

## Pithy Texts which Leverage Self-Expression

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Using well-written texts to teach English is often viewed as a hangover from the system of education imparted by the British in the Indian subcontinent. Macaulay's Minute of 1835 is a candid enunciation of the colonial agenda: the goal in view was to "form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." (Macaulay,430). In the subcontinent today, the English classroom, though free of colonial shackles is a site where a different kind of angst prevails: in some it is clearly the aspiration to belong to the English speaking world, in others the anxiety about not being left behind or being denied the opportunities for employment and upward mobility to which "English speaking" people have easy access. Macaulay observed

In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government. It is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East.....Whether we look at the intrinsic value of our literature, or at the particular situation of this country, we shall have the strongest reason to think that of all foreign tongues, the English tongue would be the most useful to our native subjects. (Macaulay 428)

Undoubtedly, the learning of English held promise: it is no wonder that the penchant for proficiency in English is deeply entrenched in the Indian soil since colonial times.

In *Masks of Conquest*, Gauri Viswanathan unveils the complex nexus between the English language and 'conquest'. Viswanathan states in "The Beginnings of English Literary Study in India" that the "first stage in the process was an assertion of structural congruence between Christianity and English Literature." (Viswanathan,435) She explicates further by pointing to two powerful influences – Macaulay and Trevelyan. "In their official capacity as members of the Council on Education, Macaulay and his brother-in-law Trevelyan were among those engaged in

a minute analysis of English texts to prove the ‘diffusive benevolence of Christianity’ in them. The process of curricular selection was marked by weighty pronouncements of the ‘sound Protestant principles’ in Shakespeare, the ‘strain of serious piety’ in Addison’s Spectator papers, the ‘scriptural morality’ of Bacon and Locke, the ‘devout sentiment’ of Abercrombie, the ‘noble Christian sentiments’ in Adam Smith....” (Viswanathan in *Post Colonial Studies Reader*435)

The above discussion on ‘English’ ‘texts’ was undertaken to highlight the fact that texts are shaping influences. The older generation of university educated Indians, belonging to the pre independence era, acquired their proficiency of English and much of their sensibilities from the system of English teaching promulgated by the British raj.

In postcolonial India which is an active participant in “globalization”, extensive reading (of which Shakespeare, Milton and the Romantic poets were salient constituents) is not outmoded. There is however, a paradigm shift and texts which intersect with the world of the learner are included in text books: the ‘ethnic’ composition of “English” texts has changed in the Foundation Course of the undergraduate programme. For example, Martin Luther King Jr’s “I have a dream speech” is a favourite among faculty who prepare text books. It is not uncommon to find R.K. Narayan’s writings and ‘folktales’ of India/other parts of the globe in text books. The teaching-learning atmosphere in ‘English’ classrooms in India has been decolonized – it has indeed come a long way from Macaulay’s ‘Minute’ which aimed at cloning “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Textbooks in the English classroom today cut across boundaries and exhibit more diversity and the tendency to be “Eurocentric” has faded into the annals of colonial history.

“Pithy Texts Which Leverage Self Expression” is an attempt to draw on and align with the approach known as ‘grammar in context’: this approach has demonstrated (through research experiments) that the practice of “reading” was hugely productive in second language acquisition. In the approach adopted in this paper, ‘pithy’ texts are recommended, as they grasp the attention of the learner, and the goal in view is to use the text as a spur which goads the student towards self-expression. Given a classroom environment that is participatory, poems with refrains or epigrammatic/aphoristic prose passages have the potential to achieve this. The student imbibes

impactful lines from the poem or passage and weaves his/her own text with the thread of thought and expression acquired. For example, the 1960s song “A Wonder Like You” , composed by Jerry Fuller and sung by Rick Nelson, has the refrain, “ I’ve never seen a wonder like you”. The song recounts all the “wonders” seen in travels across the globe. The wonders include, “the snow-white mountains of Alaska”, “the rivers of Peru”, “the white cliffs of Dover”, “the pretty dancing girls of Siam”, “the happy Polynesian people”. Every list of “wonders” is followed by the reiteration, “I’ve never seen a wonder like you” This impactful refrain is used to leverage self-expression by encouraging the student to describe the most “wonderful” person in his/her life. The song (poem) is replete with adjectives (a feature that could also give a fillip to the learner’s power of expression.

American country singer, Joey Feek’s composition, “That’s Important to Me” is a compelling text: its’ simple and honest-to-the-core lyrics touch the hearts listeners. This song, when played (by the author of this paper) for audiences at workshops on language learning elicited heartwarming responses from the participants. How did this happen? Joey Feek’s song was in itself a live wire. So emotionally moved were her listeners that the instruction, “Listen to this song and write a few lines about what is important to you” met with poignant and overwhelming responses. The text of Joey’s song is as follows:

Not plannin' my day around the T.V. set

Payin' our bills and stayin' out of debt

That's important to me

That's important to me

Openin' the windows and lettin' in air

Holdin' hands when we're sayin' a prayer

That's important to me

Yeah that's important to me

Havin' somebody to share my life

Loving my husband and bein' a wife

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And the very best mother I can be  
That's important to me

Tellin' the truth and bein' real  
And feeding my family a home cooked meal  
That's important to me  
That's important to me

Plantin' a garden and watchin' it grow  
Keepin' it country on the radio  
That's important to me  
Yeah that's important to me

Always havin' you to hold  
Bein' beside you when we grow old  
And they'll plant us 'neath that big oak tree  
That's important to me

