

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN SRI LANKA**

In the summer of 2007, I applied for a Fulbright grant to teach a course in a Sri Lankan university on the relationship between major American literary works and social, political and economic issues. When I arrived at Peradeniya University at the beginning of January 2009, I immediately learned that what the members of the English faculty hoped I would concentrate on instead was to teach their students how to speak and write better English. As they explained to me, the official presumption is that a Sri Lankan university graduate with the Special B.A. Degree in English is in fact truly fluent in English, but in reality some are not. The idea was that, with my background as a writer and teacher of writing, together with my native fluency in English and some experience in learning other languages, I might be an appropriate teacher in this context.

I began teaching weekly classes on English grammar, style and composition for the second-, third- and fourth-year students who are studying for the Special B.A. Degree in English (as opposed to the General B.A. Degree, for which students do less English but spend more time in other disciplines). After the first month, I also started a weekly lecture for first-year students, who have not yet chosen a degree path but from whom the next batch of Special English B.A. Degree candidates will come. More recently, I have also begun a series of similar lectures for the Economics Department, when it was discovered fairly quickly that, back home at the University of Massachusetts, it is in fact the Economics Department that employs me to teach writing. (See "Writing Across the Curriculum," below.)

### **Taxonomy**

Right away, it's important to distinguish between two kinds of learning English, and to recognize the need to pursue both of these at a Sri Lankan university, whether for English majors or for students in any other discipline in which English is expected

to be the medium of instruction. One is what we generally call ESL – English as a Second Language. Yes, most students at Peradeniya, like much of the rest of Sri Lanka's population, continue to approach English not as their mother tongue but as the international language it is useful to learn. A few of my students at Peradeniya are 100 percent fluent in English, and others are very strong. Many, however, as their native professors here have observed, make ESL errors in their English, even though they are in general intelligent people and academically motivated. While some Peradeniya English students would score high enough on the TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language) to gain acceptance to a postgraduate program in the U.K. or the U.S.A. should they entertain such goals, others would not, and they therefore need further work.

Note that I avoid calling this additional attention to English language skills "remedial." I think it is important to avoid regarding the teaching of English to Sri Lankan (or Indian, or Nepalese, or Pakistani) university students as a process of remedying a defect. Rather, it is, and should be understood as, part of the natural process of intellectual and verbal growth in which any globally oriented seeker of knowledge must be engaged.

From the outset, I have also assumed that a second kind of learning English is equally part of my job at Peradeniya, perhaps more so. In this regard, the task of an English-speaking university professor here in Sri Lanka is the same as at the University of Massachusetts, my home university; namely, to provide greater and more varied practice in writing as a way for students to become more skilled at using the English they already know, in order to express themselves better and to delve more deeply into their major subject. As research and experience have shown, this enhanced practice in writing enables students to learn more about the literature and language history they are studying in their other classes. The same principle applies in any other discipline, from archaeology to economics to zoology.

To summarize more simply what it means to raise the standard of English higher, these students need to know that the word "discuss" is not followed by the preposition "about"—"We talked about the problem," but "We discussed the problem"—and they also need to know that if they spend more time writing informally as well as formally about social commentary in *The Great Gatsby* or Marxian interpretations of Shakespeare, they will come to a deeper intellectual grasp of those subjects than if they only sit an examination on these topics at the semester's end.

### Practice

Although not particularly trained as an ESL teacher, I have previous experience in this area, including long ago in the Peace Corps in Nepal and later in a technical university in France. But being a pure ESL teacher at Peradeniya is the job of local instructors who are trained in this specialized practice, while I suggest that the visiting American (British, Canadian, Australian...) English scholar's job is to address, ad hoc, the particular persistent problems in these students' written English. By far the two biggest problems that show up over and over in their written English are **preposition** use and verb **tenses**. Examples of errors:

- My father goes to his office at the weekend.
- They cured the disease by some strong medicine.
- He is living here since 1998.
- When I have finished writing my essay, I was turning it in to my professor.

The approach we take to these problems in my Peradeniya classes is straightforward. I put sample sentences on the board or the projector screen and ask students to identify the right preposition or verb tense from among several choices. Or I give them an incorrect sentence and have them rewrite it to be correct. And I explain the rule, the pattern, the convention. This kind of teaching requires clear explanations in the classroom, and it requires the students to be active, whether by speaking up to give a good answer or by conferring with each other in pairs or threes to try to agree on the correct tense, preposition, word order, etc.

