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Rebuilding English from the Bottom Up: Negotiating Basic Literacy with/for Working-Class Adolescents in Kolkata

Gael Fonken
St. Cloud State University, Minnesota, USA
<foga0301@stcloudstate.edu>

Abstract

This ethnographic reflection foregrounds the efforts a K-12 English-medium (EM) school in Kolkata is making to pull EM schooling more fully into India's multilingual ethos. By focusing on the special needs of a small group of struggling working-class girls, the successes of the majority of working-class students at this school become more visible. Through a description of the activities emerging from an experimental "remedial" classroom, I imagine a curriculum designed especially for first-generation English learners. Although such adaptations would be more complicated to implement officially, my intent is to highlight the potential EM schooling has to better address the needs of a country whose majority is still chronically undereducated. For English to become truly Indian, students of all types need to be freer to use it creatively. As a guest teacher from the U.S.A., I recount some tentative moves in this direction, made possible by the special environment at this school.

Introduction

Ironically, as Indian's unique multilingual qualities are becoming better known among linguists (Annamalai, Agnihotri, and Khubchandani), record numbers of students are opting for English-medium (EM) education. Given these trends, how realistic is it to speak of Indian education as supporting a distinctive multilingual worldview? Still, optimists like Agnihotri (2007) speak of a vibrant multilinguality in India where "languages display porous boundaries and persistently converge in a fluid space," (p. 198). Likewise, Khubchandani (2003) writes of a shared pan-Indian communication ethos promoting "complementation and collaboration among speech varieties," (p. 297). But does this apply to private EM schools or just to beneficiaries of vernacular-medium (VM) government schools? Are EM schools distancing themselves from this multilingual ethos? Will habits learned in EM schools eventually destroy this precious inheritance?

These are hard questions to voice in an Indian context where the "craze for English" has become nearly universal (Tully, 1997; LaDousa, 2007; Scrase, 2004), despite years of serious national-level language policy discussions (Annamalai, 2004a; Kumar, 2005; Pattanayak, 1990). My experience teaching remedial English at an innovative K-12 school for girls in Kolkata India gave me (a second-generation American expatriate) a rare opportunity to address these questions "from the bottom up." Seeking to embed myself ethnographically as a low-level participant, I managed to insert myself into the Loreto Day School (LDS) at Sealdah-Kolkata as a teacher-in-training, asking only to teach "the most needy." This paper is an ethnographic study of the innovative practices at LDS as they relate to the needs of the working-class students at the school (who attend there as non-fee paying scholarship students). The challenge I face in this paper is not so much to probe into the *causes* of reading problems among these students but more to describe *the measures* I took to address them and to connect these back to the school's democratic initiatives and their attempts to respond both locally and regionally to the needs of a nation that is composed mostly of non-English speakers.

Thus, the remedial pedagogy I describe here makes sense only if one considers this larger sociopolitical context and the role that working-class students have taken on at this school where they seek to participate fully as first generation English-speakers. The Loreto school is also a good example of what is possible for a dedicated staff of native middle-class (*bhadralok*) teachers to achieve with high ideals and very few resources. Having recently received the prestigious national Padma-Shri award, this school is noted as a regional teacher-training center where elite teaching models have been opened up and transformed[1]. The student body has also changed, composed now of 50% underprivileged "sponsorship" students. While maintaining its academic standards and competitive ranking, LDS has transformed its curriculum to make it more responsive to a wider spectrum of literacy needs in the community (Doggett, 2005). Centered around an extensive service-learning program, it is better able to involve both its students and faculty in projects that reconnect them with the social concerns of the community and the political initiatives of the nation. In the principal's words:

> The idea of education for community [is] distinct from education for competition... [it] allows the students and staff to see themselves in the total perspective of India where millions have no access to education at all. This has led to a determination and readiness to share whatever is available. (Cyril, 2007, 113)

Significantly, in the context of West Bengal's shift towards a neo-liberal economy, it is important to see these efforts as an extension of an older anti-colonial nationalist narrative emphasizing modern education as a tool for fostering national independence, indigenous culture, and equal opportunity (Bhattacharya, T., 2001, Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2006). Though I can only mention this history in passing, the staff I came to know at LDS seemed deeply rooted in this past older ideal, which I saw reflected in other public initiatives in the larger community as well. Loyal promoters of Bengali

arts and culture, both the staff and the parents in the community were sincerely committed to proving that private EM schools could contribute responsibly to the needs of the whole community and nation. It is true that the school has religious roots that help to sustain this ethos; however, the diversity of its student body alone attests to the core place that civic and ecumenical goals have in its curriculum.

As such, the overall reputation the school cultivates is very much focused on civic duty and the urgent need to respond to the nation's Education for All reforms, yet in a way that also responds to the pragmatic demands of a globalized economy (Scrase, 2002). Providing a solution to this dilemma, the goal at LDS is to provide access to English from the bottom up, not as an overarching government commitment to uniform standards but as an internalized moral commitment to social uplift. "Our system has been designed to cater to the children of the middle classes, even when it runs in a remote village,...creating a strongly competitive atmosphere in which the poorest child often gets pushed out."...There is a "myth that the poor child will not fit in." Hence, "the poor child is blamed." So, "when we cater to the poorest child, teachers have to really teach," (Cyril, 2007, pp. 108-09). Emphasis on teacher training was prominent at LDS, as the staff was frequently called upon to give workshops around the country and even to train rural (VM) teachers. This involved LDS directly at all levels, even to the extent of helping to create innovative vernacular textbooks. Every boundary between English and India was being challenged here "to persistently converge in a fluid space," as Agnihotri (2007, p. 198) himself envisions.

In this regard, my experience is consistent with Ramanathan's (2005a) study of the "English-Vernacular divide" as it impacts entry-level college students in Gujarat. Despite persistent inequalities, local efforts made by dedicated teachers managed to counteract disadvantages in small ways. Yet rather than coming at this divide from the VM side, the goal at LDS is to pull, push or otherwise enmesh the school's English back into the complex web of languages, peoples, and religions that make up the nation. It is interesting to contrast this with state-sponsored reform agendas in the Bhattacharya *et al.* (2007) critical study of a special government school in New Delhi for 'disadvantaged' that made no attempt to integrate them with established middle-class students but merely sought to teach from the same curriculum that "privilege[d] outdated, overly formal language" and encouraged "little or no freedom for classroom transaction," (p. 481). Reform emerging *from within* the EM system has the potential of reversing the most basic restrictions that English-medium schooling place on learners. As Kumar identifies it, this is most basically a "pedagogical drawback" since the "functional alienation" of a foreign language tends to constrict education to a culturally sterile "homogeneous universe" that is unable to provide a "learning resource" relevant to an Indian milieu which is intimately bound up with the lives of India's illiterate masses (Kumar, 2004, p. 47; also 2005).

