The story of an eminently forgettable teacher of English told in his own words

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Old men like to talk about they have gone through: ange livaibaa kathaa (tales about what one has gone through), as goes the Odia saying. But who would listen to an ordinary story of an ordinary man? Therefore I am grateful to my young and generous friend, Professor B.K. Das, my teacher Professor M.Q. Khan and you all for letting me tell you a bit of my story. I have been a teacher for about forty years and taught courses in English Literature and Language, (English) Language Teaching, Communication, and Linguistics, in particular, generative linguistics. As a resource person at Refresher Courses and Orientation Programmes, I have spoken mainly on issues relating to linguistic communication, stylistics and the teaching of English in India. I was really happy to teach a senior undergraduate course at IIT Kanpur entitled “Responsible Dissent” in 2003 and 2004 with my colleague, Professor Harish Karnick, of the department of Computer Science. It was a pleasure to teach a post-graduate course on Communication with the linguist, Professor Achla M. Raina. And it was a privilege to design and teach the course “The Human Condition as Depicted in the Mahabharata” at IIIT Hyderabad in 2011. But it is some of my experiences as a teacher of English literature and language alone that I propose to share with you here.

My story is about the environment I found myself in, the sense I made of it and the way I responded to it. What am I as a professional without the fellow-professionals I met, the students I taught and interacted with, and the ideas I encountered? Nothing, less than nothing, to echo Charles Lamb.

I

On September 10, 1964, I underwent the transformation from a student to a teacher when I submitted my joining report at Utkal University Evening College, Berhampur. It was not an entirely pleasant experience for me. In a way, I lost my innocence. I was troubled by some vague fear and anxiety and was nervous and lonely. I also felt a bit odd about going to work in the evening but I got over it soon. My first class was not a success. After a year’s stay there, I left Berhampur to join Orissa Education Service (OES). I taught at SCS College, Puri, BJB College, Bhubaneswar, and Panchayat College, Baragarh before I went to CIEFL, Hyderabad (now English and Foreign Languages University - EFLU) to do a nine-month Diploma course in the Teaching of English. That was in 1972. On return from there I joined Ravenshaw College in April, 1973, where I taught for about five or six weeks before returning to CIEFL for further studies. I got relieved from OES in November 1976 to join the Post-graduate Centre of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) at Imphal, now renamed Manipur University. After serving there for about a year I joined Regional College of Education at Ajmer, where worked for about two months. I could not teach even a single class there because I left the College before the classes started after the summer vacation. On September 4, 1978, I joined Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur from where I retired in June 2004. After retirement I joined Central Institute
of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore as Fellow till February, 2007. That fellowship did not involve any teaching. In 2010 I taught for a fortnight at IIT Madras and for another fortnight at Ravenshaw University (earlier, Ravenshaw College). In 2011, I taught for a semester at International Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), Hyderabad. This has been my career as a teacher so far.

My days as a teacher of English in Orissa (now, Odisha) were not bad. I must however add that the overall teaching environment was much better then. In the sixties and even the early seventies there was better discipline in the classroom, one did not find students cutting classes and loitering almost in front of the classroom itself, and at a given point of time there were only a few vacancies in the teaching staff, at least as far as the department of English was concerned. There was less political or bureaucratic interference in the day-to-day functioning of the educational institutions, political parties were neither so much nor so directly involved in college union elections and most importantly, there was much less cynicism in the environment.

I taught literature mostly at the undergraduate level in Orissa. I taught modern poetry, romantic poetry, some Shakespeare - “As You Like It” and “Much Ado About Nothing”, and modern non-fictional prose at the Honours level. I did not really enjoy teaching prose. Neither did most of my colleagues. My senior colleagues taught poetry and drama, and they comforted me saying that I had to teach prose only for a year or two, during which time someone junior to me would surely join the department, and then he would have to teach it.

I always wanted to teach Shakespearean tragedy. “King Lear” was one of the prescribed texts at that time. Professor N.K. Mishra, who was my teacher at Ravenshaw College and had taught us Shakespeare, was heading the department of English at SCS College. He flatly but affectionately told me that I was too inexperienced to teach that great play. According to him, the teacher of “King Lear” had to have a certain level of emotional maturity to be able to imaginatively experience the grief of a father who was the victim of his children’s ingratitude. I was unconvinced; does one have to physically experience something in order to experience it imaginatively? Can anyone, as Shaw had said, be so unimaginative that he would have to burn his fingers in order to realize how painful burning could be? But I did not say anything. He was my departmental head and more importantly, he was my teacher, whose goodwill and affection I had always enjoyed during my college days. Looking back on it today, I do think that he had a point. He belonged to a generation of English teachers in India for whom teaching literature, especially the best of it, was a great deal more than a mere intellectual act; it involved experiencing the text emotionally as well and communicating some of that experience to the students.

Later as a guest faculty at Utkal University in 1970, I taught the best of Ibsen and Strindberg to the post graduate students. Teaching “The Wild Duck” was a highly satisfying experience. At Imphal, I taught Restoration plays and Irish drama to the post graduate students. And a bit of Shakespeare too: “As you Like It”. But I never got to
teach Shakespearean tragedy. It is one academic aspiration mine that has remained unfulfilled.

