

An Insight Into the Learning Process of English as a Foreign Language.

(Based purely on personal experiences)

by A. Ashutosh Dasgupta

Is it my sub-conscious mind which Sigmund Freud expounded on the exponential skepticism about the declining standard in acquiring English Language Skills worldwide—I do not have a clear answer but, one annoying and challenging experience of my past life suddenly crossed my mind as I was heading toward CAO Building, Suvarnabhumi Campus on my routine journey for a scheduled English Teaching class. This, apparently an insignificant experience at a job interview for a teaching position in a private High School in Bihar State of India, my native country almost half a century ago, triggered off a cascade of thoughts into the mystery of the learning process of a foreign language. One awfully cut and dried task that was given to me was to find the main clause in an unusually long sentence running into several lines filling more than half-the big, hanging, old-style blackboard. Initial reaction was one of shock and horror, whatever the outcome. Approach those days was primarily one of traditional grammar famously that of Newfield's. And the teachers were stern, demanding and ruthlessly bossy. Amid all this gloom was a silver lining—there were poems, short stories, fiction, essays, etc. as well and all teachers were not as boring as some self-professed grammar teachers. Except for a few basics of grammar, the rest fell flat on me simply because I wasn't interested in everything that was being taught in those days including definitions and complicated intricacies of grammar with-heavy-sounding titles.

Another related fragment of my experience goes to CIEFL (Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages), Hyderabad, India while doing my PGCTE (Post-graduate certificate of Teaching of English). Amid several exam subjects, three of them were extremely testing and intriguing such as Linguistics, grammar and Literature. There was a massive dose of Chomsky as well. It remains still a bit of an enigma for me as to why some of my colleagues fared miserably at one particular literature writing assignment despite the fact that they consistently scored much higher grades at Linguistics and grammar. The assignment involved a sizeable portion out of one of S.T. Coleridge's mystery poems - the name forgotten by now. In sharp contrast to my colleagues, my scores were higher. In general I would fare just moderately at linguistics and grammar with some occasional flashes of higher scores depending on my interest and concentration. I am quoting this not as an act of self-bragging but intuitively it reveals to me now that if something can stimulate imagination, the results can be optimistically positive, particularly during the formative stages of learning a foreign language. Introspectively I have to accept a profound influence that reading had on me - awakening in me a certain taste of beauty, culture, insights and emotions surrounding human-relationships and what essentially lends authenticity to the language and its myriad expressions. Especially I would accept the impact of Novels in the course of changing periods over time, unraveling a whole range how society and thinking reflect changes. To me, enjoyment or savoring of this taste kindles imagination and also offers language learning motivation. Evidently, looking around at this fast changing world, one has to accept a perceived lack of reading urge among students struggling

to absorb the English language. Obviously, there are adverse influences in the environment—whether it be the Internet, or any other digital gadgets, or a change in attitude showing a dismal lack of finer sensibility, whatever. Business interests and ambitions too seem to dominate the world scene, and have even sneaked into human relationships. In this changing ambience, learning a foreign language definitely is receiving a continual setback.

I cannot think of a language detached from its cultural link. Without a taste of tone, culture and all kinds of typical expressions associated with varying situations, teaching a language can become as dull and barren as doing a post mortem on a corpse. Religion too should be included as an integral part of culture. 'The Lord is My Shepherd,' the line from a Christian hymn still rings into my ears. In one senior Cambridge School (as they called it in those days) in India, at age 24-25 I started my teaching career in one such school named Bishop Westcott Boys' School chapel as it was mandatory for teachers. I still remember with some nostalgia the chapel service every morning before going off to classes. Hymns in particular would inspire and fill me with inexplicable joy and a sense of depth into the mysteries of life. Without analytically probing various methodologies of learning a foreign language such as the effectiveness of Direct Method or any other I would simply put forward the fact that listening to different hymns each tranquil morning did provide me with a sense of enjoyment – almost a bliss and unconsciously I was being drawn closer and closer to the language. I now understand why Mahatma Gandhi admitted the profound influence that the Bible had on him and how he had perfected writing of English by regularly reading the Bible – Mahatma Gandhi's rendering of English prose is considered one of the best examples the world has ever seen—simple yet rhythmically moving prose style. I can now understand why students, genuinely wanting to acquire the language habit, show a far greater preference for teachers who are Native Speakers. Surely they are admirably suited to – the real, original and authentic sound of English and to that sound is connected the whole range of tones reflecting the flavour of actual culture. I do not mean Asian teachers are absolutely flawed contacts or turn out to be much less enjoyable if brought up in a standard sense with appropriate educational levels, literary achievements, personality background and other interests. An appreciable number of such teachers, and specialists can very well be seen in Canada, the US, Hong Kong, Singapore and in other parts of Asia. Countries that are financially sound still go for Native Speakers for example, Japan, China, some parts of Arabian countries, etc.

Decades ago, young boys and girls were given poems and stories to enjoy reading, fathom their depth stories to enjoy reading, fathom their depth so as to make them appreciate the finer aspect of life. As a result, their urge for reading was consistently kindled – a sharp contrast to modern times.

As the world is moving toward a new direction I cannot deny the importance of trade and commerce, and the emergence of a completely new genre of English called Business English where precision and accuracy plays a vital role. One needs to strive for being informative, analytical, to the formats, and the related lexicon. Such a requirement may suit a student who is already advanced.

My final take on the issue is simply the fact of my realization that a student probably begins to learn English quicker when he is given a chance to enjoy the language with the essential input into its tone, taste and culture. This is particularly needed at the beginning stage with young learners. To be able to arouse a passion for enjoyment and learning, I certainly would advocate for a curriculum that includes creative works of English literature—short stories, poems, fiction, etc. There has to be lots of opportunities as well for listening to authentic English over cassettes, CD's, movies, etc. — I mean both audio and visual with free and friendly interactions between the teacher and the learners in or outside the classroom.

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