Compared to the VM students' cognitive struggles to catch up with the mastery that EM schools offer, the point of internal EM reforms delves more deeply into the social structure within the classroom where webs of personal involvement, shape the social imaginations of students. The local democratic initiative at LDS is fundamentally a

grassroots praxis of social solidarity aimed at fostering daily negotiations of meaning at close range in an environment where collaboration is experienced as not only possible but fruitful. Aware that social integration can easily be overwhelmed by the commercial and media temptations that go with exposure to English, it is crucial to provide students with a socially-convincing local alternative capable of helping them to recognize how even the most "subtle modes of resistance in the local context [can] be exploited by the global hegemony of English," (Canagarajah, 2000, p. 129) and subverted by self-defeating illusions of material gain that rarely if ever bear fruit. At every turn, the inclusive learning community at LDS functions to orient its students to the larger milieu that it is embedded within so as to engage it realistically. Able to dream, young people in India today seem quite capable of negotiating a more socially-harmonious future that includes English without falling prey to its illusions (Vaish, 2008a).

Though my role at LDS was a peripheral one, I offer this ethnographic account in hopes of providing a small window onto the school's larger project by highlighting the special role that its working-class scholarship students seemed to be playing in it--particularly those I worked closely with who were struggling the most to keep up. What follows are two parts of a dialectical whole: part onedraws from my initial socialization into the school as a substitute first grade (Class I) teacher and part two reports on the interventions my adolescent students and I created together to address their inadequate command of written English. In both cases the crucial issues are still poverty and access, but the solutions are unique, and perhaps uniquely Indian.

Part I: Democratic Socialization in the Lower Grades--*The Journey In*

"The journey in" is a significant part of this story, not only to explain my own presence at LDS, but likewise to understand what the scholarship students experienced when they entered LDS at the age of four with little prior knowledge of how to negotiate its traditions. As for myself, I managed to teach remedial English full-time at the Loreto School for three months, but for the first two weeks I taught first grade. My goal in this section is to document how my own hybrid expatriate identity shaped my understanding. Hence, I need to introduce myself first so that I can explain how my own identity affected (and perhaps even *e*ffected) the methodology of this study. Teaching as a low-level participant and having grown up partly in Pakistan, I gradually found my own unique 'place' at the school. While initially needing to shake off (and commiserate on) certain stereotypes of American imperial naiveté, I gradually found ways to use my rusty knowledge of Hindi, Mughal history, and regional politics.

Transcultural Repositioning & Ethnographic Method

Holding expatriate status since childhood may seem to be an obvious advantage. Still, such a past is unusual for Americans and requires explanation in order to be of use here especially in relation to professional TESOL issues. While experts on ethnographic methods mostly tend to focus on reflection in more universal terms as an

added last step, my unanticipated hybrid 'condition' emerges more as an on-going or even preexisting feature of my study than an appended, and hence controllable scholarly interpretation. Surprisingly, I find support for my unique 'approach' in Ramanathan's reflections on her own insider-outsider status (2005b) and with a particular style of transcultural reflection highlighting acts of cultural 'repositioning' done under conditions of duress (i.e., Lu, 1992; Guerra, 2007).

Although the success of my study hinges on the depth of my ties to the school, its concrete needs, aims, and resources, these ties will only make sense *to a wider audience* if I can connect them to existing geopolitical blueprints or mental models for imagining such things. To help at this level I offer transcultural repositioning as a particular model for referring to a unique type of ad hoc 'between-culture' communication that rarely emerges in formal conversations "about" cultural difference. Even though the focus in this study is not directly on this act, one needs to be able to imagine it working here continually 'from the bottom up' in the daily conversations that I engaged in at the school. Running contrary to the conventional 'reporting' approach to knowledge-making critiqued by Canagarajah (2005), it is crucial to understand that such input needs to be factored in from the beginning even if and when this causes certain 'incommensurability' problems. Certainly, knowing enough to ask the right questions was a crucial element in my experience that allowed me to participate as an active learner at the school, yet it is another matter to be able to organize these on-going 'insights' into a globally-relevant, comprehensible document.on Compared with the evolving site-specific 'reorientations' that I first reported (Fonken, personal communication with V. Ramanathan, June 16, 2007) which engaged semiotic complexities that extend beyond the scope of this study, the concept of transcultural repositioning gives me a way to condense these multiple overlapping worlds into a single narrative explaining the particular 'type' of access I had to the lives of the school's poorer students and their struggles to become literate.

My access to the school is also structurally similar to Ramanathan's experience of returning to 'do research' in India after teaching at the highest levels in the U.S.A. for years. However, the comparison is significant both for its similarities and differences, as the 'insider-outsider' dilemma works itself out in various ways. For her as a Brahman, the *insider* aspects of this tension threatened to act as barriers to her work with poorer students, and likewise for me, my *outsider* American 'native' identity was a formidable obstacle. Yet the unique hybrid advantage I had was in my ability to emerge from within a conversation as one having a location centered vaguely on a '*nearby*' place (Pakistan). In contrast to Ramanathan's lament that *local* "silences around caste issues are themselves 'caste-ist' and that she "[ran] the risk of asserting [her] caste 'superiority' whenever she broached these norms, when I staged my identity in a *regional* key, I experienced these same barriers as subtle openings. For example when I spoke of my experiences in Pakistan, this became an occasion for conversants to compare themselves 'as Indians' in contradistinction to *a very familiar rival nation.* The part of me that was 'Pakistani' tended to encroach on the present reality in very useful ways when I repositioned it to fit within an Indian setting.

In this way, my presence at the LDS encouraged people to retell their stories *in a concrete way* that opened conversations rather than closing them. This dynamic is perhaps more similar to Ramanathan & Pennycook's collaborative trans-generational autobiography (2007). Yet in my case, the result was not a recapitulation of colonial history, but rather an emergent, keenly local, and perhaps at times even therapeutic 'transcultural' encounter--more of the type that Pratt (1992) and Ortiz (1947) spoke of. The narrative that follows is my attempt to more fully 'unpack' these unconventional conversations so as to highlight their unpredictable glocal dimensions. Ideally, my intent here is to offer the visible fruits of these conversations (the techniques we developed to co-create readable texts) as a possible model for use in similar "progressive" contexts where schools loyal to local community are struggling to counteract divisive (neo)-colonial habits. Paradoxically, the path beyond patterns of English-dominance has involved many unwittingly in contingent engagements like these where the only way out is through (Annamalai, 2004b; Vaish, 2008b). In this regard my students were prime candidates for success since they had so many unmet needs.

Gaining Access from the Side as an Apprentice Teacher

Having described my own slippery status as an expatriate with a long and complicated memory, the next step here is to explain how exactly I used it to gain entry into this school. I had at first applied to teach at LDS as a part of the American K-12 ESL teaching licensure process; but after the paperwork fell through late in the game, I found myself going regardless (due mostly to my personal need to return). Tested initially with a two-week assignment as a substitute teacher in a crowded first grade classroom, I had to earn my way into the school. There were no guarantees, since the school was not asking for expert advice, nor did I perceive of them as needing it. Only after this trial was I given access to the class of struggling adolescent girls that I now refer fondly to as "my own students." Even then, the principal would have preferred that I contribute as a "long-term sub" in another mainstream class since this was a more urgent need. Opting for a class of dropouts moved me down and out of the spotlight, which took some of the pressure off. But since I was more interested in the children themselves than in propagating the curriculum, this gave me access to a more neutral space for negotiating identities.