Two other kinds of basic improvement deserve mention. The more obvious is **vocabulary**: how many English words does the student know passively (i.e., he or she recognizes the word in print) and actively (i.e., he or she can use the word in writing or speaking)? One of my fourth-year students has said to me that he considers vocabulary to be his greatest weakness in English. As I replied, his basic English skills are so strong, and his work habits so good, that he will naturally continue to expand his English vocabulary simply by continuing to read good models of English writing. I could develop some vocabulary-building exercises for our students here, but for now the areas of grammar and usage seem like the place to spend most of our time. (I recommend the occasional glance at a thesaurus, but not the practice of using the thesaurus to try to find the right word for a piece of one's own writing.) A great advantage of choosing English as one's major subject is that, in the texts for English literature classes, one is exposed to the richest variety of uses of the language and its vast lexicon.

The other area of difficulty is wonderful and insidious: **pronunciation**. I bring up this subject with some self-consciousness, since my own pronunciation of the few Sinhala words I know is at best haphazard. But it seems to me that in Sri Lanka, as in India, even very fluent speakers of English do not always understand how to pronounce English words. (For example, it's 'ex-PO-sure,' not 'EX-po-sure,' and 'in-DOM-it-able,' not 'in-do-MIT-able.')

As I say, it's an insidious problem. Or perhaps it's not really a problem at all. As I told the first-year students – and as I really believe; I was not speaking rhetorically – English is as much their language as it is mine, *even if it is not their native tongue*. English belongs to Sri Lanka, is part of its history; Sri Lankans should regard the gateway to the larger English-speaking world as being wide open to them, an access they and their ancestors earned long ago. Yet, I have lived in India, and I have struggled to understand the rapid pace, sound and rhythm of spoken English there. I sometimes face the same problem in Sri Lanka, and I am not alone.

The question arises, to what extent is that the speakers' problem, and to what extent is it simply a North American's failure to understand, to listen well enough, to adjust to South Asian English?

The answer, of course, is both. Sri Lankan English does not have to sound like the English of Dorsetshire or Delaware to be fully articulate English. On the other hand, especially in academic circles, it is valuable to students to continue to practice Western pronunciations of English words, especially if they wish to go on to further academic studies abroad. (A well-known complaint from American undergraduates in U.S. universities concerns teaching assistants from foreign countries who speak English that is very rapid but neither loud enough nor clear enough to be understandable in the lecture hall. Certainly some American university students will look for anyone else but themselves to blame for any of their own failures, but in some cases I am forced to admit that they have a point.)

I should add that some of my students here in Sri Lanka speak brilliant, sparkingly clear English and could probably land jobs on radio or television in any English-speaking country.

This subject – pronunciation – is fascinating, and many books have been written about it. I'll take the easy way out here, saying that students' accents will gradually adjust as they are around people who speak with a different accent, and that the greatest value I can offer them myself in this regard is simply to be a professor at Peradeniya who speaks with a sort of mid-Atlantic accent. However, for the purpose of improving students' pronunciation, it is worth conducting some classes in which students read aloud – slowly and clearly – from selected works of literature, with the instructor noting and correcting pronunciation when appropriate.

### Observations

Students seem generally to be very motivated, appreciative of the opportunity to study at Peradeniya. Like all South Asian students, they tend to be quiet in class, but there are many ways to get them to speak up. One of the best of these, as a former Peradeniya Fulbrighter suggested to me before I came here, is to get the students to collaborate on a problem in the classroom. While they sometimes hesitate to speak up to me, they talk readily among themselves, and it is exciting to see and hear them. I assume all Sri Lankan professors are familiar with this strength of the educational culture here.

On this note, one of my favorite in-class collaborative exercises is simultaneously lots of fun and a good lesson in vocabulary and grammar. It is this: Retell the old folk tale of the Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf. (It's amazing how well that story has traveled around the world.) Work in groups of three or four, with one person actually writing down the story as the group figures out how to word it. The catch: Each group of students has to follow one or another of these rules:

1. Do not use any word (not even "a," "of," "the" or "and") more than once.
2. Use no verbs. (This one usually produces gasps.)
3. Make each sentence at least 25 words long.

