abilities on account of PF were ascertained through a questionnaire survey. The self-perception of the improvements (to a great/some extent) was: 90.6% in content, 70.5 in organization, 81% in language, and 87.5% in spelling and punctuation. I must hasten to add here that what is significant is the students’ perception of their improvement and the incremental improvement evident to the project team; the gains cannot be measured with arithmetical precision.
- In a questionnaire survey, the peer reviewers reported a positive view of the experiment: a vast majority of them (88%) said that the work did not involve any problems at all; 80% of them said that they had had negligible amount of difficulty in finding time for the correction and the oral feedback; 73% claimed that the experiment demanded considerable preparation, thanks to which their own writing abilities and leadership skills (e.g. how to undertake a responsibility and how to manage it) had improved.
- A discussion that the Project Director had with the class teachers revealed (a) that they were satisfied with both the improvements their students had made and the efficacy of PF; and (b) that they felt that PF, if undertaken with proper preparation and training for reviewers, as it was done on the present project, could be a viable alternative to TF.
- The study even indicates that PF has at least three advantages over TF:
  - In a PF situation, the face-to-face oral feedback sessions can take place in a friendly atmosphere, enhancing the scope for discussion and the consequent learning value. This is hardly likely in a TF situation; given the huge numbers, a one-to-one session itself is almost impossible.
  - In oral feedback sessions, the reviewers can pay attention to each individual student, considering that each reviewer has a small number of students (not more than 9 in the ELT Centre’s study). This is not possible in a teacher-conducted class of 40-60.
  - In a TF situation, students do not write with freedom because they are conscious of the fact that they will be read and corrected by the teacher. But, in a PF situation, the students know that their reader will be a peer which allows them to write with a sense of independence and identity.
Conclusion
In the ESL contexts where the learners are not able to make progress in their writing skills owing to either absence of feedback or inadequate feedback from their teachers, PF could be thought of as a possible alternative to TF. Whether it acts as a viable alternative or a poor one depends on several factors not the least of which is institutional culture. Given the disciplined environment at ALC, the availability of a substantial number of trainable students with cut-off-level skills in writing to act as peer reviewers, and the collegial atmosphere in the ELT Centre, it was possible to undertake the innovation with relative ease and produce successful results. In institutions which are disadvantaged in these respects, it may not be so easy to introduce PF and sustain it as a viable proposition. However, where TF is either non-existent or carried out in a ritualistic manner for want of time, PF is worth experimenting with.

References


---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad. Size</th>
<th>Rate (B/W)</th>
<th>Rate (Coloured)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>quarter page</td>
<td>Rs 2000.00</td>
<td>Rs 3000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>half page</td>
<td>Rs 3000.00</td>
<td>Rs 5000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>full page</td>
<td>Rs 5000.00</td>
<td>Rs 7000.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cheques should be drawn in favour of FORTELL, New Delhi and sent at A1A/33B, Janakpuri New Delhi 110058
Rhapsody: Literature Festival of ZHDC

A report by Aman Kumar

The English Department at Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi, organised their annual literary festival-event, Rhapsody 2014. The one day festival was organised in collaboration with FORTELL, whose generous support helped in organizing a host of literary events. The festival was inaugurated with an enlightening lecture, ‘Jorasanko-The Writing of Bio Fiction’ by Dr. Aruna Chakravarty, well-known writer and translator. Focussing on the little known lives of women in Rabindranath Tagore’s family, the talk chronicled the poignant details of their lives. Dr. Chakravarty shared her experiences of gathering literary and historical evidences pertaining to the same, a tough task, for, as she put it, the records of the Tagore women were “oddly reticent, though verbose.” The lecture captivated the audience’s attention and was followed by an interesting interactive session.

The festival featured a whole lot of events – creative writing “Spell Bee”, “Just a Minute” extempore, general quiz and treasure hunt. One important highlight of the festival was the photography competition which invited online entries on various issues. The shortlisted entries were beautifully mounted and displayed. The Indian Institute of Photography sponsored the photography event and offered internship to the winners to hone their talent. The wonderful artwork by the students and beautiful photographs were much appreciated by the audience. The festival saw participation from various colleges of Delhi University. Rhapsody’14 not just showcased the creative and literary dimension of the students’ personality but their wonderful organizational skills as well.
Interrogating
English Studies in India

Conference organized by Department of English, Bharati College, University of Delhi, in association with FORTELL, supported by ICSSR and Sahitya Akademi.