I'm grateful for the trust that the teaching staff had in me in giving me such freedom to work with some of the most needy 'at risk' students in their school. Still, I deeply appreciate the brief two-week introduction to mainstream (EM-style) ELT teaching that the first grade gave me. It was in the lower grades that my adolescent students should have picked up their English literacy skills. So, my time in first grade gave me a sense for what they experienced there and what they may have missed. In hindsight, I now speak of this brief apprenticeship as providing four general insights, which I discuss in the next section. Yet, it is only in the context of my later struggles to remediate 'failing' adolescents that these insights first made sense to me. As such, I provide a particular type of 'dialectically-infused' explanation here for how working-

class Bengali children from non-English-speaking homes experience being inserted into an elite (English-Medium) setting.

These insights might also be contrasted to the American "ESL" approach to integrating language minorities where democratic inclusion is more of a legal 'rights-based' concept rather than a grassroots celebration of 'multilinguality.' After teaching ESL pullout classes in the US, this first grade class was my first experience with a "push-in" model where no lines were being drawn between English-fluent students and English learners. In contrast to American concepts of race-based equity, I experienced the Indian practice of nation building as an intentional and quite reasonable 'decolonizing' act aimed at developing a more morally responsive society. For centuries, [West] Bengal has been at the forefront of this initiative, yet I was also keenly aware that the actual practice at the school reflects far more than this even as it affords this local history access to a multiplicity of agendas, both liberative and potentially addictive. In a glocal age of opportunity, peoples' best intentions have a way of getting subsumed into superficial images that trivialize the live transcultural mixtures that converge in them. In this regard, what I observed was a mixture of motives, principled interventions, and personal explorations in the midst of a 'work in progress.' I count my own efforts to contribute to a more 'postcolonial' vision as being linked more to this idiosyncratic grassroots process than any classic, nationwide elite version of the anti-colonial story (e.g., Ramanathan, 2006). As such, I need to stress here just how much my students and I wrote each other into existence and how much our many and varied expectations both empowered and constrained this process Freire, 2004; Dheram, 2007).

What follows are four general principles that the first grade (Class I) students helped me to grasp about the creative potential of glocal settings. After teaching over 40 children everyday all day in a packed room overhanging a busy and noisy street for two weeks, I now have a much better sense for how LDS has been able to integrate rich and poor students so well into a single cooperative whole. Ironically, by recognizing the persistent gaps between privileged and underprepared students one can begin to understand how certain (seemingly drastic) measures taken by the school succeeded in significantly lessening the distances involved while maintaining the same high standards of achievement as other more aggressive elite schools and with no outside tutors to augment their efforts. As an insider/outsider to Indian multilingual practices, I greatly appreciated this opportunity.

Four General Insights Learned from Teaching in the Lower Grades

Material Advantage is a Real and Imminently Social Reality

Without a doubt, much of what I saw in this crowded first grade classroom was linked to privileges that lingered there despite the school's commitment to equality. I don't wish to imply that these are negative, but just the opposite in fact--that is, that they were the primary resources needed to jump start a broader base for learning. But noticing the details was crucial. Details such as owning an erasure (a rubber) and an

extra pencil to two were significant. The poorer students were perpetually running out of such supplies and having to negotiate terms for borrowing them. It was a very real part of my job to remedy this situation, yet the school was also adamant that students needed to work out their future without any undue assistance in order to instill in them a proper sense of their own independence and innate ability. Hence if necessary, I needed to obtain additional supplies from what was meagerly available in the office rather than giving things to the students from my own private resources. Very real limits were set on my 'service' in this regard. As a result, the class took on a particular 'natural' economy that tested everyone's sense of values and fairness. More interruptions occurred over establishing the proper etiquette for borrowing and returning prized possessions than anything else. Although the students dressed in identical uniforms and real efforts were made by all to include (and be included as) marginal individuals[2], these efforts made the effects of class-status all the more visible. Some students come to class with more poise than others. The point was to inspire each child personally to use their resources in harmonious ways that fostered the good of the whole (Doggett, 2005). This is, indeed, what I saw; but it was a process that kept us occupied for much of the day.

Both Personal Advantage (and Group Solidarity) Happen to (and between) Individuals

It is important to recognize the most basic effects of material advantage and to notice how they impacted the acquisition and use of English and how this in turn affected the quality and quantity of 'content' knowledge that students acquire. However, these obvious theoretical points are difficult to pinpoint in real cases since personal advantage and solidarity can play themselves out in parallel such that both occur simultaneously, embedding themselves in one and the same act. Moreover, at every turn these routine acts took on new and unique meanings that varied infinitely among individuals. Thinking positively, it is important to recognize how much personal power every individual possesed to renegotiate the effects of material advantage. One could 'tilt' the ethos in the room with a good example, but dictating how any particular individual was to comply made little sense. Relationships were contagious, but they worked only indirectly on the social identities that each child brought with them. What *happened to* children depended on their social capital, but how this played out *between* individuals had the power to change everything. Children are always more creative than adults are able to anticipate. The challenge lies in taking advantage of the concrete opportunities that open up to animate new relationships. In this tiny classroom I observed over and over again how personal advantages unwittingly led to shared experiences such as the acting out of a poem that gave local meaning to solitary words etched out in chalk on the board. Achievement seemed always to entail a sharing not just of the outcome but also of the entire process.

Yet this embeddedness of individuals in a web of never-ending particularities also makes certain transformational processes less obvious. One needs to sustain very close relations with children in order to see how changes might accumulate over time. As an insider-outsider with a (low-key) apprenticeship status, I was extraordinarily free to

explore ways to overcome the gaps I was noticing in material and cultural capital. Due to my *outsider* identity I was allowed to break with certain requirements (since I couldn't be expected to know how to conform). Hence I found myself engaging in activities that required the students to work in groups. Mostly this was humbling as I gradually learned to appreciate and depend on the high level of cooperation that was occurring in the class. In fact, the students delighted in pulling off these group activities that I invented sometimes with such fervor that the noise made my ears ring.

Yet not everything went off according to this self-organizing ideal. It is no surprise that the working-class students from monolingual Bengali families tended to get less practice using English than those who came to school speaking it fluently. Still, watching them co-construct orally-mediated realities in the room such as the 'guess what it is' riddle poems I put on the board or chanting '*a-e-i-o-u'* finger puppet plays together demonstrated for me that it was realistic to expect everyone to become fluent speakers. The more significant question for me was how the school managed to transmit literate skills that depended more on individual actions such as making an orderly written record of the answers to a set of questions. These were far less sharable between individuals. Here, the rare phenomenon of reading disabilities would seem to be nearly insurmountable. As devastating as these are for those who have such problems, I am all the more convinced that the path towards helping these individuals lies not so much in providing extra resources but in engineering ways to share the process in class more equitably.