After I returned from CIEFL with a Diploma in the Teaching of English, I was posted to Ravenshaw College where I taught the special paper on Linguistics to the final year MA English students. That was the first time I taught linguistics. I enjoyed teaching a subject I had just learnt. Many students had opted for linguistics and English language teaching as their special papers. As for the unfortunate literature-linguistics divide and a hostile attitude to linguistics and language teaching, I had the impression that it was almost not there in Ravenshaw College. At least there was no open hostility. Or possibly, the five or six weeks I was effectively there was too short a time for me to get to know about such things. Many well known and senior teachers of English and American literature at Ravenshaw College that time, most of them my teachers, did not seem to have a negative attitude towards linguistics. Later I taught the special paper on Linguistics and part of the special paper on English Language Teaching to the MA students at JNU Centre, Imphal, where there was no hostility towards linguistics and ELT. At IIT Kanpur I taught mainly theoretical linguistics, philosophy of linguistics, history of ideas in generative linguistics, and computational linguistics to senior undergraduate students of engineering, and to M.Tech. and PhD students.

II

And there I taught English language too – to the first year and pre-first year students. That was the first time I taught English as a “skill” subject, a term, incidentally, I do not like, because it gives the entirely wrong impression that a “skill” subject is rather mechanical and intellectually unexciting. Except for a couple of years when I was technically on leave, I taught English every year at IIT Kanpur. Teaching two English language courses a year was more or less the norm. There were a few academic sessions during which I taught only one language course but then some three or four times during my stay there, I taught three English courses during an academic year.

When I was teaching in Orissa, I did not really teach English as language. I taught English literature. The prevalent approach to language teaching then was the traditional one, namely that from his study of literature and the teacher’s exposition of the texts in the classroom, the student would acquire the knowledge of the language; putting it differently, he just needed exposure to the language, more specifically, to the literature in the language. The exposure was really varied: drama, poetry, fiction, essay, etc. The quality of material to which the student was exposed was, needless to say, from good to very good. In short, as a teacher of language I just had to explain the texts to my students in my lecture classes and tutorial classes. When they made spelling, grammatical, lexical, or similar other mistakes in their writing, I drew their attention to the same and told them the correct forms. I would of course tell them that knowing the content was not enough and penalize them for language errors. That was all I did by way of language teaching. In any case, the idea that one acquires competence in a second or a foreign language only or primarily through exposure to the literature in that language is obviously erroneous. I have heard many teachers say that if exposure to literature and literary criticism was not
It was in the Summer Institute in 1971 held at Ravenshaw College with Professor Sarbeswar Dash, who was the head of the English department there, as its Director that we were made to feel almost guilty that we were not really teaching language. It was here that we were told quite bluntly that nothing about English language teaching in Orissa was free from blemish: syllabuses, texts, teaching method, method of evaluation, etc. Professor Bidhu Bhusan Das, a former professor of English at Ravenshaw College, who was at that time the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) of Orissa, was the inspiration behind the Summer Institute. Being one, whose contribution to the teaching of English in the state was substantial, his stature exceeded that of a DPI. He seriously wanted innovations in the teaching of English in Orissa, and he had the position, more importantly, the stature, to implement his ideas. Among the resource persons at that Summer Institute were Professor S.K.Verma, Professors G.B.Dhall, and Professor B.K.Das. Professor Damodar Thakur and Professor P.K.Pati gave special lectures. Pati was quite critical of the idea of reducing the literature content and eliminating Shakespeare from the English syllabuses at the college level altogether, a view with which, ironically, the Director of the Summer Institute was in agreement. Among the participants were many senior and very successful teachers of English of Orissa, and I, with my nearly seven years’ teaching experience, was one of the juniors there. The organizers were quite serious about the Summer Institute but many participants, especially the seniors, were non-serious about the course. Many sincerely believed that the changes suggested by the resource persons would cause incalculable harm to the teaching of English in the State. If some of the resource persons were more aggressive than necessary and desirable in their criticism of the existing mode of the teaching of English, quite a few senior participants were quite uncharitable and harsh towards them. In any case, this Summer Institute surely brought some awareness in Orissa about language teaching. As for me, I was an insincere participant and didn’t do well in the course, but it did not bother me much. I was content to be selected for the Summer Institute, thanks to the hype about it. I found grammar and phonetics, especially the latter, uninteresting, although grammar was taught by one of the greatest teachers of English grammar in the country: S.K.Verma. G.B.Dhall, very probably the first trained phonetician of Orissa, taught us phonetics, but there was hardly anyone in the course who took that subject seriously. It was unfair to Dhall and to the subject as well, but then phonetics is hardly a subject that can interest the uninitiated, especially when the uninitiated are the senior teachers of English literature. When the teacher pronounced those unfamiliar sounds, the participants found it hilarious. I liked B.K.Das’s lectures on stylistics and grammar and I liked too the young, friendly and unassuming Sagarmal Gupta’s lectures on material production. I have not forgotten the biryani that was served at dinner the day before the closing of the Summer Institute. It was memorable because of its quality and the discourse that it had generated. M. Q. Khan, the Coordinator of that
Summer Institute and also a participant in it, had supervised the preparation of this unforgettable biryani.

Talking about motivation, a well known professor of English in my state thundered his advice at us one morning during that Summer Institute - we must think of ways to make our classes interesting. For reasons of this, we could take the students to a nearby park or to the college playground. As a teacher he was never concerned about the motivation of his students. There was of course nothing special about it; powerful people always behave like that towards their subordinates. “Motivating his students is the teacher’s job” was what we were told so often at CIEFL. One knew that this is how the administration and the specialist speak. Such advice completely ignores the fact that motivations to learn a language comes a great deal more from the society than from the language teacher. N.K.Mishra’s was far more realistic and reasonable on this matter: a student must know that class is a place for work, not entertainment. If he does not, he should be told by all concerned, including his parents, in no uncertain terms.