(5th-7th Feb, 2014)

A report compiled by Anavisha Banerjee

The conference was a three day event and the Principal and Convenor, Dr. Promodini Varma delivered the welcome address in which she highlighted the urgency of rethinking the objectives of English studies in India, given the contemporary scenario of technological advancement and the changing needs of the student in the class. Prof. Ania Loomba delivering the keynote address, “English vs. Literature” underlined the difference between English studies and English literature studies since the latter conveyed dominant ideologies. She mulled upon the fact that India has become a “graveyard of languages”, as asserted by Prof’ G.N Devy and focused on the variety of languages in India since many were “dying” due to the lack of representation.

Susie Tharu’s paper “Beyond Curricular Change” argued that universities were closed systems where the Dalits faced extreme marginalization. She raised the question of caste and bolstered her argument with her practical experiences and the need for pedagogic strategies to give the minorities an equal status especially in the representation of their literature. Prof. Rukmini Bhaya Nair’s “Talking back to Technology” focused on the role of technology in the construction of language and placed it in the context of modernity. Prof. Svaty Joshi’s paper, “English Studies in the Time of Globalization” made the point that the growing economies of the globe were displaying fascist tendencies and concealed a fundamentalist agenda in the garb of technocratic achievements and developments. Prof. Simi Malhotra’s paper “Recasting Theory: Challenges for English Studies in India Today” made the point that literature, being a site of dominance, encapsulates political motives and that such politics through texts in classrooms had both a politicizing and de-politicizing effect. Focusing on the dominance of theory, which compromised the other aspects of literature; she spoke about the need to focus on the “re-territorialization” of theory.

There were a series of papers that focused on the pedagogical issues related to the teaching of English. Prof. Rama Mathew, from the Department of Education, Delhi University expressed her concern over the lack of teacher training of teachers of English and the need to introduce ELT (English Language Teaching) courses at the graduate and post-graduate level. The other papers ranged from teaching Basic English to employees working in MNCs to the digitization of English studies. The debates between the importance of regional languages, Indian Writing in English and the questioning of the “master’s” language as English, were also amongst the issues discussed. These tensions were highlighted in the papers presented by the Bharati College students, Heer Menon and Shifani Reffai. The former focused on the “Englishness” of the curriculum in the Department of English in Delhi University and the latter focused on the effect of “neo-colonialism” in terms of English language studies. A survey of the Bharati College students regarding their views about the nature of English courses and their preferences was analyzed in a joint paper presented by some of the Bharati College teachers in the Department of English.

The main attraction of the Conference was an interactive session with the two stalwarts from the world of fiction, namely, the Marathi and English playwright, Kiran Nagarkar (Sahitya Akademi awardee for Cuckold ) and Siddharth Chowdhury who was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize (also known for his famous book, The Day Scholar). It was an interesting session with the audience where the questions ranged from their writing careers to their personal life. There were also a few budding student writers who were inspired to take up writing as a profession and hence looked for some useful tips from the authors.

The conference ended with a wide range of issues related to English studies in India and also widened our knowledge about scope of the subject.
IATEFL 2014, Harrogate, UK

A report by Sabina Pillai

Attending the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) 2014 conference as a Cambridge English scholar this year gave me a ringside view of the world’s largest conference on English language teaching. The charming town of Harrogate in northern England came alive with the conference in early April this year. With the impressive International Centre as the venue, it was an ideal location to accommodate over 2500 delegates from around 100 countries. The ubiquitous bright red delegate bags in the conference kit were visible all the time. It reminded me of a splurge of poinsettias blooming all over at the venue and on the streets and corners of Harrogate!

The conference days were packed with five plenary sessions and over 500 presentations, talks, workshops, symposiums, forums, Signature events, poster presentations and early morning ‘How to—’ activities. Besides, there were many Special Interest Group Days and Associates’ Day functions on the day before the conference. As for the evenings, we had receptions, award ceremonies, social dinners and sponsored events to attend leaving us scarcely any time to breathe!