This exercise virtually guarantees a hilarious class with all students getting involved. It can also be used to enliven a teacher-training workshop. I recommend it to anyone. Besides being amusing, and being a way for the students to get over some of their natural self-consciousness about their own language abilities, this game compels the participants to be more aware of their own verbal knowledge, and to build on it. Getting one student from each group to read the finished product aloud adds to the value of the exercise.

### Beyond ESL

Whenever I offer an optional writing workshop to postgraduate students in our department at the University of Massachusetts, it is almost invariably the foreign postgraduate students who attend it – students from India, Russia, Turkey, Ghana, Korea, Paraguay, etc., for whom English is their second (or third, or fourth) language. Their thinking is, Here's an opportunity to improve my English language skills, and I need this opportunity because I do not speak English so well as my American counterparts here.

In fact, however, almost without exception these students have as large an English vocabulary, and as much understanding of English grammar, as native speakers of English do. Chances are good that they have actually been taught more English grammar in Istanbul or Seoul than is taught in Denver or Atlanta. Instead, these sophisticated students' main problems with "English" are the same problems that American students have, namely, problems of clarity, conciseness, organization of thought in writing.

This, I'm convinced, is where the greatest challenge, and the greatest opportunity for students, lies. And it's as true at the University of Peradeniya as it is at the University of Massachusetts – or, for that matter, at Harvard or Stanford or the University of Chicago or a number of other American universities that, back in the 1980s, joined UMass in creating new, enhanced programs in writing for students in all disciplines, not just for English majors. These relatively recently developed programs, often referred to as "Writing Across the Curriculum," typically require students to write substantial essays in whatever subject they have chosen for their major.

### More Practice

Much of my teaching for the second-, third- and fourth-year students at Peradeniya focuses on this larger aspect of using English well. In this regard, we spend a lot of time not directly on lessons in improving English-language skills but, rather, on using writing in general as a way to learn, to think creatively, to discover more of what one knows about any subject.

Some of this classroom work does focus on specific principles of style. I remain a devotee of *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk and E.B. White, and I make good use of several parts of it. If I had known last November what I would be teaching at Peradeniya in February, I would have ordered a copy of this book for every student I teach. It is not comprehensive, but it is inspirational, and its lessons are easy to remember. Building on what the author of *Charlotte's Web* and his old Cornell University English professor have to say, in class I emphasize to all the students the importance of such considerations as these:

- a. Follow the word "this" with a noun when possible, to reinforce the reader's awareness of what you are talking about, unless it is quite clear which word is the antecedent.

Original version: "Hamlet convinces Claudius and Polonius that he is mad, but in doing so he also seems to infect Ophelia with the real madness which

he himself is only feigning. *This eventually brings Hamlet to a fatal confrontation with his foil and rival Laertes.*" [my emphasis]

Revised: "Hamlet convinces Claudius and Polonius that he is mad, but in doing so he also seems to infect Ophelia with the real madness which he himself is only feigning. *This unintended consequence of his actions eventually brings Hamlet to a fatal confrontation with his foil and rival Laertes.*"

- b. Learn to recognize and avoid the dangling modifier – the subtlest grammatical error in all of college writing and professional writing as well.

Original version: "Introducing the epistolary narrative technique to the English novel of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, critics find Richardson's *Pamela* to embody a new kind of realism in literature."

Revised: "Introducing the epistolary narrative technique to the English novel of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Richardson's *Pamela* embodies a new kind of realism in literature, noted by many critics."

- c. Notice how the development of a series of thoughts in your mind does not always occur in the same order in which it is easiest for your reader to follow them. Try to begin each sentence with that part of itself that is most closely related to what you said in the preceding sentence, and to end the sentence with that part that is the new idea you are introducing in this sentence.

Original version, from a student's essay on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: "The Self is always looked at as virtuous and immaculate, while the Other is 'the miserable and the abandoned...an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked and trampled on.' Here are the typical oppositions held by the Self and the Other which reverberate through history and still continue at present in all societies. *Repentance and self denial in the Other seem to be the only effective process to gain the attention of the Self.* The Other admits his faults and wicked deeds thus showing a strong sense of self consciousness which makes him more human than monstrous." [my emphasis]

Revised version: "The self is always looked at as virtuous and immaculate, while the Other is the 'miserable and abandoned...an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked and trampled on.' Here are the typical oppositions

held by the Self and the Other which reverberate through history and continue at present in all societies. *The only effective process to gain the attention of the Self is repentance and self-denial in the Other.* The Other admits his faults and wicked deeds, thus showing a strong sense etc....”