At IIT Kanpur I did not have the problem of motivating students to learn English. They were already motivated. They were aware that to be successful in their profession, they had to learn English well. In several ways the Institute tried to convey the message to them that they had to be proficient in the so-called “soft skills” (“soft” need not be understood either seriously or literally), that they should be effective communicators in English. With regard to motivation, I had an interesting experience at IIIT Hyderabad recently. When I announced the term paper topics to my students, I spent some time telling them a few simple things about how to write a term paper: how to restrict the paper to the prescribed length, how to begin, how to end, how to organize the discussion, how to write the abstract, etc. I did this for about half an hour in the beginning in three consecutive lectures and did not fail to notice that the students paid a great deal of attention to this part of those lectures. They knew that if they had to do well in their career, they had to learn how to write an effective project proposal or a good, readable project report in English.

A point that was frequently raised in the Summer Institute but was never satisfactorily answered in academic terms was the following: school was the appropriate place for the changes in the teaching of English that were being so vociferously advocated. Agreed that the college entrant’s English was weak when he joined college, but should English at the graduation level be primarily remedial? The answer that was given was that since bringing about changes at the school level was extremely difficult, the problem should be dealt with at the more manageable college level. Further discussion was not allowed. At CIEFL, where college teachers were admitted to the Diploma course, this matter was hardly raised in a class. The Institute’s attitude was simple: the participants were on deputation (i.e. they were getting their salary, their seniority in service was protected, etc.) and the Institute too gave each of them a stipend of two hundred and fifty rupees (not a very bad sum at that time), so they had no business to raise such matters. There was always that veiled threat that a participant could be asked to return to his college in the middle of the course (and face the music from his employers). CIEFL’s attitude was
not really unreasonable; one who enjoys privilege has no right to ask uncomfortable questions to those who grant one that privilege.

III

It was at this Summer Institute that I first heard of CIE, which was renamed CIEFL in 1972. I went there to do my Diploma the same year, but for me the road to CIEFL did not pass through that Summer Institute. I went there for some personal reasons, having almost nothing to do with academics. I was fortunate that I could join the course that year. When I reached Hyderabad some twelve days late for the course, I was told by some participants that I had arrived too late. Professor M.V. Nadkarni, who was the Coordinator of Studies that year, helped, and I joined the course. I must not forget to mention that those days the Government of Orissa, because of DPI Das’s support, used to depute teachers of English in Orissa Education Service to do the Diploma course at CIEFL.

At CIEFL I had my first real experience of the academic institutions outside Orissa. Certain things at that Institute I really liked. Teachers came to class on time and equally importantly, left the class as soon as the bell rang. No class was cancelled. Tutorial classes were taken seriously by all concerned. Teachers were generally available for consultation in the afternoons, but the Diploma participants hardly met them. When the four of us from Orissa had some problem, we usually went to B.K. Das, who was from our state. He really looked after us. The library was good, and the librarian, L.S. Ramaiah, and his staff were very helpful. Ramaiah was the kind of librarian an institution of repute would like to have. The cleanliness of Institute was impressive; in particular, the toilets were almost clean, despite the limited water supply. The rooms in the hostel were small, but not uncomfortable and food in the mess was nothing really to complain about. We were told at regular intervals that the Diploma course was highly rated by the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Government of India and the British Council. It appeared as though the British Council was the reason inspiration for the shift to language-oriented English teaching in India. As for the British Council - that is another story, for some other day!

At the Institute I heard the expression “CIEFL method”. Nobody knew its origin, its author and even its content, and yet it was very popular among the participants. The Diploma course was good. Herel got a fairly clear idea about what it meant to teach a language (as against literature written in that language). The faculty was good. The atmosphere was positive. The members of the faculty and the senior participants doing the Research Diploma course (there were just two then) appeared quite sure of themselves and one got the impression that they considered what they were doing to be terribly important for language education in the country. They appeared to be without a care about what their counterparts in the universities thought about what they were doing.

Those were the days of open hostility between linguistics (and related areas, such as ELT) and literature. Most, by no means all (in fact some senior and well known professors of literature supported the Institute and its programmes) teachers of literature
were of the view that teaching content was far more important than teaching language skills. A well known professor of English literature of Osmania university next door had reportedly described “methods of teaching” as a subject that asked such profound questions as the following: what should be the colour of the chalk piece that the teacher must use if the board is black? Now, what looks commonplace may not be commonplace at all. Set aside the trivialization – thoroughly enjoyable, come to think of it – “methods of teaching” is not really trivial. Now, if literature teachers generally trivialized language teaching, they hated linguistics, which for them was basically about grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The attitude is not surprising - who liked grammar anyway which one learnt at school? Who, except the grammarians, could be excited about “how a sentence can become part of another sentence”, as our grammar teacher at the Institute liked to put it? And who, except, hopefully, the initiated, would be impressed with the finding that the animal systems of communication are fundamentally different from human language? Generally speaking, the literature faculty in the country had a rather unflattering view of the Institute. Even after it became a “deemed university” in 1974-75, a label that very few institutes were awarded those days and quite a few these days, some continued to say that it was essentially a teacher training institute, despite all the hype, and lacked the stature of a university.