Each day began with a plenary by leading luminaries in the field. On the first day, David Graddol stunned a huge audience with his findings on “English and Economic Development”. He referred to his recent work in India, China and Brazil when critically examining the question, “Is it necessary for everyone to learn English?” On the second day, Kathleen Graves set her audience thinking about “The efficiency of inefficiency: an ecological perspective on curriculum” in her plenary session. The thrust of her talk was on how an ecological perspective on curriculum focuses on growth and development. The well-attended plenary on the third day was delivered by Michael Hoey on “Old approaches, new perspectives: the implications of a corpus linguistic theory for learning the English language”. He discussed the work of Michael Lewis and Stephen Krashen and surprised the audience with provisional evidence that Chinese has the same lexical properties as English.

The last day was a treat as we had not one but two plenary sessions! The first one by Sugata Mitra was well timed as it looked ahead to the time that is coming for all of us in education. I daresay India’s stock went up a couple of notches with the acclaim and debate his session generated. Talking about “The future of learning”, he held forth on his many experiments, like the ‘Hole in the Wall’ and had the audience hanging on to his words. Lastly, creative writer Jackie Kay delivered the final plenary session, bringing the house down with an absolutely riveting performance which included biographical anecdotes, readings from her work and insightful observations about life, letters and literature. One of my last impressions of an eventful conference was of the long queue of eager delegates getting their copies of her new work signed by her.

As for some of the other highlights of the Conference, the Signature events drew large crowds. Cambridge English had a thought provoking one on “Bringing Learning Oriented Assessments into the ELT Classroom”. The British Council’s Signature event on “English medium instruction- cure or curse” was interesting. The ELT Conversation between Jeremy Harmer and Scott Thornbury on “Communicative Language Teaching: what have we gained or lost?” was a delight to attend. The Interactive Language Fair and symposium on Creativity were also popular events. “Open Spaces”, led by Adrian Underhill was to be a popular experiment but did not get the expected participation levels. Delegates’ presentations on creativity, technology, methodology and research projects were sought after and crowded affairs. Rama Mathew and Annamaria Pinter’s presentation on “Children and teachers becoming researchers- a project in India” generated a lot of discussion.

On the fun side, there were sold- out day time trips to local tourist sites as North England has so much to offer. Of the evening functions, the opening day reception attended by the Mayor of Harrogate at the Royal Hall was jam packed. The Pecha Kucha event was a rip roaring success as delegates let their hair down and enjoyed themselves. Then we had Dave and Luke do a spoof on “Hard Times for English Teachers”. The social evening on the last evening had delegates exhibiting their considerable musical talent.

IATEFL 2014 was an outstanding event in many ways. The administration worked with clockwork precision with not a hair out of place. The efficient handling of all the sundry affairs that such a massively mounted event would have entailed was a lesson to learn. In retrospect, the back to back events, spotting of the veritable who’s who of ELT luminaries, starting with the distinguished David Crystal no less, the books exhibition, the ever- smiling IATEFL president Carol Read, huge amounts of food for thought, presenting my paper, sharing experiences with colleagues from all over the world and getting to hear experts first hand were so very worthwhile. And of course the icing on the cake for me was being awarded the Cambridge English Teacher Training scholarship at the event!
An Interview with Dr Hemachandran Karah

Dr Hemachandran Karah is Assistant Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). Karah works in the fields of disability studies and medical humanities. Following his doctoral research at Cambridge on the writings of Ved Mehta, Karah has been working on a book manuscript concerning the narratives of blind culture. In the long run, Karah is expecting to contribute towards academic debates in the areas of disability, health, and medicine. Here, in an interview with Manjari Chaturvedi and Chandra Nisha Singh, he shares his thoughts on the idea of disability pedagogy eventually moving towards a brainstorming session on newer horizons in the field.

Manjari Chaturvedi (Manjari): Hema, tell us about your early days as a student. How did you learn English following your school education in Tamil?

Hemachandran Karah (Hema): It was indeed a messy affair to begin with. Telugu and Tamil were my primary languages of thinking, playing, and breathing. While one spoke Telugu at home, the world of learning opened up solely in Tamil. This is not to mention the amount of rote learning in Tamil one has to comply with during the waking hours.

