

Reflections on Having Been a Learner Before Becoming a Teacher of English

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I do not know for sure, but it may be instructive for non-native teachers of English to reflect on their own journeys as learners of English. This may also be of some interest to theorists of language learning.

I became a teacher of English by default rather than by design. To say this is just to point out the role of chance in life, and maybe, to also hint at the devious ways in which the process of language learning itself may operate.

I began my schooling in pre-independence India in a small town in the Indian Punjab. My mother tongue was Punjabi, but my schooling began in Urdu when I was about four-and-a-half years old. I studied in Urdu for four years. In the fifth year, I had to change schools since my family had to shift to another nearby city (my father was in the army and was subject to frequent transfers, hence the family was always on the move). Now the medium of instruction became Hindi. In addition to Hindi, I was also initiated into Sanskrit and English. I have no memory of what I learnt in English or Hindi. But I do remember that I learnt by rote over 100 Sanskrit *shlokas*. My first exposure to English outside school was through the English news bulletins on the All India Radio (Akashvani now). I distinctly remember the set refrain of the news bulletin “This ‘s’ All India Radio, and here’s ‘th’ news, read by Melville de Mellow”. This I heard a few times every day, but I do not remember if I understood anything of the news. My father, though only a matriculate, but having worked under British officers, was a very fluent speaker

of English with hardly any Punjabi accent. In this city however, I seldom heard him talk in English. The following year, my father was transferred once again, and we had to shift to our ancestral village in Punjab. So, in my sixth year of schooling, another language—Punjabi—was added to my repertoire.

Thus by the end of my sixth year of schooling, I had been introduced to four languages—Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit and English—in addition to my mother tongue, Punjabi. Interestingly, I had been taught four scripts—Persian, Devanagari, Roman and Gurmukhi! But this of course, could not have been a special case. There must have been many people like me who were exposed to a multiplicity of languages and scripts. Moreover, I suppose this kind of exposure may be far more common now in India with so much mobility across states and linguistic regions, and migrations from rural to urban areas. In fact in most places in our country, the learning of English takes place alongside a multiplicity of languages and scripts. I do not remember whether this cocktail of languages and scripts caused any confusion in my mind.

My father was then transferred to a city in Uttar Pradesh (Bareilly), where I went to a school for two years before I was transferred again. In this school, I had to study three languages—English, Hindi and Sanskrit. The medium of instruction now irrevocably became English. I have no memories whatsoever of my English teachers or of the books we studied. I may have a vague memory of having studied William

Cowper's humorous poem "The Diverting History of John Gilpin". However, I do remember the face of our headmaster, a very handsome and sophisticated young Muslim with a postgraduate degree and a very fluent speaker of English with hardly any regional accent, I imagine. Every year, in the annual examination he used to give dictation to class eight, and every year he would choose the same passage. All the students knew this, and yet not many were able to score 100 per cent. I also failed to score 100 per cent, making two mistakes. In one mistake, I misspelt 'across' as 'accros', unsure whether there were two of the letter I should double the letter 'c' or the letter 's'.

My conscious efforts at learning English began from class nine, when I shifted to Delhi after my father's transfer first to Rajasthan and then to Kashmir. In Delhi, I stayed in a very small house with my maternal uncle's large family. In the house, there were about half-a-dozen of us, both boys and girls. We were all studying in different classes and doing different courses and so there was a lot of interaction amongst us. In school, the emphasis was on teaching English through grammar and translation. Although no one said it overtly, nor was anybody was conscious of it, but the focus was on teaching writing skills, reading and listening by default; very little was taught on speaking skills. Most of the effort in learning spoken English was directed towards memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary. I remember, we had a book of translation, grammar and vocabulary in which the emphasis was on learning the rules for use of tenses, phrasal verbs, idioms and proverbs, vocabulary, and reported speech. For example, we were expected to learn all the possible combinations of verbs such as give/take/get along with prepositions in/up/away/out/way/on. All this knowledge was directed towards translation from Hindi into English, and essay writing. The clues for memorizing the rules for tenses also came from Hindi. For example, while

learning present tense, we first memorized the verb endings in Hindi (/ *taa huun/ taa hail/ tii hail/ te hain/; /rahaa huun/ rahaa hail/ rahii hail/ rahe hain/; /chukaa huun/ chukaa hail/ chuke hain/* etc.) (ता हूँ/ ता है/ ती है/ ते हैं; रहा हूँ/ रहा है/ रही है/ रहे हैं/ चुका हूँ/ चूका है/ चुके हैं etc.) along with the corresponding English verb forms. Similarly, we had to memorize all the rules for changing a sentence from direct to indirect speech. The medium of instruction for science (physics and chemistry) and mathematics was English. History (of India and England) was taught in Hindi. We had three text books for English, each containing a selection of poetry, essays and short stories. Of the poems, I remember four: "Abou Ben Adhem", "Leisure", "Lucy Gray" and "The Charge of the Light Brigade". Of the prose lessons, I remember only one which is still in use: "Uncle Podger Hangs a Picture"; and of the short stories I can recollect two: "The Tinder Box" and "Jack the Giant-Killer".

Studying and teaching English seemed like studying and teaching any other subject. I cannot recall any of the present day anxieties or pressures on students to learn, or the teachers and linguists (there were hardly any in the early fifties of the twentieth century, I suppose) to teach or theorize or discover new methodologies. It was all rules of grammar and hard work and *intense practice*. I do not know what level of competence I achieved, but a distant relative of ours who taught Geography at a college rated me just average. Before I was admitted to this school I had appeared for a test for admission to a prestigious school in the city. One of the sentences to be translated from Hindi was: '*Gaadii chal rahii hai*' (गाड़ी चल रही है). Like many others, I translated it as: 'The train is moving'. The teacher ruled it as incorrect. The right translation should have been, he said: "The train is in motion". I believe my translation was not idiomatic and therefore unacceptable.