In the second part of this article, I suggest group-centered methods for sharing written words on the board that transform not only the *location* of the exercise, but also the cultural *content* of its message to match better with the common oral experience in the room. The point is to change the system rather than simply attempt to push more people through it. I noticed that the teacher next door centered some of her lessons on environmental print linked to common items such as soap wrappers and toothpaste adds. Yet the curriculum also demanded the acquisition of more academic concepts such as the 'water cycle,' which had nothing to do with bicycles or umbrellas. By creating a special class for adolescent storytelling, I see my role in this larger academic initiation process as promoting a more sharable experience-based form of written English that could house and foster a more emotive vocabulary. According to Pavlenko (2005), L2 writing typically contains fewer emotive words when it is learned in classroom settings or at an older age, but that young L2 learners tended to pick up and express a fuller range of emotions. This difference would seem to be especially important in EM settings at least if working-class students are going to be expected integrate written texts with what is happening orally in the classroom. Yet typically Indian social norms tend to relegate private meanings and personal morality more to home life and to the native tongue and to ascribe a more formal ethic to public discourse which makes it harder to speak of deep human truths in English-mediated classrooms (Kumar, 2004). The use of English needs to involve students in more than the pragmatic attainment of scientific concepts if it is to become socially transmittable to new learners. Private middle-class modes of constructing reality need to become more thoroughly public.

Socially-Constructed Realities are Linked to Pedagogies that Can be Modified

The previous discussion opens up this topic as well since the transformation of individual advantages into sharable strengths involves the social re-construction of English. In contrast to the situation described by Atkinson (2003) where first-generation English-speaking students experienced a process of dys-socialization, the aim at LDS is to re-socialize both working-class and middle-class participants. Within this process, the relatively uncommon problem of reading failure remains one of the most invisible problems since the students themselves are asked to work across such 'deficiencies' through oral means . The very modifications in the curriculum militate against a solution to this problem.

What I value the most from my experience in this first grade classroom was how it helped me to hypothesize the deeper *social and pedagogical* origins of this most hidden problem of reading failure. Given the overall success of the school, certain idiosyncratic factors must somehow be overtaking some of the less-well-equipped individuals making them less receptive to learning certain skills from their more privileged neighbors. Since my adolescent-aged students could all read in Bengali, it seemed that more organic disabilities such as dyslexia could be ruled out. Looking more closely at links between pedagogical practices and the complexity of peer interactions, Toohey (2000, 2001) documented a similar classroom situation in Canada where the proximity to the teacher and excessive control over a language minority student ended up isolating him from social situations where interactions with peers would have served him better. Similar studies reinforce the importance of establishing quality interactions with peers (e.g., Norton & Toohey, 2001).

But the situation at LDS seems to be the reverse. Though I could identify several students in this first grade class who seemed to be more socially-withdrawn, one must discover the links between this behavior and missed opportunities to engage in the emergent literacy events in order to remedy the situation. Simply encouraging shy students to orally negotiate meaning with their peers may actually exacerbate the problem. However the point I make here is that even older remedial students can contribute *belatedly* to the construction of publically-sharable, communally-meaningful literacy events,but that this involves a different set of pedagogical tools since the location is shifted from the mainstream class to a more sheltered classroom. In a subsequent paper I unpack the unique characteristics of this sheltered space in terms of trauma recovery and safe house theory. The general principle in either case, though, is that pedagogical choices create complex webs of social relations whose effects are hard to anticipate. However, in a progressive school like LDS it is at least possible to seek out novel ways to transform literacy practices into more publically-transparent events.

Multilinguality is an Underused Asset in EM Schools

The fourth insight I learned from this first grade classroom was how totally dominant English was in this setting and in EM schooling in general. The teachers and much of

the support staff were more than adequately fluent in English. The fact that Bengali was taught as a second language (with the third language being Hindi) seemed to be more of a curricular obligation than a consolation. In first grade, the Bengali alphabet was just being introduced while the students were already writing whole sentences in English--or at least copying them. Bengali was also taught by a different teacher who traveled between classes, much in the same way that ESL pullout works. For my adolescent students, the biggest frustration was that this brief introduction to Bengali literacy had been enough to turn them into Bengali readers while ten years of full-time effort struggling to learn to read and write in English had not given them more than a 2nd or 3rd grade level reading proficiency in English.

If I were fully bilingual, I could say more about the options and constrains here and speak more precisely about what the school was either doing or not doing to promote biliteracy. But since my earliest days in Pakistan, I have always felt free to use what little bilingual skill I did manage to acquire--and am aware that the symbolic utility of using strategic "L1" words far exceeds any actual conversational fluency I might wish to have had. This played out in some valuable (and mostly unexpected) ways at LDS. Though the first graders could not understand me, my older students quickly picked, pulled, and sometimes wrenched out of me some choice concessions that set Bengali on a more equal footing. Tolerating and promoting this openly was, I think, one of the most useful 'unavoidable' transgressions that I was able to pull off as an *outsider*--or half-way familiar *bystander*. In order to create a more honest boundary between English and Bengali, one needs a *place* where it is socially possible to transgress. But this place also needs to be structured in a way that fosters socially meaningful 'productive transgressions' capable of bridging the space between worlds. In my experience, most ordinary, 'polite' conversations jump over the top of geopolitical boundaries in ways that effectively erase the actual embodied experiences that might lead to the kind of negotiated outcomes that I was seeking.

Both in this regard and in the discussions above, it is useful to consider the experiences of FL teachers such as Kramsch (1993) whose pedagogies engage students in more personally-evocative ways. Yet it is difficult to justify such insights in TESOL circles since this literature is typically based in a humanistic view of language as compared to the more pragmatic social science focus in TESOL. Taking more thorough advantage of interlingual space requires more than a desire to attain a practical ideal scientific or transnational form for English. One needs to be free at least at some point not just to practice normative differences, but also to 'cross-dress' them with impunity. For this to happen, one needs 'a room of one's own' that is *both* centered in the contact zone between worlds *and* discretely hidden there so as to allow students to try on various meanings in order to make sense of them before being held publically-accountable for the result. Though this is similar to the well-established, culturally-encoded safe house behaviors that Canagarajah (1997) describes among African American college students, the particular situation that my adolescent students faced was more transient, requiring more open-ended *ad hoc* procedures for exploring, negotiating, labeling, (and not just reflexively communicating) differences..