When I joined Loyola College (formerly Madras, and now Chennai), I chose to read English Literature. This was in a sense taking the English language bull by its horn. (We all laughed!) But, actually it was not that difficult; thanks to bazar guidebooks! I used to depend upon them heavily. Interestingly, they all had Tamil and English summaries and cursory reviews of the novels of Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, and what not. So, one can get a feel of a novel with a detailed vernacular review. They also offered me a cultural translation of a British world which was so far away by way of language, culture, and time. Moreover, these guidebooks are intelligent templates of our examination-driven academia. All one has to do is to commit the template contents into memory. The templates host paraphrases, themes based Q and A sections, synonyms and antonyms of a hard-hitting words cluster, and even commentaries on historical context of a literary masterpiece. Probably, one can claim that the bazar guidebooks were an erstwhile Wikipedia portal in themselves. Obviously, many of us helped ourselves with a good many of them to crack a seemingly advanced undergrad course in English. On the spoken English front, my first port of call was always The BBC. Those days, imitating the accent
of a BBC reporter was my fond hobby (you should ask my sister about this!). Of course, the BBC stuff did not help me with written English. My teachers, both at tertiary level and thereafter, told me that my writing was sketchy, illogical, and completely unorganized. Then, and now, we haven’t evolved structures beyond a classroom setting that can cater to pupils who are in a similar situation. In inclusive education, the main issue is not about how to make books accessible; say audio and braille formats. The concern is the starting point itself. It is like this: In an unequal marathon setting like ours, students start at various distances. One who has a better cultural capital begins the race already much ahead of others. Some really lag behind so much that their starting point in the marathon is far behind the track area itself. We need to understand this first before talking about disability pedagogy, and the like.

That said, I started much late for a career in writing. Writing is a different game altogether. One can deploy camouflages in the spoken domain, and not so easily in the written medium.

Chandra: Nisha Singh (Nisha): Are you saying that accessibility is not such an important issue?

Hema: No, not at all. I just wanted to say that college education should perform with the premise that all is not equal at the cutting edge. Book accessibility for example was a huge problem for me then. When I was at Loyola College, I used to go around in search of my readers. They generously spent a good part of their everyday lives in recording lessons for blind students like me.

Concerning writing, I truly became appreciative of the art of writing during my doctoral programme at Cambridge. My supervisor Mr Tim Cribb spent a good deal of time in explaining the subtle differences between ‘good word’, and the almost ‘good word’. A wrong idiom for example, would trigger a discussion about English language usage across Continents.

Nisha: What about your school days?

Hema: It was good fun there I must say. However, all the blind schools, including mine, perform with the assumption that the sighted world outside is an ideal one. We should all aspire to integrate well in there.

Nisha: Had you been in an inclusive classroom, what difference would have been there in your learning process?

Hema: For language learning three things are important. The first is the development of an appropriate lexicon. When somebody acquires knowledge basically via listening, there is a chance that he or she is forever anxious about spelling, vocabulary, and other nuances of word usage. A classic case is that of Ved Mehta, a celebrated blind autobiographer and an essayist. In All for Love (2001), the protagonist confesses that he is shy to do touch-typing since he feels embarrassed about basic spelling mistakes. In his letter to a girlfriend for example, he spells the word ‘taxi’ with (y) at the end. Like Mehta, I often stumble upon a score of new words which are spelt very differently. My recent catch is ‘Korea’, which I thought is always spelt with a ‘ch’ in the beginning like the word ‘choir’. After all, I have always heard the word Korea via a good many casual readings sessions with my friends. It never occurred to me to crosscheck such an idiosyncratic auditory association. So, what is the lesson? For a language pedagogy of the blind, braille material is a basic prerequisite. If blind children are given vocabulary training in braille, chances are that they will get a comprehensive view concerning lexical idiosyncracies. Other disabilities obviously will require some other sets of solution.

The second component involves communication. Developing communication competency is more than a training in fluency. Our conversations and speech improvisations for example, are accompanied by gestures, facial expressions, and a propensity to establish a contact with an audience. All these communicative nuances do not occur to us automatically. They accrue usually via observation and imitation. Certain higher-level communication rhetoric is acquired only by training. These include a lawyer’s tactic concerning the art of cross-examination, a sales person’s perspicacity, and a doctor’s concerned gaze. People with sensory disabilities miss out on communicative competence. Due to a social exclusion, they rarely get an opportunity to learn by imitation and observation.

And third, the idiom. Proper expressions and a right idiom are a matter of good training in writing. On this count, disabled pupils are not exclusively disadvantaged. Our centers of higher education are increasingly investing in oral performance and not good writing. If I dare say, they teach ideology, and not ways and means to think through a problem.