Some participants, I knew, did think that our Institute was indeed a teacher training institute, although a sophisticated one, and felt at times somewhat embarrassed about it and concerned about themselves. In my Diploma days, CIEFL used to offer basically two courses: a Diploma course and a Research Diploma course in the teaching of English. In the Diploma course one could specialize in the teaching of English language or of English literature. As a participant in the Research diploma course, one wrote an examination and then a dissertation on an institute project under the supervision of a faculty member. One could not work on one’s own project. The Institute projects were all essentially ELT projects. In the Diploma course, almost all subjects were taught from the pedagogical point of view. In its orientation CIEFL was truly unlike a university.

There was the general impression, no doubt correct, that CIEFL was teaching English as a skill subject. Now, who would consider an institution to be a university if it taught only skills? The popular idea was that skill was merely a mechanical matter. Besides, that a skill subject may have content in the form of a body of knowledge was not something many even cared to consider, let alone accept, in the humanities departments in the universities of our country. In any case, there was never any intellectual contestation of the popular and dismissive notion of skill at CIEFL itself.

Since lovers of art consider art to be inherently superior to plumbing (a huge superstition), they often want plumbers to openly acknowledge their status of inferiority with respect to them. But a healthy society cannot afford to encourage such an attitude. I must confess that I did occasionally feel pretty uncomfortable in my first semester when some “celebrity” teacher of literature would tell us right on our face, mostly in informal conversation though, that we were doing something intellectually inferior at an institute which was anyway substandard. Incidentally, some important linguistics departments in the country did not think much of the linguistics that we were doing at our institute - the
linguistics department of Osmania University, for example. We were doing “diluted linguistics”, they said, and they were not entirely incorrect. Whatever linguistics we were doing was oriented towards just one application, namely English language teaching. So there had to be some “dilution”. The matter is really a good deal more complex, but a detailed discussion is out of place here.

In any case, although I sometimes felt uneasy, I was by no means disheartened by all these negatives. The reasons were not entirely academic. One day during our second semester we were told by the Institute faculty that the Diploma course was going to be formally recognized by the UGC as a qualification for the teachers of English at the college level. That apart, we were told that it was beginning to get noted in the country that an appreciable number of teachers of English, more often than not, did not write grammatical English. And the education ministry of the central government and the UGC had started appreciating that at least in the second language teaching-learning situation, knowledge of the literature of the relevant language would not necessarily lead to the learners’ command of that language. This was when undergraduate students in many parts of the country (especially in the North) were asking their teachers to teach English literature in their mother tongue. The general feeling among those concerned was that something needed to be done. We, the Diploma participants, were told that we had a role to play in this situation and that our future was going to be something to look forward to.

CIEFL was mandated to train the teachers of English; it was a specialized institution and the only one of its kind in the country. It was wrong to trivialize its work. And then, quite independent of all this, looking down upon a training institute merely because of its being a training institute is just not right. Somehow in our country we are not very concerned with how well we are doing what we are doing. It is not often realized that quality cannot thrive in an environment that encourages superficiality.

Incidentally, it is important to note that in 1958 (if my memory serves me right) Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru specifically observed that British English should be taught at the Institute; what he presumably implied was that American English must not be the standard to follow in India. In the sixties many of the members of the faculty had degrees and diplomas from the British Universities. In my Diploma days, Indian English was generally viewed at the Institute as substandard, although no one spoke British English.

Like in many institutions in our country, hierarchy was a fact of life at CIEFL. Perhaps the hierarchy here was a bit benign. One could, for instance, figure out the position of a member of the teaching staff in the hierarchy by simply looking at his office. These were of three kinds of office rooms: with a carpet and a single occupant, without a carpet and a single occupant and without a carpet and two occupants. The first was the room of a professor, the second, of a reader, and the third, of two lecturers. As for the participants, except for Professor R.N.Ghosh and Professor H.N.L.Shastri, both of the Methods department, no one really looked on them as colleagues, which indeed they were. Social interaction with the participants was not liked by most members of the teaching staff those days, although one or two teachers (one was Nadkarni) did once in a while play table tennis with the participants in the hostel. Things changed after 1974 after Professor
Kantak, a great scholar and teacher of English literature, joined the Institute after his retirement from M.S. University, Baroda.

At CIEFL, which was headed by Professor Ramesh Mohan, a teacher of Literature, whose contribution to the growth of the Institute is really great, a dismissive attitude towards literature was very much there. Linguists and experts in various fields of language teaching, especially the linguists, did not seem to think much of most teachers of literature and of literature teaching in our country as a whole. Some used the security of the class room to make ironical and even derogatory remarks on literature teaching in India. They saw those teachers of literature who were negative towards linguistics and language teaching as essentially a lot who mindlessly resisted new ideas and change for the better. There was much arrogance in both sides of the literature- linguistics divide – arrogance that arises from a sense of insecurity, real or worse, perceived. The concerned academics seemed unconcerned about the harm that the divide was capable of causing and in fact, already was, to the teaching of English in India and to the community of English teachers in the country.

