

The Diary an English Teacher Did Not Keep

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Let me begin with a disclaimer. I am not very sure whether disclaimers are permitted in a volume of scholarly papers. And yet, disclaimers have a way of getting into the lived experience of some academicians, especially those who teach language and literature. We get to listen to unspoken disclaimers from students in the English language classroom, for example, when we ask questions. The unspoken has a particular narrative force for it puts our question under erasure. The disclaimer is written over in the language teacher's classroom. There are different kinds of disclaimers like the one I make when I say that I am not an ELT specialist. It is quite possible to explain the potential of disclaimers and invest them with meaning. I build my disclaimer on the claim that I am not a language specialist in that sense and I do not have any formal training in the teaching and learning of English. My disclaimer that I am not an English Language Teaching specialist rests, perhaps paradoxically, on the claim that I am an English teacher. Disclaimers sometimes are followed by confessions. I never studied ELT or even ESP for that matter. I am aware of the possibility that my disclaimer could find some space alongside the disquisitions of those colleagues trained in ELT and ESP.

Much of what I intend to share here has to do with a claim which is at once a disclaimer. I have never kept a diary that could have helped to describe what an English teacher does in the classroom. I would like to take off from an interesting, very crucial idea that P.P. Ajayakumar (Pro-vice Chancellor, University of Kerala) flagged while he spoke at the conference on “Language Teaching and Learning in ESL/EFL Settings: Status and Prospects.” He had observed that English has become a world language, it is not that English is a world language. I would like to emphasise on the word ‘become’ because it marks the trajectory of the various claims that informs English language. English has many incarnations, and not surprisingly, there are attempts to invent and create it across classrooms and life situations. A corollary to this arc of becoming has to do with the kind of strategies one adopts, or the way in which different situations demand of teachers very different strategies. Such strategies are affirmations of how we recognize and believe in the kind of experience we all accrue over the years. Our experiences make us see better the claims we make.

When I started my career, I had to claim like many young teachers the importance of laying the foundation of language learning in a very systematic manner. A claim can soon become a platitude and teachers learn to be wary of it. I had to learn to teach language in a systematic manner. However, when I started my career, I realised that there is much more in trying to understand about the systematic manner of teaching language. And so I ask, what has this to do with the kind of system that exists around us, and the kind of system that we create as teachers? When I was teaching students who passed their tenth standard and joined for their two year pre-university programme to prepare for their under graduate programme, the obstacle in the English class was grammar and composition. For, we generally taught students rules in the name of grammar right from their school days. Even as one acknowledges the model of rule-based grammar teaching, specialists in language teaching point out that things have changed and teachers graduated to develop full-fledged ELT courses. Armed with this kind of exposure, it has become possible for many language teachers to lay claim to a completely new field in the teaching of English language.

I have never had the fortune of doing any ELT course, so here is a person trying to have a sidelong glance at the becoming moments in the English classroom. The meeting point is the discovery of new ways of teaching and learning English as a foreign language or perhaps as a second language. What I would like to emphasise here is not that there are these many developments or list out and enumerate these landmarks. What I am personally more interested, more fascinated, has to do with the things that go into this development. I intend to pick up one particular aspect here. For this reason, I wish to insist that all these developments are in a way contingent on a variety of needs and professional requirement.

Rightly therefore, it is very important to recognise the players who are involved in the whole process of language acquisition. I would argue that this process is contingent very much on the needs, on the variety of needs of the students because the learning situation is very heterogeneous. I therefore argue that a range of factors cutting across the social, cultural, or even economic spectrum informs those moments of erasure in the classroom disclaimers. Therefore, the needs are very important to which is added the kind of professional requirements with which we learn to equip ourselves.

Now what this leads to is the creation of a niche. It is a niche that the English teacher discovers; it is not that it is already there, given, pre-existing. This discovery is a niche area of experience to which the teacher lays claim. One particular niche area that I would like to mention briefly here, perhaps created, happens to be ESP. Niche areas can help to make interesting claims. It is also true that ESP *becomes* what it is because when talking about English for specific purposes, the purposes specified, and addressed in the labelled claim can be many things. There is English for business, for nursing students, for lawyers, for medical practitioners and so on emphasizing the need-based orientation of language teaching pedagogy.