Concerning disability pedagogy and language learning, one may consider specific contexts of disabled students such as their reliance on Assistive Technologies. To give you an example, I always had a problem with punctuation. My sentences for example, were profuse with commas. An undue proliferation of commas gave the impression that the writer-figure is twisted and shapelessly broken inside. In seeking the truth behind the problem, Tim asked me to read a few paragraphs with the aid of my screen reader. (Screen readers are special audio technologies that read aloud a computer screen). Hurrah! he discovered that my screen reader is set to read sentences with loads of pauses in between. Over a period of time, Tim reasoned, I developed a habit to mime the technology in making my sentences to read with as much pauses. It did not take much time to get out of a comma spree once I came to know about such a basic influence. A million other insights is bound to emerge once we choose to go for a more enabling learning environment.

Nisha: Do we mean that in an inclusive classroom if a teacher uses traditional methods without taking into account the specific requirements of the disabled students, these gaps would be too pronounced?

Hema: I think one can take assistance from special educators. Besides, we can introduce disability pedagogy as an integral component in ongoing teacher-training programmes.

Manjari: Is there some special training that could be given to teachers or is sensitization enough for the teachers to be able
to deal with such class rooms? Are you in favour of mixing students?

Hema: I am in favour of mixing students beyond high school education.

Manjari: So, in that situation, how do you think a teacher should or will be able to address different needs? Are there different needs? I am talking particularly of the Indian situation.

Hema: Sensitization is always helpful; but it can go only so far. There must be special education person in every school who can advise about everyday problems. A deaf student for example, requires sign language support, and also a friendly multilingual atmosphere.

Manjari: Should there be some sort of language labs to address such issues? Do we have any such innovation in place in India or is it something we can create here?

Hema: So far, I reason, disability related training courses such as diploma in teaching the blind, diploma in deaf education, etc target exclusive schools environments. As long as I am aware, they are not integrated well with a mainstream field such as English Language Teaching (ELT). ELT is a specialized discipline. It is very different from a course in literary criticism. All the four modules in ELT such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing will obviously benefit by a reflection concerning disabilities; be it cerebral, emotional, or sensory ones. Disability is not always a problem, it can be a resource too!

Manjari: ELT yes. How about its engagement with disability?

Hema: It is not conspicuously there yet.

Manjari: Is it something that’s not begun yet?

Hema: yes, not systematically.

Manjari: But what about in the first world, in the western countries?

Hema: Western world too. ELT needs to do a lot of catching up work. However, the Western world can afford expensive technologies. For example, for people with dyslexia there is a software called CURZUEL 3000. It aids people with dyslexia to handle choice of words, synonyms, grammar, and an appropriate sentence structure. Fortunately, Kurzweil 3000, and the like are not beyond the reach of Indian centers of learning. However, East or West, technology is not a substitute for hard thinking about disability. A special focus in ELT concerning disability pedagogy is bound to make language accessibility as a mainstream concern, and not a sideline issue.

Nisha: But don’t you think, Hema, that this is ultimately a very idealistic position: only possible in theory. I can visualize immense problems in its implementation. Do you think we can achieve our goal?

Hema: We need probably a two pronged strategy. On the one hand, we have to be very exclusive to people with different requirements. A resource center for example, can aid Universities to produce reference materials in accessible format. The second method is to introduce disability pedagogy in mainstream disciplines themselves. Fortell is taking a right step in that direction. Our B.Ed. Programmes can have disability pedagogy as a primary component. With no exception, Literary Studies can also include a module on special needs. I don’t think we have a self-reflexive teaching module in literary studies. For example, it is assumed that if you have a PhD degree, you are automatically equipped to handle students who are tuned to different paces of learning. Some professors of literature simply do not know how to mentor students. Literary scholarship requires an ability to peruse reams of secondary materials, close reading tactics, skimming through pages in a book, a way with words, and an acute reflective capacity. All these skills are not innate. They require rigorous, and yet empathetic literary pedagogy. In the absence of such support arrangements, disabled students will end up taking all the abuses.

Manjari: Is disability a state of mind or is it a creation of the society? Is there a real disparity or is it something that one just assumes, both from the point of the disabled and that of the others.

Hema: It is both. Let us take an example. Imagine a blind student in a classroom situation where a teacher offers all the crucial stuff via a blackboard method. If no one were to translate things for him or her, all that is written out there will make no sense. Now, the blackboard is an essential tool for many. To make the tool relevant for a blind student too, a teacher can offer oral relays of Blackboard notes, which can otherwise be nothing more than a chalk piece screech.

