

## Transcending the Course Outline

*A. Ashutosh Das Gupta*

### 1. Incidental English

I still don't know what had happened to me that fateful or, may be I should say that blessed late afternoon – I felt myself in a sort of listless spirit and it was with a thoroughly distracted mind that I entered my class. It was in Bangna campus, room SG 408; the window on the sidewall overlooked a patch of silvery-blue sky and in-between were interrupting reminders of imposing trees standing still, and I don't know why they were looking detached. A dreary feeling crossed me, for it was 3.30 and the class would give over at 5. There's always a haunting urgency at this hour to finish off the day's business fast and make even a faster headlong dash to catch the earliest coach back to Huamark campus of the university.

It was English IV class. Suddenly, the girl sitting in front held out both her hands in order to attract my attention to her palms displaying a beautiful, artistic design with 'Mehandi', henna (famous Indian herbal leaves). Being myself an Indian – how could I ignore 'Mehandi', (henna)? Especially during weddings the girls would deck their palms with the reddish-brown hue of 'Mehandi', (henna) leaves. This particular Thai girl I'm talking of, is full of enthusiasm and compassion as well as pleasantly gutsy with me. What took me by surprise was how a Thai girl suddenly got enamoured of this curious 'Mehandi', (henna) color and even more surprising was the fact where she got this typical Indian artistry on her palms. Well, the whole thing eventually led to an animated conversation between us loud enough for others to hear. At the end it became clear she had gone briefly to New Delhi, India to attend her cousin's wedding ceremony with one Indian guy. It's another part of the saga how both met each other in the USA and happened to fall in love. The boy's father didn't mind the two cultures blending but insisted on Indian ceremonies according to Hindu custom back home in New Delhi. The same girl further excitedly narrated how she managed to go to see the monumental legend of love 'The Taj Mahal' in Agra.

The whole situation was charged with emotion: love, wedding, blending of two cultures, the Taj Mehal, the girl in my class visiting New Delhi, India, savouring the famed succulent Indian sweet 'Ras Malai' as she told me. I hardly could resist my temptation of showering her with queries in order to fathom her feelings, emotional responses and the impact the whole episode had on her particularly for the fact how she would have felt as a Thai girl in the midst of typical Indian wedding environment. I don't quite remember what I could accomplish in teaching in that class but I'm sure I must have done that part briefly, and as a customary ritual.



Whatever be the situation – after the class it made me realise the role ‘Incidental English’ can play in teaching the language without the jaded thump of the cruel requirements of the course outline day in and day out. After all, what use is all that of the straitjacket if a student cannot communicate reasonably well both in speech and writing?

## 2. The Class, the ambience

There’s no dearth of tactical ploys to employ if I want to keep the class under my thumb – the most powerful being the attitude, ‘I’m an illustrious pundit of English and you know nothing about English – absolutely nothing – you’re a cypher? Thai students already view teachers with awe and respect, and adopting any ploys of this sort will further widen the sense of alienation between the teacher and the student. Further it would rob them of whatever confidence they might have gained over time.

What do I want the class to look like? I often feel psychologically handicapped because students seem to get into the class with an icy, preoccupied mind as to what they’re going to receive in terms of purely concrete course outline standards forgetting the basic truth it’s a language class, a foreign language at that. For my professional comfort – well, I might prefer a class without the least sign of animation – eerie silence so to say pervading everywhere, students looking up to me for some great lesson of the day and I’m likely to feel I’m like a monarch over all that I survey. Absolute nonsense! If it really were so, it means I’ve already written off any probable chances of communication or interactions between myself and the students. Where’s that sense of involvement or participation so essential to language teaching? Whatever we may talk on improving the standard of teaching – specifically a dynamic foreign language like English, we cannot possibly forget the fact that everything eventually boils down to motivation. Participation, a certain amount of visible involvement, interaction, communication are just natural steps to accentuate and boost motivation. I personally would like the class to be informal where I might expect a lot more incidental English and a lot more freedom for students to speak out. Incidental English is one potent way to establish an emotional tie between the teacher and the pupil.

What’s needed is just to transcend the prosaic surface of the course outline or the syllabus for a while. A free flow of feelings and emotions fill the classroom air; of course, the initiative should come from the side of the teacher but, surprisingly in my case it often came from students. At times, in a bid to transform the classroom atmosphere I had to endure a cheerful, vibrant animation even verging on what we proverbially call ‘noise’ and perhaps bringing in another pedagogical accusation of lack of class control. However, such a situation isn’t likely to last longer.