The particular pedagogy that I lay out in the second part of this paper is the result of three months of joint effort on the part of my students and myself to create a more effective way to become literate in English. Yet it is also a result of their patient attempts to make English say more of what they would otherwise be saying in Bengali. It is this open-ended creative task that has caught my attention more than the mechanical challenge of getting these spirited 'dropouts' to reengage elements of learning English that they had previously opted to opt out of for whatever reason. Hence rather than view these special learners as simply 'deficient' in particular skills, I set out here intentionally to view them as guides capable of working their way towards the missing pieces of the curriculum. In this way, we left behind us the question of why certain individuals *were not* fitting into the present curriculum and attempted to directly establish a new path towards a more multilingual, worker-friendly 'school' English—one that included them as more central players. Still, romantically presenting my students as free agents capable of overpowering me leaves too much to the imagination What follows is an account of a far less predictable, on-going negotiation between culture and grammar, fluid bodies and unintelligible texts.

Part II: Rebuilding English with/for Struggling Adolescent Readers

Finding Alternative Paths around Impediments

It is crucial to note that nearly all the working-class students at LDS were managing to learn to read and write in English well enough to master the existing curriculum. The ten students I had in my class were struggling with various undetermined factors, perhaps even early-childhood malnutrition. When I discovered that one student simply had poor eyesight, she was returned to her mainstream class whereupon the whole school received free eye exams. Impediments come in all forms. However, because I saw myself as an 'ESL specialist,' it was months before it dawned on me that I was working with problems that specialist in the U.S.A. would probably label as "LD" (learning disabilities), and even longer before I shifted to thinking of this problem from within a 'Basic English' approach which leaves far more room for non-organic (sociopolitical) explanations. These were categories that other specialist dealt with, so I didn't (feel authorized to) address them. My job was to address ELT issues related to (failed) language use. Initially I worried mostly that my State-side ESL training was going to be irrelevant in an "EFL" setting (e.g., Greg, 1996). I had come to Kolkata looking for a more effective approach to teaching English 'abroad.' The reality presented by ten orally fluent students with reading problems simply forced me to start all over.

Looking back at this time as a total pedagogical overhaul, I recognize now that SLA theory might be the only 'reasonable' way to professionally account for the site-specific challenges that were emerging. Here Atkinson's sociocognitive approach (2002, 2007) seems most useful since the concept of apprenticeship in glocally-complex environments requires a more-or-less permanent commitment to pedagogical adjustment rather than to the development of a particular mode of resisting dominant cognitive models. However, not willing yet to seek *ultimate* accountability for my

actions, the more pressing task seems to be that of systematically describing the range of classroom activities my students and I created so as to sense *at least vaguely* how they were addressing their most basic unmet 'literacy' needs. The possibility of any solution at all to this problem is the first order of business here. Using my insider/outsider identity to animate conversations that deflected the focus away from impossible curricular expectations, we gradually established a routine centered on a new balance of grammar exercises and shared (mostly 'invented') readings. The writing we engaged in was done mostly out of necessity--to create new texts to read. Oddly here, we stayed faithful to well-established copying or dictation routines, at least initially, but what happened after all these activities started to merge together came to take on a more proactive shape. Initially though, the main challenge was with behaviors and the memories of painful failures that were forcing my students to hide from view rather than confront (others with) their needs.

Evading the (Painful) Issue of Assessment

The fact that everyone in my classroom was required to contribute something was not remarkable in a school dedicated to active, task-based learning. What was unique for us was the total detachment from exams. I simply had no connection with them, nor was I going to gain that savvy soon enough to make myself useful in that way. Since we were all learners, the only rule I set up was that every one (including myself) spent a maximum of time focused on the task of 'learning' per se. The *focus* is what counted, not the *results*. This is how I graded: for every single task (every element of every activity) each student either received full points for the effort to focus on it or no points if they didn't. Perfection was not the goal, nor was I giving partial credit for mastering a particular item of new 'knowledge' since such evaluations gave me too much control over the definition of success. If I couldn't claim to know what exactly they needed to learn, it seemed counterproductive to expect to teach any one particular thing to them. Rather than teach incrementally, I was looking for 'system-level' problems.

My students presented themselves more as unsolved mysteries. In hindsight, however, I have come to favor the explanation that they were having problems "seeing" sentences since they had learned English orally. Expecting oral channels to work better, then, I imagined my grammar exercises to go more smoothly when we chanted whole sentences from the blackboard as an integral part of reviewing the task of completing them. But tactically, the first task was to write them; and with each progressive sentence in a series, I left more of the sentence blank for them to fill in with correct tenses and the like, according to the model set previously. When we got stuck, I would help them chant the pattern (e.g., *I am, you are, he is*). As long as everyone was focused on the effort, they all got the same points in the end regardless of who filled what blank. When we were done, we always had every sentence filled in, both on the board and on their individual scraps of paper.

For positive reinforcement, these points were recorded instantaneously on the blackboard next to each person's name. Gradually (only gradually) the accumulation

of points took on vital meaning for them, but I didn't stress it. One child decided one day to give me back all the points, so I erased hers. Because it was painful to make mistakes, they did not always value their attempts to use English. Hence, there were many times that they exercised their right to abstain. Obviously these points had no official baring and were never used to select out more talented students; but gradually everything we did revolved around them, which gave the students a much-needed sense of accomplishment. Coming up with the right answer assured them of success, but not doing so meant only that they had to copy it from another or give their 'turn' to another. Turn-taking gave everyone a chance to contribute, and failure to attempt a contribution was defined minimally as a refusal to try.

This game went on for weeks while I gradually developed activities that fit their needs better. First though, before I could get them to expose their weakness, they needed to feel secure enough to expose them to me and to the class. For years they had survived by hiding whenever a task required reading, then copying answers from another. As the school placed a high priority on mixed-ability group work, cooperation (of all types) was endemic. This helped many slower students, but apparently not those in my class who seemed to have developed alternative strategies for surviving their relative deprivation. My job was simply to give them a chance to focus on learning rather than purely surviving. But they needed to make that shift on their own and in their own way. Toward this goal, what I put on the board was all assessment. However, at each turn it was my own ability to sense 'the gaps' that formed the basis of this process. In the meantime, it helped considerably that, by the end of three months, they were willing to do anything 'for points.'

From Oral Dominance to Written Competence--Acquiring New Words

Assessment was the easiest problem I faced, though. It was much harder to find ways to help my students turn the corner from oral practice to work more intensely with written texts. For me to feel successful, this was an essential goal. Perhaps though, I shouldn't have been so judgmental? Since advanced oral skill is highly prized in India, it marked out a solid reason for why working-class students were willing to struggle to keep their place in an EM school. Yet, certainly the school was also focused on academic success. One of the key problems with EM schooling is its near total dependence on English to convey content knowledge. This problem is a familiar one in TESOL, both in India and the US, and an important argument for bilingual schooling (Cummins, 1980, 2000). My students seemed to have stopped picking up new vocabulary at about third or fourth grade since so much of it came at them in the context of readings that they were failing to comprehend. There was no chance for them to learn to think academically in Bengali first. There was simply not enough connection between oral vocabulary and the language of written texts (Purcell-Gates, 2001). It was interesting to probe my students' abilities to read texts from various grade levels and to notice the link between their (in)abilities and the presence or absence of 'specialized' words that they didn't know. My students seemed to be limited to those words they could figure out from oral conversations. For example, they knew neither the word "law" nor the meaning of it in the context of a social studies lesson on

how courts of law function to create them. If they knew this in Bengali, there was no transfer to English--at least not that I could detect during a prolonged study of that topic (see section on *sentence combining* below).