- d. Do not simply repeat the same word for a key idea. If the same word comes up often in what you are writing, probably the concept behind that word is essential to what you are saying – in which case it is appropriate and helpful if you expand the reader’s understanding of what you mean by that key word.

Example: “In his greatest novels, Fielding attempted to recreate the *epic* form, albeit with more comic elements. The *epic* was popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Fielding was well schooled in *epic* literature. His *epic* treatment of the lives of Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews gave his readers a kind of objective distance from which to view them and to understand the author’s larger meaning about morality.” Too many “epics,” not enough explanation. We need something more like this:

Revised version: “In his greatest novels, Fielding attempted to recreate the *epic* form, albeit with more comic elements. Homer, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* were all popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Fielding was well schooled in all of them. His treatment of the lives of Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews, though such *epic* elements as sequential books, lengthy travel narratives, and long mock-similes, gave his reader a kind of objective distance from which to view them etc....”

This kind of problem is common in any situation in which students have concluded that their main responsibility is to show that they took good notes in the lectures, that they recall the terms the professor used. That kind of hopefully dutiful writing does not do enough to count as learning.

Again (and again), these lessons and principles are as important for native speakers of English as for non-native speakers of it. I think it is helpful to get that message across to students whose first language is not English, because it reinforces the idea that they are not, after all, really foreigners in this territory at all, that we’re all on the same journey.

### Writing to Learn

The least direct approach to teaching English either as the student's native language or as a second or third language is ultimately perhaps the most interesting and rewarding of all. It not only develops English-language skills – as much by surprise as on purpose – but also develops students' ability to think critically, to impose their own understanding on a body of material they have studied, whether it be Greek tragedies or particle physics.

Thus, following a practice increasingly found in American education, our classes at Peradeniya include a good deal of what is frequently called free-writing. Another term for this kind of writing comes from Peter Elbow, the well-known teacher and writer who is perhaps most articulate on this topic. Elbow distinguishes between "low-stakes" and "high-stakes" writing, the idea being that most academic work requires high-stakes writing (i.e., the essay that counts for 40 percent of the semester grade), but that students can learn a great deal about what they are studying if they also spend plenty of time writing about it not for a grade but for fun, for experiment, for adventure, for discovery.

For example, consider an assignment to write a 12-page essay on the relationship between themes and structure in Shakespeare's comedies. The task is straightforward and large, and the essay is a piece of high stakes writing. How does one begin?

Well, suppose one spends half an hour in the classroom writing about how each of several characters in a Shakespearean comedy could be represented by a musical instrument. That's right – a musical instrument. This is low-stakes writing. Start fast, don't think too much before you start writing, but keep writing and thinking at the same time. Write anything, but try to stick to the question. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, as one of my fourth-year Peradeniya students wrote, Puck is a piano, capable of all sorts of wonderful combinations of notes, rhythm, chords, playing all over the scales, up and down ("...goblin lead them up and down!"). Oberon, on the other hand, is a set of drums; he plays fewer notes, but he sets the rhythm, the pace, for the whole show. Titania is a harp, Bottom a saxophone: no innate compatibility, but by magic they find themselves playing together. And so on. After several years of using this kind of assignment in various settings, I am convinced that it is hardly an idle exercise; that, rather, it makes students more aware of their own ability to think creatively and critically at the same time, and of how it can help them reach their own insights into whatever they are studying. In fact, it improves their high-stakes writing.

At Peradeniya this kind of writing exercise also helps Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking students improve their more basic English-language skills. The focus is on the game, the metaphor, the ability to keep pushing the pen and writing more and

more – not on whether or not the English spelling and grammar are correct. As with many other kinds of learning, this type of writing pulls students out of their habitual self-consciousness, allows them to play outside what they thought were the boundaries. They are encouraged to take risks, with only rewards, not penalties. They become braver, and that’s what we want. (Here is an alternative example from economics, one I have used at Peradeniya this year and use every year at UMass: Imagine a reader who lives in a tent somewhere in the desert or the prairie or veldt, sleeps on a pile of beautiful rugs, travels on horseback or camel, sits on mats on the floor – and has no concept of the idea of “furniture.” Explain to this person what a chair is. After we work on this surprisingly challenging task, the students reading their explanations aloud to the class or perhaps just to the student in the next seat, we move to the next part of the exercise: Imagine a bright 14-year-old who has never studied economics. Explain to that 14-year-old what “market equilibrium” means.)