On a more personal front the first few weeks at the Institute were not comfortable for me. That was the first time I was with colleagues from outside Orissa, and I felt diffident. I realized that I could not speak English as fluently and as freely as did quite a few in my batch, and that my pronunciation had strong regional features. In a language laboratory class my instructor (a decent, well meaning and warm hearted person who later became a friend) told me one afternoon with a benign grin that my pronunciation was substandard. Because of much that has happened since then, our attitude to the regional varieties of English has changed and only a die-hard conservative today would use the term “substandard” to label a variety. It is almost a linguistic taboo these days. I hated the language laboratory class; it was terribly boring. The Spoken English tutorial was yet another class I hated. In the lab class human interaction was confined to the participant and the instructor at the one-to-one level for a minute or two, but in the tutorial class fifteen of my batch mates heard me and concluded that my pronunciation was unsatisfactory. Professor Bansal, an excellent teacher, was a bit harsh (he was not an unkind man, only a no-nonsense teacher) on those whose pronunciation was distinctly regional and did not mince words to express his displeasure. During those days at CIEFL, GIE (General Indian English, which in that particular description was not very different from RP) was considered to be the model to be emulated by the teachers of English, and one was encouraged to feel embarrassed if one’s pronunciation was “unacceptable”. I was very much conscious of my unsatisfactory pronunciation and on that account felt uncomfortable in the company of those of my batch mates whose pronunciation was considered good in the Institute circles.

As for the importance given to spoken English at the Institute, some of us thought it was unjustified. Some in the faculty thought so too, but none of them aired his views in public. Except Professor K. Subramaniam, who taught literature and taught us “written English”. He would openly say that so much emphasis on spoken English was just crazy. When he said “fanatician”, a word he had created, everyone knew who at the Institute he was targeting. Thirty eight years have passed since I did my Diploma, and today I believe
that the Institute was not entirely wrong in emphasizing spoken English. What was wrong was that spoken English was given the status of an educational and social value.

There was something else that was not right too. The spoken English course was about phonetic transcription, pronunciation of the vowel and the consonant sounds of English in isolation and in the relevant words, a bit about stress, and a bare mention of intonation and tone group. But intelligibility is also a matter of pitch, loudness, and clarity of delivery and non-phonological factors, such as awareness of the context of utterance in the comprehensive sense of the word “context”, among others. A course on spoken English arguably need not include such non-phonological factors, but at the same time it must be recognized that these could give a proper perspective to the course. Too much stress on the so-called “correct” pronunciation of individual sounds is pointless. However, for the inadequacies of the course I would consider the language pedagogy based on structural linguistics responsible rather than Bansal, the course instructor, who merely implemented it.

During those first four months of the Diploma course I learnt many useful things: how to design a syllabus, how to prepare supplementary teaching materials to teach comprehension, composition, grammar, vocabulary, etc., how to make a question paper, how to evaluate student performance in a test, among others. As a teacher of English for about seven years I had made several question papers and had evaluated hundreds of answer scripts, but had never thought that there was a rich, specialized body of knowledge on testing. In the course on methods, the lecture method was squarely condemned and the unsuitability of large classes was repeatedly emphasized. We were taught how to motivate a class, the conditions under which learning took place, etc. Most of us did not find much of what we learnt in this course either interesting or useful.

The entire criticism of the lecture method and of the large class was misplaced because it did not take into consideration the realities of the teaching situation at the college level. Almost all my batch mates were teaching English at the BA, BA (Hons.) and MA levels. None was teaching language, and back in their respective institutions, they were unlikely to do so either. Lecture method and large class, etc. were obviously unsuitable for language teaching but if one was going to teach literature, then the same would not be as unsuitable. Then, in Orissa and hopefully elsewhere too, there was the tutorial class system. The class size was small, and was quite suitable for teaching language.

The second part of the Diploma course, we were told, had been restructured to some extent that year. We were to choose Language Teaching or Literature Teaching for “specialization”. Nadkarni advised me to choose the former. I should look upon the Diploma course as an opportunity to learn something different, he said, since back in my job, I would continue to teach literature. Incidentally, it was because of him that I got interested in generative linguistics. In the first semester he taught us an introductory course in linguistics. It was one course that was not pedagogically-oriented, and was the richest in terms of content. Nadkarni was an excellent teacher but I didn’t find the subject particularly interesting - till the last three lectures which were on transformational generative (TG) grammar. We were taught some basics of this grammar, and in one of
these lectures Nadkarni mentioned rather casually that according to that theory all languages are really identical in structure and that their structural differences are only superficial. During those months at CIEFL, I had come across no idea that was even remotely as refreshing and exciting as this. I wanted to know at least a little more.

In the second semester I wrote a term paper on the testing of literature at the college level and my supervisor was R.N.Ghosh, an excellent scholar and a wonderful human being. We had many useful discussions on the project. He encouraged me a lot; till then no participant had worked on the testing of literature at the Institute, he told me. My project report was liked by Ghosh and Professor Jacob Tharu who had just joined the Institute. In 1974 I was offered a lectureship in the department of Testing and Evaluation of the Institute, which Tharu was heading, and I think this project was an important reason for my getting that job. For some personal reasons I could not accept that offer.

Many of us knew that we would not be able to implement what we learnt at CIEFL for many years to come and we were not likely to be the agents of change in English language teaching in our places of work. We were not going to make, in the foreseeable future, question papers at a level of some significance and design syllabuses. We were not going to prepare supplementary teaching materials because facilities for the same were unavailable to us at our respective places of work. Besides, that notion did not exist. We also knew we would continue to lecture to classes of 120 students.