This problem was compounded by their lack of practice with dictionaries. I assumed that they were mostly too poor to own them, and knew well that every wealthy student had both English, and Bengali-to-English dictionaries to help them acquire and master new words. I spent many sessions with the few dictionaries that I could find on site. But these were 'mission donations' and there were no Bengali words in them. They often defined new words in terms of other new words which turned the activity into a blackboard word Web exercise--for example, if *bold* is like *courageous* is like *valiant* is like *noble* is like *intrepid* is like *gallant,* then *bold* was going to be inaccessible too. So I needed to move the topic sideways a bit--to *bold, brave, courage, unafraid,* and *fearless*--which we then built up together into an alternative blackboard dictionary. These emotive words could then be acted out bodily with the help of a pickled snake-in-a-jar that I found in the back cupboard of the senior science room we were occupying at the time. Next we made fresh sentences on the board linked even to a mini-story that imagined the snake waking up and speaking to the janitor who slept in that room each night. On average though, few of the words we struggled with were learned directly in this manner (in terms measured by next-day quizzes). However, I did see improvement in their confidence level at using these dictionaries and some sense also for the way written contexts could be personally manipulated to explore meaning. Of course the obvious point here is that a little money and parental intervention could probably have solved this problem years ago, both in terms of buying appropriate English-only dictionaries and in giving the students access to Bengali-English explanations. But the cost was too high when even the teachers lacked access to the newest and best of these resources.

Such skill-based background knowledge seemed to emerge from practices learned at home. As textbook supplements were designed for wealthier students with in-home tutors, they didn't contain help of this kind either. The one middle-class parent I had access to described how these skills were carefully reinforced in her home with the help of the best dictionaries. By contrast, one of my students complained bitterly when I assigned homework 'from books' that needed to be taken home. Her situation was such that her little brother repeatedly tore up all her books, so she had been unable to take any books home, period. Still, I noticed that all my students had issues with homework, which made it entirely impossible to assign any for the duration of my stay there. More than anything, this problem seemed to go counter to all that I thought I knew about Indian education, which brings up the next hardest issue that I faced: willful insubordination.

The Right to Say No to English

The main way that my students expressed their frustration with English was to not come to school. Attendance for some of them ran about 50%. Only two attended regularly. I have hard data to show that attendance was directly correlated with the

number of points that a student earned (per day attended). This is not surprising, but the question it raised for me was why stick with an uncomfortable task? Why not enroll in a VM school and switch over to Bengali so that the missed content could be recovered? Some of the orphans living on site were in fact sent to a local VM mission school, so the option seemed reasonable. But even after having failed final exams repeatedly, my student persisted. It seems to me now that they were more patient than I, and perhaps were willing to endure in this social setting long enough to become parents for a future generation who would succeed.

However, such a definition of success was not in keeping with the school's feminist agenda nor with anything that I brought with me from the United States where individual success was the measure of all things. Another late blooming insight I had in this matter was that the school itself was at least partially tolerating my students' active rejection of English for symbolic reasons. The school's strong ethic of inclusion could easily be stretched to this degree. The very presence of orphaned street children living permanently on the campus was evidence of this, since they were not required to attend the EM school, providing a visible focal point for alternative ways to succeed at participating in the larger community. While the EM school children played Western games like 'four-square', the group of orphans was provided with professional classic dance instructors and frequently performed highly-skilled traditional dances for visitors, both local and foreign. There were also a larger number of teachers from VM schools around the region who came to the school to partake in training programs. These included staff from many rural schools, some of whom wrote in Urdu script. The school artist was visibly employed most days in the production of new texts for these teachers as well, and was always a good source of information for me when I wanted to know more about the philosophy behind these activities. The very limited role that English played in all this was quite noticeable. It is through these activities that I came to understand some of the more progressive aspects of the school and its commitment to a multilingual future. In this context, it seemed that English was truly finding its proper place.

Facing the Need for Special Remedial Materials--Learning to Draw from the Heart

But this is not to say that English had no place. My students' commitment to learning seemed real enough. The underlying reason why they weren't learning had to do with the near total lack of appropriate resources. As this problem accumulating over the years, the gap between them and their curriculum widened till they had to repeat a grade. Some of them were even repeating the same grade twice since the school's policy was to retain and nurture rather than blame and expel them. The more time they spent in my class though, the more aware they were of the degree to which they were lagging behind their classmates. Since they could not read grade-level texts (and I had no role in preparing them for their exams), I was free to look for alternatives. At first I simply brought in a pile of texts from the lower grades--not those they had used before, but single promotional copies of supplemental texts from the K-4 teacher's resource room. After some probing we discovered just how wide the achievement gap was for the class, since the books they could read were mostly picture books with big

print. I used many of the grammar exercise from these books, but it was entirely impossible to get them to take these books seriously since they dealt with such immature themes.

Still, we had to read something. It was here that I came to understand why my students were introduced to me by the principal as the "naughty" students. In my class they were asked to confront their maladapted study habits head on since there was no longer a place to hide. Some had issues over seating in this regard since it was easier to copy answers in the back of the class. I gave no points for anyone who didn't sit in the front rows. Another more difficult issue to deal with was their fondness for singing in Bengali in the middle of their lessons. However, such issues were negotiable and simply served as markers of their level of commitment to the class goals. When I could we incorporated songs into the stories we wrote. However the main problem we all shared was the persistent lack of age-appropriate remedial texts of any kind (singable or not). Because my students had left their regular classes to join mine, we didn't even have access to their regular textbooks. I continued working with topics like math and home sciences, but not with the textbooks they had been using since they agreed it wasn't working.

Granted, "teaching without books" is exhilarating, but there had always been an official series of ESL texts to fall back on. Here, there were no extra resources. We were expected simply to adapt. The supply of chalk was endless, but I had to regularly check the office wastebasket for scrap paper since the students could not afford the five-cent notebooks that the venders offered for sale at the entrance of the school. Pens were in short supply, too, and had to be borrowed on occasion from outside donors, taking time and effort as well. I was initially not allowed to intervene since it was policy that students help each other, but exceptions were made since we were so isolated now from the better-off half of the school. More problematic was the issue of never having more than one or two copies of any alternative texts that I did manage to find, which made sharing readings was nearly impossible. I quickly learned that if it didn't happen on the blackboard, it wasn't going to happen.