Surely, specialists identify, classify, explore, and occupy these niche areas. It is also true that as teachers, we discover niche areas as we go into different classrooms. Different classrooms create different niche

areas and I hope to locate my intervention in ESP in this context reemphasizing my disclaimer that I have had no training in this niche area or TESL. My disclaimer is that ESP develops depending on the learning situation in the classroom, rather than solely depend on the class or professional background of the learner. ESP for me is that specific purpose for which my students come to the class. Let me repeat that ESP for me is the specific purpose for which my students come to the class. There could be many reasons for which a student comes to the class. There should be different reasons, but then why would a student come to my class? What is it that this student wants from my class? Why should this person come at all to my class? This is a question that I always asked when I did teach the undergraduate students for four years when I started my teaching career and then postgraduate students for over two decades now.

I asked the same questions while teaching diploma courses and the certificate programmes the Centre for English Language Teaching offers in my department to heterogeneous participants from different social-economic strata. The heterogeneity in such learning situations bring together a variety of structures of unspoken disclaimers and the task revolves around parsing those established disclaimers to help students lay claim to the pleasures of communication. Towards this end, language teachers work with students to help explore four basic competencies, namely Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. I always tell the students in the classes that the most important skill is not writing or reading, but it is listening.

For, when I speak, I must listen to what I am saying. If I do not listen to what I am saying, I will not know what I am talking about or what it is that I am saying, because I need to listen. When I read something, I need to learn to listen with my eyes. When I read, I need to listen with my eyes and with my ears. If I have a problem, if I am a differently abled person, then I learn to read with my fingers, I learn to listen with my fingers, and with all my senses. So, we listen with not just our ears but with all our senses. That is why I argue that this idea of specific purpose and the creation of this niche is a beautiful discovery for a language teacher. My students come to class for this specific purpose.

And so, I tell my students that listening is very important, because if you do not listen you will not be able to speak. If you do not listen, you will not be able to engage in a conversation; if you do not listen, you will never be able to ask questions.

That is to say, I must be able to discern the multiple niche areas into which the students are willing to allow access. I must be conscious that I do not lay claim over an area that I can give to my student. I must be willing to listen to the niche areas in which my students permit me, allow me in. There could be areas marked by certain disclaimers, which make them inaccessible. Teachers would have had this problem with students, for instance, who probably are scared, with those who will dare not open up, listen and speak. That is their territory; there can be responses akin to how territories are guarded. Disclaimers have a way of marking territory. There are areas that are marked that will not allow you entry. It is important for language teachers to recognize such kind of territorial behaviour and see the kind of claims that go into its making.

There are territories that we fear, that we are scared of, that we guard, and territories where we permit access. I feel this is very important for a language teacher. The territories that the students claim indicate their strength, diffidence, or perhaps some kind of weakness. There could be hesitation, fear, anxiety or even plain unwillingness, which are all forms of disclaimers. I think a lot depends on how much the student is able to allow access to all this. A lot depends on classroom engagement; what transpires in an English classroom depends on such positioning of the nuanced disclaimers that frame the specific purpose of language acquisition.

Therefore, to make another disclaimer, I did not write this diary of my English classroom on a daily basis. It must learn to discover and occupy a niche. To write is to discover. Our thoughts and feelings shape what we write and when the teacher uses the red pen, we feel bad. The teacher may put an X mark or strike out something, writing over the claim of the student despite the belief that whatever s/he writes is written in stone. We never write anything in stone.

To return to the claim made about the diary I did not keep, there is an implied question that asks the reason as to why I never kept such a diary. I very much believe that what happens while teaching English in the classroom is a fascinating process of erasure. Language learning happens always under erasure. The diaries that I do not keep therefore were also under erasure, and that is why I do not have a diary. The reason why I bring in this idea of erasure here is that it has a whole lot to do with the practice of teaching, and the practice of learning a language. I have borrowed the word erasure from its strategic use in philosophy not to discuss constraints on language but to indicate a learning process that is always in the present, always continuous. I propose to use this word in such a way that it helps to show something of the process of language learning.

I made a disclaimer about a diary I did not keep. In the diary that I never wrote I learnt to write my experiences of correcting compositions of teenage students, students who would have learnt to use Malayalam at home, it could be Hindi, Gujarati; it could be any other language. In that disclaimer, in the diary, I learnt to write the experiences of correcting teenage students. This class of students would have gone through the drill of studying grammar and composition in school and would be at the portals of higher education. In spite of such an exposure, students tend to have a very big problem with preposition, tense, and agreement. My teacher used to tell me that if you know how to use preposition in English, you could master the language. I always feel that for students these three are always under erasure.