There was an activity called “practice teaching” which was part of the Diploma course and which many of us regarded as a weekly nuisance. Accompanied by an instructor, a group of about twelve of us would go in the rickety and undependable Institute bus to some colleges in the city (where we were unwelcome) for practice teaching. The participants were expected to apply in the English class room what they had learnt about class room teaching at the Institute. Interestingly, during my stay there, I did not see any teacher of CIEFL giving a model demonstration of what they were teaching us about language teaching for our benefit.

In the opinion of many who controlled the teaching of English in India in the seventies and the eighties, those trained at CIEFL were no better teachers than those who were not. So their conclusion was that the training was useless, as the Institute itself. It was unfortunate; it was never appreciated that whereas CIEFL trained college teachers to teach language, they went back to their respective institutions to teach literature. Besides, the infrastructural facilities needed for the teaching of English as language hardly existed there. As for CIEFL, it failed to take serious note of these limitations and made tall claims for their courses. As a result of all these, the Diploma course did not often get due recognition in the community of English teachers.

The contribution of the Diploma participants came in a different form. Because of the recommendations of UGC, a few post-graduate departments of English in the country started optional special papers in the mid seventies in linguists and English language teaching. It is the diploma and the certificate course (a one semester version of the Diploma course) participants at CIEFL who taught these courses. In Orissa, Professors
D.K. Ray, M. Das, J.K. Chand, B.K. Tripathy and some others taught these special papers. In this context Professor Fakruddin Khan deserves mention. I do not know whether he had done any course at CIEFL, but he knew what language teaching was about. My impression is that Orissa did not make full use of this talented teacher.

It would be incorrect for a participant to leave the topic of CIEFL without mentioning the hostel mess, and Swami, the chief cook, under whose dictatorship worked Yadgiri, Salim, Dasrath and two or three more youngsters. The food was not something to complain about, but in our society one does not often say a nice word about hostel food lest others draw unflattering inferences about one’s food at home. I had \textit{rajma} (a lentil), and \textit{palak paneer taloo palak} (\textit{palak} paste and a few pieces of potatoes thrown into it) for the first time in life. I liked \textit{rajma}. On Saturdays at lunch we had \textit{bada khana} (big meal), with \textit{puris}, mashed potatoes, \textit{vegetable biryani}, \textit{chola} some \textit{khir}. I never liked \textit{bada khana}. There was no evening tea and no dinner on Saturdays. I do not remember where I went for dinner, but I do remember where Swami spent the evening. He went to the Ganesh temple near Secunderabad railway station, and some of us gave him a little money to do puja for us there.

Debabrata Mishra, a serious but not a dry academic and a generous person, was my batch mate at CIEFL. He had some realistic ideas about how to improve language teaching, and I do not know whether he got the opportunity in Orissa to implement some of those. When his wife joined him in the second semester of the Diploma course, he shifted to a rented accommodation close by. They were wonderful hosts and used to invite us – Jugal Kishore Chand, Rankanath Hota and me - frequently for food, especially fish fry. It was almost always \textit{rohu} fish. At that time people of Hyderabad probably did not like \textit{rohu}, so it was one of the cheapest fish available in the market. For us, \textit{rohu} is the king among fish. We really had a wonderful time.

\textbf{IV}

On return from CIEFL I joined Ravenshaw College. I was a student there and it was a privilege for me to join its teaching staff. I was happy. It was mid-April already and there was just about a month and a half of MA teaching left. I was asked to teach linguistics to the final year MA students. I was to take over from Sarbeswar Dash, who was the head of the department then. Interestingly at that time linguistics was taught by P.K.Pati at Sambalpur University and by Sarbeswar Dash at Ravenshaw College, both very senior and well-known teachers of literature. That had given linguistics importance in my state.

I enjoyed teaching linguistics. I taught a class of about forty students, and there were quite a few in the class who were keenly interested in the subject. That was the last batch I taught in Orissa as an employee of the state government. After the summer vacation, in August (73), I went back to CIEFL for a year to do my Research Diploma. Professor N.Krishnaswamy wanted me to spend one more year at CIEFL before returning to EM Forster on whom I had just begun working for my PhD degree. Nadkarni too was quite encouraging in this regard. In any case, I could go back to CIEFL for two other persons to whom I am grateful. Posted to a temporary post (although I was a permanent
employee), whose salary was held up every year from February to July, I did not have money that summer to go to CIEFL to attend the interview for admission to the Research Diploma course. A friend of my college days, Mishra, (I am ashamed that I cannot recall his first name now), about three years my junior, who was working with State Bank of India (SBI), lent me hundred and fifty rupees to go to Hyderabad. If after my selection I could join the course, it was because of B.K.Das’s help. In this context, I must say that I am grateful to Shri H.N.Das Mohapatra, the then Secretary of Education, Government of Orissa.

I stayed on there for three wonderful years for my Research Diploma and PhD, but since what I did was unconnected with the teaching of English except very superficially, I do not want to say anything about these years here. In November 1976 I was relieved from OES to join the Post Graduate Centre of JNU at Imphal as Associate Professor. I got a British Council fellowship that same year but my well wishers at CIEFL advised me to choose the job at Imphal. I taught at Imphal for three semesters and taught Linguistics, English Language teaching, Shakespearean comedy, Eighteenth Century Prose and Irish drama. I left the JNU Centre to join the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) College at Ajmer as Reader. After about two months there, I joined IIT Kanpur.