In my 11th grade for example, I did accountancy. I remember those days now. My accountancy teacher was clearly aware of my specific requirement. He would vocalize everything that he wrote on the blackboard. He told me that the debit account is always on the left side and the credit scores are always on the right. So whenever he would mention credit, I would automatically pull up in my mind the required mental picture. He was able to pool together certain tricks of the trade in accountancy pedagogy that renders the discipline friendly to all in the classroom. So similarly for every discipline, e.g., literary criticism, such tiny maneuverings can make all the difference.

Now, there is the issue of the burden of disability. Negative symbols and ideas can inculcate the notion that disability is a burdensome affair. Probably, disabled people work through them all their lives. They find it hard to cultivate a positive self-imagery inside. Writers such as Ved Mehta struggle with them all the while. On the education front, it is important to cultivate such a positive imagery. However, we need to confront constrains that come with disability head on! Brilliant solutions may emerge from such a confrontation.

Manjari: Thank you Hema for sharing with us your personal experiences and for the insights into the issues of pedagogy that you have so honestly addressed.

Nisha: Yes. Thank you very much. It has been an extremely thought provoking experience in many ways.
Untouchable God
by Kancha Ilaiah

ISBN: 978-81-85604-33-6
Pp. 248, Rs 350/-
Reviewed by Preeti Gupta Dewan

Dalit social scientist Kancha Ilaiah fires yet another salvo against Brahminical Hinduism from his armoury, this time in the form of a novel titled Untouchable God. The novel lacks an engaging narrative and focuses instead on the creation of the caricatured portraits of six Brahmins—Veda Shastry of Tamil Nadu, Banerjee Babu of Bengal, D.C. Tilak of Maharashtra, Krishnamurthy of Karnataka, Namboodiri of Kerala and Appa Rao of Andhra Pradesh so as to reveal the pan-Indian stranglehold of casteism. Examples of exalted brahminhood, firmly ensconced in their privileged niche in the social order, these men systematically exploit and despise both dalits and women. Namboodiri of Kerala, heading a temple trust, considers it a matter of right to coerce a dalit woman into a ‘sambandham’ while reducing his widowed sister-in-law to the status of a non-entity. Veda Shastry, their leader, has no moral scruples while ordering a murderous assault on a dalit man while sanctimoniously proclaiming the ‘justice’ of his action. Gentle irony is used to unmask the hypocrisies which lie beneath the ‘radicalism’ of Banerjee Babu and Gayatri Devi, bhadrakol communist intellectuals. The ‘rebellious’ mould of Banerjee Babu’s character is shot through with elitism, conservativeness, and status quoism, while Gayatri Devi dabbles in communist ideology before comfortably settling in her bhadrakol world of privilege and status. Appa Rao attempts to plagiarize a dalit poet’s works, albeit unsuccessfully. The author’s indignation is range pronounced in his portrait of D.C. Tilak, where he even distorts history to create a character very different from venerable historical figure of Tilak in the freedom struggle. His venomous hatred of Christians, Muslims and dalits alike spurs him to create a right-wing organization with “a militant network” called “Bharatkhandha Protection Sangh” which is a thinly disguised fictional veneer for the RSS. Ilaiah exposes the xenophobia and the dangerous use of religious revivalism by right-wing ideologues like the fictional Tilak to simultaneously fan the fires of communal hatred and oppress dalits to maintain the ‘purity’ of a Hindu nation.

Though there are continuities between his earlier polemical work and this debut novel, the departures that Ilaiah makes from his earlier stance are very significant and noteworthy. In Why I am not a Hindu, Ilaiah, while critiquing Hindu families as following a patriarchal model, had posited dalit society as an exemplary one in which relationships between men and women were far more egalitarian and non-oppressive. The comment on the opening page of the novel “Men were men whatever caste they were born in” indicates the distance Ilaiah has travelled from his earlier book and the tenor of this statement is followed up in the rest of the novel where he exposes the equally pitiable condition of Brahmin widows, and dalit Nair women forced into ‘sambandhams’ in which they are merely reduced to objects of sexual gratification for upper-caste Namboodiri men. While his earlier work was an example of the Manichean imagination which works in terms of binaries (dalit vs upper-caste), and did not take into account other coordinates of gender and race, the novel’s sharp critique of patriarchy, whether dalit or upper-caste, is a redeeming feature of the novel which is otherwise riddled with many flaws. What is exemplary about the novel is its remarkable dissection of the interplay between caste, gender, religion, class and even race. The bigoted mindset of the Brahmins is revealed equally in their hatred and contempt of the dalits, and their oppression of women, both of whom are routinely exploited for their labour and treated as chattel. Ilaiah not only lashes out at the hierarchical structure of the caste system, he reveals the hierarchy prevalent amongst the various dalit sub-castes as well.