## 3. The essential link with English language seems to be missing

The entire perspective toward English language teaching calls for a change – a change in our attitude. Reality number one is, it’s a foreign language for Thai students. So, the fundamental question that should arise is, how to make the language pleasantly acceptable along with the associated culture, the society, the tone, the atmosphere, the quintessential ways emotional responses emerge, implications of various intonation patterns. First and foremost, therefore, we need to create a taste for the language



– enjoyment and emotional tie with the language should precede all other considerations. Impromptu dialogues in class, or may be making students listen to already planned, taped dialogues in English, making students watch one-act plays in English or documentary movies are some of the ways toward establishing that essential link. British Council library can be very resourceful for getting appropriate materials in this direction.

#### 4. Generation Gap

It would be height of our professional hollowness if we expect the modern kids to be taught the way we were taught quarter of a century or half ago. The backdrop of culture, continent and the lyrical mood of the times – everything seemed to have a poetical impression then. The boat, the tranquil waters of the river, the woods, the tender moonlight, William Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' reaping and singing, singing and reaping all by herself will not cast a magic spell on the young any more.

Even noticeable is the fact how the scene of English language is turning increasingly hip day by day – delightfully interspersed with a host of American and British informal words and slangs topping it all off with a dash of some colloquialism. Use of words under labels of officialise or formal have extremely restricted contexts today while poetic or literary words are perhaps conveniently reserved for the very romantic or may be for some crazy, comic effects. All these stark facts make me realise how challenging it's getting – I mean, the job of the modern-day English Teacher.

Talk about latest fashion, nifty little gadgets, internet gaming, hip restaurant, Britney Spears' 48-hour-long married life and those young students, the audience will lap up all the stories in no time. Isn't generation gap getting wider? I must eat the humble pie and say it's much more than generation gap – it's virtual communication gap. In this high-tech era I've got to know what music, what movies, what fashion appeal to my young students, and also the list of things or actions they consider 'cool'.

#### 5. Extensive reading needs to be encouraged

Lack of reading habit can't be cited a peculiar phenomenon to be found only in Thailand – it's on the decline everywhere – a world-wide reality so to say. And it requires no in-depth analysis to trace the causes. Too many technological and electronic distractions have bedevilled the situation. Notwithstanding this dismal trend – we can never underestimate the immense potentiality of reading habit in acquiring a foreign language. Some High Schools have the system of classroom libraries and normally once a week the library class is conducted by the English Teacher during which he/she allows students to pick their choices and engage in silent reading. Students are also allowed to borrow books if they so desire. The teacher not only maintains such a classroom library but is also responsible for guiding and inspiring students. The teacher needs to know their likes, their preferences and likewise furnish similar stock of books. Looking at the popularity of cartoon books we may select books which have lots of illustrations, drawings or pictures. Even fashion magazines can be included. Interesting storybooks based on wide-ranging choices – I mean simplified versions of fiction need to be included. This sort of system can also be adapted to the university level. But, if extensive reading is thrust on students for a grading assessment it might dampen their spirit.



## 6. Basic grammar can't be ignored

Despite enormous changes in English language usages, there's still a need of some form of grammar. When basic grammar and syntax become topsy turvy, the sentences can take on multiple meanings and interpretations eventually zeroing in on sheer confusion. It's a different issue altogether as to what to teach and how to teach. Whether one teaches basic rules through structural patterns or situations and contexts or through functional implications or on communicative grammar level it doesn't really matter as long as students are able to understand and absorb all that into their language use. But, it's necessary. If students produce the same kind of language mistakes each time they come up with a writing – in what way further writing assignments become significant? Therefore, after each writing work I would suggest some kind of 'Remedial Grammar Exercise' in the class based on the types of mistakes students are found to be prone to. It shouldn't be a serious loss of classes if only a few classes are sacrificed for this great and most essential cause.

## Conclusion

Transcending the course outline in no way means neglecting or shirking one's responsibilities toward what needs to be taught.

A. Das Gupta had his education in India and the UK. After finishing his M.A in English and Bachelor's degree in Education (B.Ed) he completed Post Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of English (PGCTE) from Hyderabad CIEFL, India and in 1984 he obtained his diploma in TEFL from Trinity College, London University.