V

At IIT Kanpur there was no “ground floor”, one said “first floor” instead, and one heard about “guys”, not “blokes” or “chaps”; when in those early days there a student told me quite casually that her parents were looking for a guy for her, the language and the matter-of-factness of her tone almost threw me off my chair. There were no “teachers” at IIT Kanpur, there were “course instructors”. There were “supervisors”, no research “guides”. Many members of the faculty cycled to office and a few came walking. Many used shoulder bags. There was some informality in the working of the Institute although personal relationships in general were rather formal. It was not unusual for students to behave like strangers with their former instructor once the course was over. PhD from US was more highly valued than PhD from Europe, and PhD from India, unless from Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore or an IIT, in particular, IIT Kanpur, was lowly valued. PhD from CIEFL! What was that! I could read it in the eyes of quite a few colleagues I was introduced to in my first two or three weeks there. These were among my first impressions. At the same time I thought that in many ways it was clearly an excellent place to work in. The faculty enjoyed considerable academic freedom and there was an interdisciplinary environment in the Institute. Even today, many of my close friends are from there and I gained so much, so very much, at the Institute in intellectual terms. But that story can wait.

It was at IIT Kanpur that I taught English as language for the first time. And considering the Indian realities, the situation for language teaching was close to ideal there. The students knew that they had to have a reasonably good command of English to make the best use of education there, and the faculty of the Institute was persuaded that mere exposure to the best of English literature would not improve a student’s competence
in English. By a rule of the Academic Senate of the Institute, the number of students in the English language course was restricted to thirty. If there were, say, ninety students chosen to do the English course, then they were placed in three sections, which were taught by three different faculty members. One of those three instructors was the course-in-charge. Text books were chosen by the course-in-charge, and the instructors prepared teaching materials in case they did not find the material available suitable. We were six members of the faculty in the English Group (which was part of the department of Humanities and Social Sciences), and three of us had specialized in linguistics and three in literature and those of us who had PhD degree in English-Linguistics / Linguistics, had our basic (i.e., MA) degree in English. Five of us during our post-MA period had done one or more courses in Applied Linguistics / English Language Teaching. (Incidentally, the PhD programme in English was so designed that during the course work every doctoral student had to do a course in Applied Linguistics with special emphasis on English Language Teaching, irrespective of whether he or she was enrolled in the Linguistics or the Literature stream.) The PhD scholars assisted the faculty in the correction of the tutorial work and home assignments. A few senior scholars occasionally taught tutorial classes too.

There was an additional facility for the first year student to make use of if he or she wanted to improve his or her English. The Counseling Service Unit of the Institute provided for additional teaching of English in the evenings. We didn’t teach those classes, but those who did, sometimes worked in coordination with those of us who were teaching the English course that semester. There was a scope for improvement in that arrangement, but the important thing was that there was such a facility available in the campus itself.

At IIT Kanpur English was compulsory for those who, on the basis of a diagnostic test, were found to need English. Based on the nature of their need, they were divided into two groups. One of these, the much larger one, would do the course in one semester, and the other (the slow-paced, SP group), in two. We tried to restrict the number of students in the latter group to fifteen. The English diagnostic test was obligatory for every student admitted to the undergraduate programmes. Incidentally, the Orientation Programme for the entrants started with the English diagnostic test.

In the mid-eighties, discontent surfaced over the whole idea of the slow paced programme. The students in the SP course felt that it gave them a humiliating label. It was not merely a matter of the name of the programme: Slow Paced. It was about having to complete the language requirement in two semesters rather than one. That the SP programme was for their good did not matter to them. Whatever be the positives of the course, the perception issue could not be ignored. Had I not felt uncomfortable when placed in the Remedial Spoken English group at CIEFL?

During those days English for Special Purposes (ESP) was a fairly new idea and quite popular among our ELT specialists: the language course for the students of engineering should be different from the language course for the students of management or of medicine. The text books for the students of engineering would contain pieces on science
and engineering so that they learnt the special vocabulary and the syntax of technical writing. As an idea it appeared persuasive but when implemented, the outcome was disappointing. By and large the ESP text books contained useful language exercises but invariably the content was from boring to terribly boring. Besides, the student of engineering would learn his technical vocabulary in the engineering classes, and as for syntax, those few syntactic patterns that were frequently used in technical writing were also used in non-technical writing; for example, the passive or the nominalization construction. In any case, among those that impede learning most are, I am convinced, (a) boring teaching materials and (b) rank bad teaching. In fact, often bad teaching is a consequence of dull teaching materials.

For obvious reasons it is difficult for an English teacher to teach technical words to students of technology. Exponents of ESP often say that the English teacher today has to be familiar with the terminology of many disciplines. It is one of the most hilarious things I have ever heard. Sometimes it is argued that materials must be learner-oriented, not teacher-oriented, which sounds reasonable but often, especially in the ESP context, it is used as an argument in defence of utterly uninteresting texts. Students would hardly find dull stuff motivating to read. A piece on the design of a bicycle in a text book for students of technology, which I had the misfortune to teach, is a case in point. I have often thought that ESP is a particularly telling illustration of that memorable proverb: the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Yet another idea I was never comfortable with was the following: in language teaching, teaching of content should be de-emphasized. At least at the higher levels, I do not consider separation between content and form desirable. Teaching materials and classroom teaching become awfully tedious. Besides, at this stage values like understanding of and empathy for the other, accommodation of the other, who may have a different world view, etc. have to be inculcated in the student, and the English course can make a valuable contribution in this respect. In my English language classes, especially in the Preparatory course classes (where there was no prescribed text book to teach), social and political issues of relevance (job reservation, secular politics, educational and health problems of rural children, English as medium of instruction in technical education, coaching classes for entrance examinations, etc.) were the topics for composition and oral presentation. My students enjoyed articulating their views on such topics. The language part was not neglected; it was never forgotten that the main aim of the course was to improve the students’ performance in English.