Another more challenging part of this adapting was that we had no regular room. On the worst days, we had to move up to three times from one empty room to another in order to stay out of the way of mainstream classes. However in hindsight, these problems seem minor and almost productive in nature since they helped us to build up a sense of shared purpose and common cause. Near the end of our time together I brought in my camera and had them load it and take pictures with it. Earlier they had refused to let me take pictures of them. Even when they had the camera in their hands, they refused to go outside with it (until the very end of our time). The complaint was that they didn't want to be seen. This was so even on the day that the principal come home from New Delhi with the Padma-Sri award. Frequently reading disabilities are associated with these sorts of behaviors, vacillating from social withdrawal to acting out (Greenleaf, et al., 2002). However for my students, most of the acting out happened in the relative safety of our classroom. And with time, it became more coordinated and mutually productive. In a typically Freirean (1970, 2004) way, I saw

their resistance more as a positive sign, since I understood that it was ultimately based on real needs that could be worked through. What our negotiations led to was a fungible series of age-appropriate stories that we managed to create together on the blackboard and then share.

The techniques we used to develop these co-written texts gradually became familiar enough to provide a much-needed focal point for their creativity. In this final section, I describe the more useful blackboard storytelling techniques that we created and suggest their relevance to my students' belated acquisition of written English.

Appropriate Technologies: 'Blackboard Texts' and the Remediation Process

Besides the grammar exercises we composed on the board, I started to reproduce chalk copies of other activities that I pieced together from local materials. Gradually we came up with composing routines that deployed some highly-specific techniques such as 'sentence combining' and 'language experience', but the first ones were quite simple.

Drawing Picture Stories on the Board

The easiest activities we managed to reproduce on the board were line drawings of familiar events such as buying something at the market. One textbook had a series of such pictures that depicted the act of buying a bird, which I drew on the board. But in keeping with an overarching theme I was building for the class, I added a few scenes where we decided that we should let the bird go free to join the others in the tree. Since my students were prone to dodging difficult (middle-class) tasks, I developed overarching metaphors throughout the semester that focused on a tension between 'wild' and 'tame'--whichcould be respectively linked to contrasting rural and urban definitions for freedom. Whether it was a Canadian basal reader story about a baby bear returned to the wild, or a British children's book about a visit to the zoo, or the capture of a wild gorilla in Africa, or a Tagore poem (*Paper Boats*) depicting the journey 'downstream' from village to city, I sustained this ambivalent contrast to give the students exposure to the deeper literary structures that these various written texts held. This also helped to keep a more sophisticated adult tone going while experimenting with picture books meant for younger audiences. Thus, even with the simplest picture story from a first or second grade text, I could pick out themes that kept them thinking and focused.

The easiest way to use such picture stories was to have the students write or vocalize the actions in the story while I redrew them on the board. This type of oral composing, copying, and rereading became familiar enough and resulted in the production of duplicate student versions on scrap paper that we would study in more detail later. It was also easy to modify the story to match the students' imaginations, which in turn encouraged them to take more ownership of the process. This process of transposing printed versions of stories onto the blackboard set us all free to explore more immediate concerns since it validated any and all links between the world of books and the present moment.

Since research in the U.S.A. at least has shown conclusively that remedial students learn the most from reading a high volume of easy-to-read texts (Allington, 2002), the overarching goal I had for the semester was to provide a steady dose of these. Children's storybooks can be used them in the same way as the picture series exercises to tell fresh stories. Picture books that recounted a journey through some imagined physical space were ideal since I could use the board to map out that space. We would read the book together then work out our own blackboard version of it, adding more words as we went along. But there is a limit to how many little kids books older students can focus on.

Early Attempts to Process Harder Stories on the Board

In general, the age-appropriate reading material at the school was too hard for my students. Two related problems kept appearing as we tried to work with these texts: (1) many of the supplementary reading textbooks were older and most of them foreign and thus culturally difficult to engage; (2) the target vocabulary was too advanced. The one advantage was that there were often enough copies for the whole class. It also helped that they 'looked' like textbooks, so the students took them seriously. But, we had to adapt them somehow or face certain failure.

After struggling valiantly to read these harder texts 'conventionally', the students were more willing to work with the abbreviated versions we managed to reconstruct on the blackboard. It worked to rewrite the story on the board while the students helped reconstruct 'what happened next'. This process gave me control of the vocabulary yet retained the core meaning of the original text. I found also that the best way to select culturally relevant, learnable words was to have the students themselves pick out individual 'study words' from the print copy that they felt ready to learn. I would list these on the corner of the board then proceed to integrate them into the rewritten text and underline them, holding each student accountable for learning to use 'their own words' in new sentences.

The drawback these summary texts had, though, was that I did most of sentence-level composing, so the product was not that easy for the students to study with. It was still 'my' text. However, as they got more familiar with the general process of creating new texts on the board, it was possible to collaborate on certain aspects of the process. I was also becoming more familiar with their grammar 'issues' and began to address these more directly in the context of our reading and writing exercises. These strategic modifications led to two very different approaches: (1) the editing of existing sentences (sentence combining and splitting), and (2) the composing of more complicated whole texts from oral-based classroom discussions (the language experience approach). I will deal with sentence combining first.

Sentence Combining (and Splitting) on the Board

With an eye on my students' grammar 'issues', I began to explore more structured, sentence-level strategies for creating readable texts. Abandoning the security of

textbook readers, I began to experiment with traditional Indian literature from the library. These were most often old editions written in formal English that were not that well edited for young readers. One book in particular had wonderfully short versions of classic tales, but was absolutely impossible to read due to its long, run-on sentences. After rewriting several of these by myself, I discovered that this editing was far more comprehensible when done jointly on the board--starting with the intact text from the book (rather than me making the modifications for them). I told them they needed to make it readable by splitting up the long sentences and making shorter ones. I had already done a few sentence combining exercises with them where we put phrases together to make sentences. But this wasn't all that meaningful (yet). Setting out in reverse order, moving from grammatically dense mega-sentences to more numerous simple ones helped to make 'sentences in general' more visible. The challenge was to 'see' these shorter sentences in the big one and to dress them with the nouns, pronouns, and verbs required by rules that had previously seemed pointless. It took lots of time for them to notice the parts that were missing, but I gave them one point for each shorter sentence they made. In the end they also noticed that this process helped them to read the story, which gave them even more reason to focus on the task.

After working both ways--from pieces to whole and from long to short sentences, the students gradually began to understand that sentences were useful to help make sense of written texts. In contrast to their seemingly effortless grasp of oral English, it became evident that the sentence level grammar had a purpose that was linked finally to something that they valued at least provisionally. But making sense of grammar wasn't the only task we tackled with these texts. I also challenged them to compose stories of their own. As they were also extremely hesitant writers and resisted assignments that involved the composition of even one sentence without some sort of precise model, sentence combining gave us a way to compose entirely new stories. In contrast to the literature in TESOL (e.g., Reid, 1993) that associated this technique with outmoded audiolingual pedagogies, I had originally learned to use it in conjunction with a collection of progressive, highly creative essays in Daiker et al., *Sentence Combining: A Rhetorical Perspective* (1985) that linked the approach to higher-level 'critical' writing tasks. So when I first introduced the approach to my students , my initial goal was not to teach grammar, but rather to promote the critical thinking needed to compose an original idea.