In my class, when I used to teach grammar, or help discover the nuances of working with tense or subject verb agreement, I would ask my students to come to the blackboard, give a piece of chalk and generate sentences. Sometimes I write a sentence and ask the student to correct what I have written or what a student has written. The student writes on the blackboard and other students join in and write, rewrite, and overwrite on what others have written. A student would write something, another would strike it off or a third might simply erase it; still another would write again and then the student will have to share his/her thought processes as s/he tries to convert an active verb

into a passive verb or whatever. At that point, the whole class learns how to use language, using the eraser. I learnt that language learning is both discovery and erasure. In a short note titled “An Open Letter to Derrida” that R. Viswanathan wrote in Malayalam he responded to Jacques Derrida’s understanding of language and his employment of Heidegger’s idea of *sous rature*. In this brief note, Viswanathan draws attention to the tradition of writing and overwriting the first letters on sand. As learners, we perceive the pain and pleasure of writing in those moments of erasing and writing over.

My learning instinct as a young Ph. D. scholar in the early 1990s taught me how I was erasing and writing over what I thought was my assured competencies in English. I had to reclaim into the cognitive processes the rules of grammar to convert sentences from passive voice to active voice, for instance, in the actual rewriting of sentences in the course of redrafting the chapters. There was a completely new way in which I learned to write and discover something of competency in language. This goes back to the central experience of not just writing but erasing what I write. Language learning is possible only if the student recognises the potential of erasure, not otherwise.

I will try to sum up with a brief discussion about two very interesting experiences as a teacher. The first one happens to be that of supervising a Ph.D. thesis, which had to do with writing. I began this discussion with listening and I am going to share this experience of research supervision. Iris Selina Devadason submitted her thesis in 2008 January to the University of Mysore. The thesis was titled *An Investigation into the Writing Processes involved in the Master’s Thesis in Theology: The Challenges Faced and Overcome by the Unskilled L2 Learner*. I found her topic to be very engaging, and I picked up a whole lot of things working with Iris Devadason. The most striking thing for me while supervising this thesis was that she had filed portfolios for over two decades of teaching of what her students wrote and submitted for corrections. She learnt to see that process of writing from the erasures that her students did as they discovered how to write. It was a very beautiful experience where I could see how you learn to engage with the writing that your students

produce. In the thesis, she showed that thesis writing is a genre in itself and sought to demonstrate how one can actually discover the rigours of this genre in the process of teaching academic writing to students.

The second experience is the course that I designed which I started offering in 2019. To teach a course in Academic Writing was only a dream for two decades. Many teachers offer such a course at different levels in colleges and universities. Disclaimers in many guises did narrate and shape those two decades telling a story which I desist from sharing. This course is all about how students learn to keep track of everything they rewrite, not just write. I keep track of everything that they rewrite. I encourage them to keep a portfolio of writing so that they will be able to use every question, the X marks, underlined words, phrases, sentences as the hyperlinks leading them through the language learning process. Such erasures and hyperlinks shape the language learning process. I assume that students would have at the end of the course a whole portfolio, which I encourage them to build on, add as they go through the entire master's programme. Those moments when students, erasures and hyperlinks construct a triad, become an on-going discovery of the pleasures of using language. For it recognizes that the nature of language, and how we learn to put it to use is essentially priapic. For language is a remarkable shape changer, the greatest invention we ever have had in the world.

I would like to arrive at an ending with another disclaimer. There is a rule of the thumb that an article or argument must draw together the inferences made in the form of a statement or a question that opens up further inquiry or debate. I do not have such a statement. Instead, I would like to conclude with a quotation from the historian G. M. Trevelyan. One sentence that he wrote back in 1913 in a book titled *Clio a Muse and other Essays* reads thus:

What is easy to read has been difficult to write. The labour of writing and rewriting, correcting and recorrecting, is the due exacted by every good book from its author, even if he knows from the beginning exactly what he wants to say. A limpid style is invariably the result of hard labour, and the easily flowing connection of sentence with sentence and paragraph

with paragraph has always been won by the sweat of the brow. (34)

I now realize that what Trevelyan says is a hyperlink for I have pinned these words in my room to remind my students and myself of the exacting nature of erasure as we write. I now tentatively discover that it is possible to read a diary that an English teacher did not keep, then think, and even write about it.

References

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