In the last chapter of the novel, fortuitous in some respects, the novel introduces a black American sociologist, haunted by his own history of racism and slavery, on a visit to India, confronted by the shocking realities of casteist violence in rural and urban India. The narrative of the novel, if it can be said to have one, comes back full circle as the Afro-American man is accompanied by the Christian convert son (who, too, narrowly escapes an attack by upper castes) of the dalit man, aptly named Pariah, on whose life a murderous assault was made in the first chapter for the ‘crime’ of thinking about metaphysical and social issues. Ilaiah attempts to bring an outsider’s perspective to bear upon caste realities, which are shown to be all pervasive and confined not just to Hinduism. Dalit converts to Christianity.
are also treated as pariahs, and Christian priests are shown to be as dogmatic and chauvinistic as their Brahmin counterparts. Ilaiah reveals, with seething contempt, the insidious manner in which caste has permeated other religions in India. The novel uses the staple tropes of dalit literature—pollution taboos, geographical segregation, belief in endogamous marriages, caste violence, economic exploitation and inferiorization of dalits. The light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek humor of the novel often mutates into dark, morbid humor, a fitting weapon to reveal the vicious and pernicious nature of the social system. The novel’s mockery of Brahminical ritualism (for example its jet-speed chanting of shlokas, incomprehensible to everyone) and hypocrisy becomes scathing and trenchant when it reveals the malignant nature of the system.

The novel is disappointing on several fronts. Readers’ expectations regarding an in-depth, exhaustive and authentic account of dalit life are not fulfilled; the dalit characters in the novel are reduced to shadowy figures, deprived of agency, easily victimized and manipulated by the upper-castes for their own political purposes. What he offers, instead, are caricatured portraits of Brahmin zealots and their machinations in preserving their hegemonic status. In place of a flowing narrative, the several portraits are strung together, almost forcibly, by thematic connections. All his ire is directed only against Brahminical fanaticism. In the context of the attack on Pariah ordered by the Brahmins, it is imperative to mention that Ilaiah doesn’t even deign to take cognizance of the innumerable attacks on dalits by members of the other backward castes which have routinely taken place in the past few years. (For example, in Dharampur, Tamil Nadu 400 dalit houses were burnt down by the most backward caste, the Vanniyars. In Lathor in Orissa in 2011, the perpetrators of the same crime were members of an OBC caste called Mehar.) Why he glosses over the role of members of other backward castes in such atrocities against the dalits is a question worth pondering. Ilaiah seems to be still stuck in the first phase of the dalit emancipatory movement.

The novel ambitiously attempts to cover a vast geographical territory and a time span ranging from the 1880s to the 1960s, covering the freedom struggle, social reforms, and even the civil rights movement in the US. The disappointment caused by the absence of an engaging narrative is further compounded by Ilaiah’s frequent lapses into pamphleteering which are understandable in a polemical work but quite out of place in a novel. Yet, Ilaiah’s expose of Brahminical conspiracy to subjugate the dalits, his searing depiction of their selfishness, brutality and hypocrisy and his vision of a casteless utopia is commendable. Ilaiah addresses issues related to caste, class, gender and religion that, he claims several times in the course of the novel, even social reform movements and Marxist revolutionaries have skirted.

Talking about Detective Fiction
by P.D.James

Pp-159, Rs. 399/-

Reviewed by Shilpy Malhotra

Talking About Detective Fiction, as one would expect of any work by P.D. James, is at once engaging, easy to read and informative. It covers a wide range of works of detective fiction; beginning with an analysis of nineteenth century fiction (which had strong elements of mystery) to Sherlock Holmes, Father Brown, Hercules Poirot, Albert Campion and James’s own creation, Dalgleish. However, the book does not assume for itself to be a critical study of the genre. Rather it claims to be an account of the history of detective fiction written with the purpose of entertaining those who enjoy reading detective fiction or wish to gain knowledge of the genre in general terms.