The best example I have of this is when we started with a second grade, page length traditional 'prince falls in love with peasant girl' story and recomposed it, piece by piece, to arrive at a more nuanced version where the young woman negotiates with the prince to get him to promulgate better laws to protect the forest ecosystem she lived in (refusing to marry him till he did so). This transformation of the storyline in the blackboard version was entirely possible when I was the one to select the order and content of the phrases that were to be combined. But knowing that the students needed the freedom to end the story themselves, we composed only the beginning paragraphs together phrase by phrase, then discussed a number of possible endings, while giving them only a few key words for finishing the story. This was too hard for most of my students, but it was interesting to realize that the part that was the hardest seemed to be

thinking about the cultural options that I was proposing. The new plot simply didn't arrive in a socially predictable place. However, despite the fact that I had trouble getting them to imagine a bolder ending to the story, the attempt held their focus far more effectively than a children's book would have. Writing came to take on more nuanced social purposes that promised multiple meanings and required careful attention in order to construct one that fit with their own unique ways of thinking.

My gendered ideology may have pushed them too far in spots, but I doubt that it deviated that much from the school's policy, since they were actively encouraging the girls to publically engage in gender issues such as street protests demanding that anti-prostitution laws be enforced. However, the process of composing romanticized fictional resistance to authority pushed this activity to a new and more abstract (middle-class?) level. What made it particularly meaningful for working-class students was perhaps the way that it scaffolded this middle-class genre without necessarily duplicating the whole of it. By providing fewer key words and leaving the endings undone, sentence combining gave my students a way to imagine (and reimagine) a variety of different outcomes without necessarily having to produce them in an original format.

Cultural Re-writes: Embedding Class Issues in Nationalism

I will end this section with an example of a technique that combines elements of all the previous activities. Using a classic 'feminist' picture book from the 1960's, *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins, I modified the now standard technique of composing a common text from pictures by asking the students to explicitly rewrite the text *as if it happened in India*. As usual, I attempted to keep control of the final copy, but the board soon filled up with new images complete with Bengali names for the animals we decided to put into the story. The terrain of the story also got more concrete, complete with a crocodile-infested river and fish market. Rosie the red hen morphed into Manju the Murgi. She was still a red hen, but she did different things in the story. Rather than walk around a British farmyard, she went to visit the fisherman's shop across the river. The fox that was chasing her also took on a Bengali face, though he still tried to catch the hen. The only problem with this plot was that the board filled up with details so that I could only fit small segments of the story on it. Stage by stage I needed erase previous sentences in order to continue the story. As before, we only managed to finish the first half of the story before the day ended. Since the only full copies of this first half were in the hands of the students, I had to borrow one of these to recoup my control of the text, which I eagerly finished at home by adding yet one more feminist ending. In my version, Manju (the hen) turned out to be delivering freshly laid eggs to customers who paid her a fair wage in return. She also negotiated a plan with the fisherman to rehabilitate the fox with proper education and a future job marketing eggs.

Another novel aspect to this activity was that I had fixed my broken computer that week and managed to produce a typed copy of the text including my version of the story's end. Since I had been packing adverbs into the story as well, I had underlined

these and also highlighted all the relative pronouns that gave the story cohesion. Then I added a list of questions related to these target words as well as a few on social studies topics linked to local autonomy, job creation, and the spreading neo-liberal economy that was taking this autonomy away. As this was the first real print text we had constructed together, I noticed that it captured their attention the next day in an encouraging way that previous texts had not. I also noticed that I had trouble reading it due to the high frequency of Bengali names in it. But I assume they were experiencing the opposite. More than any previous text, the comprehension questions for this one were also much easier for them to respond to. They still had a lot of work to do in order to comprehend what I had added to the text, but I could at least get them to sustain their focus on the text. The following week I heard that one copy of the story had made its way to the boys' school where it was being memorized as an extemporaneous speech for a contest there. So, I do know that it did make some sense to the community at large.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Obviously, it is another matter to ask if and how this *Manju the Murgi* story was 'linguistically' effective with my students as a means of teaching them how to read and write. But this was the last text we made before my tourist visa ran out and I had to leave India. I would have liked to continue this combination of oral negotiation and scaffolding writing to see what else might have evolved from it and to see if it was indeed providing my students the experiences they needed to catch up with their peers. In general, though, I'm convinced that blackboard texts could play a role in helping remediate working-class students in this context. I recently received word that these students did manage to reenter their mainstream classes and were surviving there. I'm still not sure that I was the one who caused this result or what exactly I might have done to help cause it. But after more study and reflection on the situation and the roles that I observed these students playing in my class, I would venture to say that these students were very much highly valued by the school. Even though they were hard to teach, they kept adding in things that were missing from the curriculum that made life at the school more properly Bengali despite its heavy emphasis on English.

The desire to restore a *multilingual* balance after the introduction of English in India is very much an ongoing project for language teachers and linguists in India (e.g., Vaish, 2008a, 2008b, Agnihotri, 2007). It also emerges in the literature on India's social history (e.g., T. Bhattacharya, 2001). I don't imagine my expatriate status, nor my fluency in American English, nor my elemental grasp of postcolonial themes as contributing anything essential to the project at LDS. But I do think that being enabled to participate as a cultural bystander (an apprentice teacher with previous experience in Pakistan) did something special to help a few students re-image themselves in a more creative way that linked them a bit more closely with the craft of making sense of written English. Obviously, there are very real limitations to how much experimentation of this sort is possible in EM schools. I don't think I would have been able to discover these techniques if I had been asked to teach in a mainstream class since most students still do need to focus all day on the curriculum in preexisting

textbooks. I am aware that the textbooks at LDS were the best available and also the best for weaving more familiar native recourses and themes into the curriculum.

The question I end with is how this process of nativizing English might be enhanced even further if students like the ones I had were given a more creative role in the process of curricular reform. Keeping their interests in mind, it is important not just to focus on the problems that disadvantage them, but to notice and value what they bring to this setting. In the context of national unity and the pursuit of democracy, it would seem crucial to understand what students like these might contribute to the process out of their own means and from within their own imagined futures. A vision for EM schooling that did not manage to also carve out a meaningful space for such students would seem to be at the very least--divisive--if not somehow less Indian.

About the Author

Gael Fonken is a licensed American K-12 ESL teacher and freelance poet, who has taught underprivileged learners in the U.S.A., Bangkok, and India. She holds masters degrees in cultural studies and curriculum development; her research focuses on multilingual language policy and student/teacher dialogue. Having lived in South Asia off and on since childhood, her teaching practices, no matter the setting, take on a uniquely transcultural hue.

Notes

[1] For public information on LDS see http://www.loretosealdah.com.

[2] This model of radical equality was worked out not just in the cases of class and religious minorities, but also included individuals having Down Syndrome, orphans, etc. The whole community was intentionally present here (Jessop, 1998).

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