When I was course-in-charge, I included in the course stories (popular stories of well known writers) for detailed study and sometimes a novel for non-detailed study: Animal Farm, Things Fall Apart, Swami and Friends, etc. In the Preparatory English class which comprised students who were not yet students of the IITs and who came from the deprived sections of the society, I often used stories by Indian writers, pieces from newspapers, short reports on news magazines on a variety of themes etc. to teach English. My students enjoyed working on these.
We had a good language laboratory and had some really good audio-visual material produced by BBC, among others. Through these we taught listening comprehension and exposed our students to British and American English. As for Indian English, there was no need to use the language laboratory since we all spoke Indian English in all class rooms and outside. Thus the students were exposed to three varieties of English. As far as improving the spoken English of the students was concerned, I did not think language laboratory was really useful. Instead I set aside a class hour a week for that. Every student had to speak on something he was familiar with for one or two minutes and interact with fellow students in the class. I used to encourage the Slow Paced course students to come to my office in the evenings to talk to me about anything they felt like. I would set aside half an hour for this twice a week, but only a very few came.

In sum, when I had the opportunity to teach language, I relied more on my experience as a teacher of English than by the recommended practices which had theoretical (theories of whatever merit) support. I was aware that despite thousands of years of practice and reflections, and decades of modern scientific research, language learning has still remained more or less a mystery in the sense that whatever little we think we know about it can hardly provide a usable method of teaching. However it does not mean that the knowledge of the existing pedagogical practices and their theoretical bases was of no use to me. After all, one does not think or work in a vacuum.

At IIT Kanpur about forty percent of my work was teaching English; there was so much else to do: courses in linguistics to teach, graduate students to interact with professionally, my own research, projects of interdisciplinary orientation to work on, administrative work to do at the departmental and Institute levels, among others. Moreover, I was not doing research or supervising research on language teaching / learning. Teaching English is a very demanding activity; as is well known, one has to select material from various sources to teach, edit them if necessary, make them available to the class, prepare exercises of various kinds, correct class work and sometimes home work, give time to the students outside the class hours, etc. This was why at least one IIT outsourced the teaching of English. The literature and linguistics faculty there thought that it was eating too much into their time. At IIT Kanpur we thought that outsiders could hardly be as concerned about our students as us.

Teaching English can be frustrating. When a student makes, say, an agreement mistake in his written performance (performance that is not spontaneous), the instructor doesn’t know what to do: draw his attention to the errors, explain the relevant rules, give practice, etc., the same that his teacher at school surely had done umpteen times? It is indeed frustrating to see that more often than not a student’s performance in English at the entry and exit levels of the language course is not substantially different. It is a humbling experience for the teacher to realize that he does not know how to help. But the consolation is or should be that no one knows how language learning takes place.

While on my days at IIT Kanpur, I must mention about a sweet, old man whose name I never knew. My philosopher friend Professor Nirmalangshu Mukherji and I called him “Baba” (father). At six thirty in the morning we often went to his small, dingy, apology
for a stall to have hot samosas and tea. He welcomed us with a smile that made our day. He is no more but his smile still lingers in my memory and gives me joy. Some colleagues warned us that it was not a clean place, but then there was Achla Raina’s classic: as for samosas, the dirtier, the tastier.

VI

During the last twenty years, whenever I got an appropriate forum, I have drawn attention to the problem of what I call the “English divide” in our country. English is rightly viewed in India as the language of opportunity; therefore, “English divide” is indeed an opportunity divide, an economic divide, a societal divide. It is no exaggeration to say that our school education is in poor shape. As for college education, the situation does not seem to be very encouraging either. I am told MOUs are being signed with prestigious universities and institutions by my state government but the faculty vacancies are not being filled. This can hardly improve matters. Starting English at Class II or III without competent teachers and suitable texts would not lead to the learning of English in some meaningful sense. Throughout the state (and in fact, the country) English-medium schools under private management would proliferate wildly which would be beyond the reach of the most, and the logic of the situation leads to the conclusion that in most of these schools bad English is more likely to be taught and learnt.

A (PhD) researcher sought some information from the organizers about a workshop he wanted to attend, and this is what he emailed: “My dear professor please I will attend that workshop please accommodation and registration fee how many give some information”. One is aware that in an email text spelling and grammatical requirements are relaxed, but such relaxations do not legitimize the above. I am totally skeptical that with the command of English demonstrated by the above, one would really find the doors of opportunity open.

Now is there something that we, the teachers of English at the higher level, can do? The problem is complex and societal, and individual initiative or that of a group may not amount to much. But there cannot be an argument for doing nothing, for indifference. At the very least let us reject the attitude that teaching language is an inferior activity, not worthy of teachers at the best institutes and universities. Something that empowers the marginalized simply cannot be so. Furthermore, there are already too many divides in our country, so let us commit ourselves to fight yet another divide; we will then find a way to make a difference, however small. In difficult situations the squirrel in the Ramayana must be our guide.

Old men tend to be talkative, especially those who have been teachers. Perhaps language teachers? I do not know. Whatever it is, it’s time for me to stop.

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