As would be expected of any study of detective fiction, James’s work too provides a prehistory to the genre. However, she limits her discussion of the prehistory of detective fiction to the large scale appearance of elements of crime, mystery and the careful unraveling of both in the nineteenth century English fiction. Her study includes The Moonstone, Pheasus Redux, Bleak House, Jane Eyre and, interestingly enough, even Emma. However, James overlooks the role that magazines and newspapers played in the creation of detective fiction. Much before Collins, Dickens and many like him began to incorporate elements of crime and mystery in their novels. A whole body of literature on the subject of crime existed in the
form of Newgate Calendars, Newgate Novels and the penny dreadfuls to name a few. Moreover, the elements of mystery and crime which were found in gothic novels and their relation to detective fiction too do not find any mention in James’s work. To that extent, her “talk” on detective fiction is very traditional beginning, as it does, with the nineteenth century.

‘Talking about Detective Fiction’ does, nonetheless, provide a succinct discussion of what constitutes detective fiction, features that make it formulaic and reasons for the formula to have been successful with some alterations over the century. James acknowledges that there is no easy or generally accepted answer to questions regarding the genre’s popularity; a point that almost all researchers of the subject have come to agree upon. In their opinion, detective fiction flourishes in a society which is a strong supporter of institutional law and order and it confirms the reader’s belief that we all live in a comprehensible world.

The chapters on Sherlock Holmes and what is now called the Golden Age of detective dictionary are concise but interesting accounts of the works of Doyle, Bentley, Chesterton, Sayers, Christie and Bailey. These two chapters talk about the literary detectives created by each of the aforementioned writers and the reasons for their popularity. But these chapters fail to discuss a transition that takes place in the genre of detective fiction from Sherlock Holmes to Poirot, Marple and thereafter; a development of which P.D. James, herself a writer of detective fiction is a legatee: the development in the telling of the mystery and its solution, from the short story to the full length novel. This is a serious short coming of James’s study.

A Comprehensive Book of English Grammar is a series of eight books for the Primary and Upper Primary classes. The series has been designed according to the latest English Language Teaching guidelines and the syllabus of various School Boards across the country. Besides grammar, each book in the series covers comprehensively through separate sections on Vocabulary, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Skills. The objective of this series is to help the students acquire all the four skills of English to enable them communicate accurately and effectively.
Wings
A Course in English for Schools (FOR CLASSES 1-8)

It has been written strictly according to the objectives and guidelines of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for School Education 2005. The course consists of 22 books (8 Main Course Books, 8 Workbooks and 6 Supplementary Readers).

The course

- Has a wide range of reading materials relating to neighbourhood, science, technology, environment, sports etc.
- Has a variety of exercises that will engage the learner in pair work, group work and individual work.
- Promotes all language skills, including the skills of listening and speaking.
- Makes teaching and learning of English an exciting task.
- Relates learning of English to real-life situations.
- Provides a rich variety of supplementary reading materials (for classes 3-8) to generate interest in reading beyond the textbook.

Is accompanied by a Teacher’s Book for each class that provides the key to most of the exercises and suggests activities that could be done in class.

Splash
A course in art & craft for schools

It is an exciting and innovative Art and Craft series of 8 books for pre-primary and primary classes. This innovative series lays equal emphasis on drawing, sketching, colouring and creativity. The content in each book has been designed keeping in mind the learning capabilities and attention span of kids at each level. The following features make the series unique and special for the learners.

- large variety of drawing exercises
- graded colouring exercises
- graded and easy to follow craft activities
- step by step instructions
- techniques graded according to the learners’ level
- boosts the children’s curiosity, imagination and creativity
THE BOOKS THAT INSPIRE YOUNG MINDS

Kohinoor Publications is a renowned publishing house in India. It was founded in 1992 in New Delhi. Since its inception it has been bringing out books that are used exclusively in schools at the pre-primary, primary and post-primary levels. However, it specializes in books connected with English Language Teaching (ELT). The books are geared towards shaping the young minds in keeping with the latest research in the educational pedagogy.

For the past 22 years Kohinoor has been viewed as a symbol of high-quality school books. The market response across the country has been excellent.

KOHINOOR PUBLICATIONS
A Progressive Schools Publication
Email: me@kohinoorpublishations.com
Website: www.kohinoorpublishations.com