### **Larger Considerations**

Learning to speak, read and write English is like learning to swim. If you work on a tea plantation in Nuwara Eliya, you are less likely to need to know how to swim than if you dive off the rocks at Galle Fort to collect a few hundred rupees from the tourists, or if you want to be a SCUBA diver. On the other hand, knowing how to swim is never a disadvantage, and when by accident you slip and fall into a pond near the tea plantation, it’s much better to know how to swim than not to. Similarly, knowing English is never a disadvantage.

At the same time, through all the foregoing discussion, I assume no one is forgetting a deep principle of English-language development in Sri Lanka and anywhere else in the world, namely, the high correlation between good command of English and one’s socioeconomic status. (Data indicate the same correlation between socioeconomic status and good math, science, and other classroom skills.) To continue the analogy: Galle Fort divers aside, people of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to know how to swim than people from economically depressed backgrounds. My own students are well aware of the gap between the English of the average rural school child and the English of a graduate of a superior high school in Colombo. A few of my Peradeniya students have in fact taught elementary school children in both places and know these things from first-hand experience.

I get the sense that my faculty colleagues at Peradeniya keep this subject well in view, whether or not it comes up in the classroom explicitly, and I am impressed by their insights and awareness. I would be presumptuous to offer many

suggestions about how to address the issue, but I hope that, following the eventual decline of the civil war as a distraction (or as the universal excuse for ignoring other social problems), the government will make serious strides forward in improving elementary education in English language, as in all other areas, in schools here.

In case anyone should imagine otherwise, I hope it's clear that nothing in this discussion is meant to imply that English is fundamentally more important than Sinhala, Tamil, Pali, Latin or any other language. Of course English has widespread practical applications beyond perhaps any other language, even including Chinese or Arabic, but one of the great advantages enjoyed by Sri Lankans (and Indians, and educated Chinese, Egyptians, Japanese, Finns, etc.) is the mind-expanding quality of being able to speak and perhaps to think in more than one language. The average American should only be so lucky in this regard.

Moreover, the ongoing evolution of literature in Sri Lanka in all three languages must be a source of excitement and pride, not to mention intellectual growth, on this island. Sri Lankan colleagues have suggested to me that this country's greatest literary output continues to be what is written in Sinhala or Tamil. Certainly efforts to make sure that English-literature students at Peradeniya also learn the Sinhala or Tamil literature – or both – are well-conceived.

Similarly, the high visibility of Indian writers in the West deserves to be followed by a growing recognition of Sri Lankan writers. I suspect most American readers of *The English Patient* still cannot identify Michael Ondaatje's nationality, nor find Sri Lanka on a map. And when they read Ondaatje, they will do well also to read the works of Martin Wickramasinghe and others who are available in translation. I believe the Fulbright program and other international programs in Sri Lanka can provide a great service to both countries by helping American, European and other readers become more aware of this country's literary identity. At the same time, by reminding Sri Lankans of the richness of their own culture as a treasure for the world, it can also continue to raise the quality of literary and linguistic education at Sri Lanka's universities.

### References and Suggested Reading

- Beebe, Brent, and John R. Stifler, "A Street-Fighter's Guide to Writing in Economics." Collective Copies, Amherst, Massachusetts, U.S.A. 2008. An informal handbook of thoughts, examples, exercises to develop university students' writing skill and confidence.
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- reports, position papers, abstracts, etc. Also includes sections on grammar and style.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. Oxford University Press. New York, London. 1998. An outstanding inspiration for writers of all sorts, all levels of experience. Filled with suggestions about how to get a piece of writing started, organized, finished.
- Lunsford, Andrea A. *The Everyday Writer*. Bedford/St. Martins. Boston & New York. 2009. An excellent all-around handbook on grammar and composition. Good section for multilingual writers.
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- Strunk, William and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Macmillan. New York. 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition 2009. The classic work on American style. Old-fashioned and reliable.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sourcebook for Instructors of Junior Year Writing Courses 2007-2008*. University Writing Program, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, U.S.A. Includes descriptions of various courses in a program of writing across the curriculum. Also available on line: <http://www.umass.edu/writingprogram/>
- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. Harper Collins, New York. 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition 2006. A definitive work, beautifully written and especially useful for nonfiction writers of general-interest essays and articles, notably including journalists.

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