Needless to say I was refused admission in the prestigious city school.

Outside school, my exposure to English was through the English newspaper, and occasionally through English films. We went to see English films because it was fashionable and also to watch kissing scenes, not to learn English. I barely understood a few dialogues and that also after a lot of effort. I remember my cousins reading Conan Doyle's *The Hound of Baskerville* with great excitement. I do not remember how much of it I read, most probably very little. I also found my cousins reading stories of Sexton Blake, a Sherlock Holmes-like detective. We had no radio in the house, so for nearly three years I hardly heard Melville de Mellow's rich and powerful voice.

After passing high school, I went to college as a science student. Around this time, I also began to prepare for the entrance test for the NDA (National Defence Academy), for which the main subjects were English and general knowledge. This meant reading books on essay writing and general knowledge, memorizing essays on topical subjects such as "Unemployment", "Co-education", "Science: A Blessing or a Curse", "Conscription" and "The Kashmir Problem". Studying general knowledge involved coming into contact with lots of new words relating to science, history, geography, politics, names of places, and famous people and famous books, monuments, instruments, etc. In fact it opened up a whole new world before me. This exposure outside the class, along with essay writing, helped build up my vocabulary and hone my writing skills. Listening to the English and Science teachers definitely helped to improve my listening skills. Since I was a shy student, I did not take part in debates and had no opportunities to improve my speaking skills as the interaction among the classmates was mostly in Hindustani and Punjabi. I passed the NDA written examination

and was also successful in clearing the Services Selection Board (SSB) interview. I was fortunate to get more than a month's training in English conversation before facing an interview by an army captain who happened to be my father's friend. I did not get admission in the NDA, but I was becoming a fluent speaker of English.

Once again I shifted to another college in another city—this time Gurgaon—to do an intermediate course in science, that being the minimum qualification for admission to a degree course in engineering. I passed the exam, but could not get admission. I went on to do my graduation in science from yet another college in Punjab—Government College, Hoshiarpur. It was here, while pursuing a course in science, that I developed an interest in English and began working to improve my writing skills. Ours was a college that was rich in all kinds of co-curricular activities including dramatics and debating, and Sunday discourses in English on the *Bhagavad Gita*. It was a college that staged a Shakespeare play every year in which both teachers and students participated, where we had a visiting professor from England, where students from Oxford came to participate in debates. We had teachers who talked about the "Illustrated Weekly of India" and P. Lal's poems published therein, or discussed Raj Kapoor's films in class, inviting us to comment on them. We had a teacher who made us enact scenes from "The Merchant of Venice" in class with no great dramatic effect but with much amusement. In addition, we read English newspapers and maybe a few magazines, and listened to cricket commentary in English on the radio. One of my lasting impressions of college came from the students and teachers of MA English. The girls were beautiful; a few students even wrote poetry in English. One of them was compared to Edmund Spenser by Miss A. G. Stock, an English woman who taught the MA classes. One of the teachers—an Oxonian—used to hold

classes in the canteen lawn while he smoked pipe and even encouraged students to smoke.

It was this image that I carried with me from college, somewhat envious of this crowd studying English literature, though still holding on to the belief that science and literature did not mix and that I had to remain committed to science. It was also this very image that ultimately led me to join the postgraduate course in English Literature at an evening college in Delhi. This was after I discovered that I could not go to an engineering college because my father had retired and we had no money for my education. I unwillingly joined a security agency in the Government of India where I received training as a Morse code operator, in electronics (a very new field then), and in the use, repair and maintenance of wireless equipment. Now the tug of war between science and literature ceased and I felt at home doing both together—reading English literature and repairing radio transmitters. I worked at the security agency for about thirteen years before I quit. I quit not because I wanted to become a teacher but because the job involved frequent transfers, which disrupted my family life. Teaching seemed the easier way out and teaching English the easiest route. Those were lucky days with many new colleges opening under Delhi University and I got a job as a teacher rather easily; that is how I became a teacher of English, more by default than by design as I said earlier.

Before I finish, I want to add something about one of my multilingual experiences in my Government of India job. I had joined as a member of a batch of 24 science graduates from 12 Indian states, in which at least 8 different languages were spoken—Hindi, Punjabi, Bangla, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Konkani, and Marathi. A few of us did not know a word of Hindi. Apart from our batch, we had at a training centre in Delhi where there were people from other states—Assam, Orissa, Jammu and

Kashmir, Nagaland, Mizoram, Sikkim and Ladakh. In this real Tower of Babel, English was the lingua franca, and both training/teaching and communication among us took place in English. Here, I not only heard more than a dozen Indian languages, but also as many varieties of spoken English, all of them Indian. However, since all the people at the training centre had to interact with the people in the market place in the city, they had to pick up Hindi or Hindustani, or a mixture of Hindi and Punjabi. Over time, all of them became reasonably fluent users of Hindi or this very special north Indian mix of language in Delhi. In our batch on the other hand, we mostly used English or Hindi for communication and learnt only a few words or phrases from other languages, most of them being swear words or crude obscenities. Obviously it was the two dominant languages here—English and Hindi—that had their way, others fell by the wayside. Something similar may be happening in multilingual classrooms today.

Before I joined as a teacher of English I had become quite a competent user of English. I could write reasonably correct English, read higher level texts, speak an Indian variety of English and follow many Indian varieties of spoken English. How and whether I became a competent teacher of English is another story.

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