Always havin' you to hold  
Bein' beside you when we grow old  
And they'll plant us 'neath that big oak tree

Believin' our dreams,  
Still bein' ourselves if we ever get there  
That's important to me  
That's important to me  
Yeah, that's important to me  
That's important to me

Structurally, it is the personal pronouns (I, You, We) in the two songs referred to that make these texts persuasive. On a similar note, Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a Dream" speech

is also cited as a text which can be used to teach “persuasive writing and speaking” So also “grammar used for effects and with rhetorical purpose – in road signs, fast-food menus, instruction manuals and all other commonplace forms of communication that nevertheless reflect complex decisions about style, voice, and even correctness.” (Weaver and Bush: 2008: 4). Taglines and slogans for advertisements are also “pithy texts” around which self-expression can be built. L’Oreal’s “Because You’re Worth It”, Nike’s “Just Do It”, McDonald’s “I’m lovin it” and Pepsi’s “There’s no other choice” can indeed unleash a chain of sentences when used as triggers in a classroom situation. The inspirational “Life” poem (the composition of which is generally attributed to Mother Teresa), and reads, “Life is an opportunity, benefit from it/Life is beauty, admire it/Life is bliss, taste it/.....Life is a game, play it.....” has a rhetorical quality similar to the closing lines of Luther King Jr’s “I have a dream” speech. In the classroom, students can be encouraged to write their individual versions of the “Life” poem.

## **Grammar in Context**

“Grammar in Context” as an approach is anathema to traditional grammar teaching which involves identification and labeling such as “parts of speech” or “types of sentences.” On the other hand, ‘grammar in context’ upholds the benefits of reading and the tremendous impact that reading has on writing. A comprehensive overview of grammar in context is presented on the ‘teaching resources’ web page of the Victoria State Government (Government of Australia). The article states that “Teaching about the generic structure of a text is not enough.” What is required is “development of metalinguistic awareness, that is, ‘grammatically informed knowledge about language’ (Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth 2011, p. 11) which supports linguistic decision making (Myhill, Jones, & Watson, 2016).” Learning is facilitated by the use of “model or mentor texts” which “illustrate language choices which students can appropriate into their own texts. This allows for clear links to be made between the texts that students read, the texts that they compose and the ways in which they talk about the texts they read and compose. (<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources>). The “pithy texts” employed in the present work are those “model or mentor texts.”

Constance Weaver in her book *Grammar in Context*, (1996) recounts the work she has done with her students in terms of the tremendous impact ‘reading’ has had on ‘writing’. She alludes the Elley’s Review of nine studies in second language acquisition titled “Acquiring Literacy in a Second Language: The Effect of Book-Based programs” (1991). These studies showcase the impact of ‘extensive reading’. In *The Power of Reading*(1993) Stephen Krashen concludes that ‘reading’ is the most effective means for learners to acquire language skills in context. This reading is “free” and “voluntary” (FVR – Free Voluntary Reading). Apart from leveraging the impetus to compose, ‘grammar in context’ in Weaver’s project encourages the student to edit his/her writing. The teacher provides the support required in the process. In other words the teacher teaches, “relevant aspects of grammar” (subject-verb agreement, for instance) “within the context of students’ writing.” (Weaver, 1996: 144). Weaver’s subsequent book, *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing* (2008) replaces “teaching grammar in the context with teaching grammar in conjunction with writing to allow for a slightly greater range of possibilities” The “thrust of this book is basically the same: teaching useful aspects of grammar as we help students enrich and enhance their writing skills.” (Weaver 2008: 8)

The emphasis on ‘reading’ as a means to acquire language skills is founded on the hypothesis that language acquisition takes place subconsciously: structures and vocabulary get reinforced in the process of extensive reading. Linguist Noam Chomsky’s “Language and the Mind” in which he has clearly laid out his theory of “deep structure” and “surface structure” are foundational to this theory of language *acquisition*.

## **Deep Structure and Surface Structure**

Deep structure is “One or more basic, or kernel structures that underlie the structure of the actual spoken or written sentences, according to transformational grammar.” (Weaver 1986: 32) Weaver offers a graphic explanation of “surface structure” as “ the linear order of words, phrases and clauses, [which] is something like the tip of an iceberg: the part we actually see or hear. The deep and deeper structure is like the submerged part.” (Weaver 1986: 33)

## **The Input Hypothesis and Language ‘Acquisition’**

‘Reading’ through which language is acquired subconsciously is the “input” which hones expression evidenced in writing speaking. In *The Input Hypothesis* (1985) Krashen contrasts language *learning* with language *acquisition*. According to the input hypothesis,

.....second language learners require comprehensible input, represented by  $i+1$ , to move from the current level of acquisition, represented by  $i$ , to the next level of acquisition. Comprehensible input is input that contains a structure that is “a little beyond” the current understanding—with understanding defined as understanding of meaning rather than understanding of form—of the language learner. (Weaver 1996: 48)

In this method second language acquisition, therefore, occurs through exposure to “comprehensible input” ( in lieu of “explicit instruction *learning*” of the traditional approach) (Weaver 1996: 49) Though Krashen is the pioneer in the theory of language acquisition, an expanded definition of language “acquisition” by Gee elucidates is salutary in its elucidation of language acquisition as

.....a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching. It happens in natural settings that are meaningful and functional in the sense that acquirers know that they need to acquire the thing they are exposed to in order to function and that they in fact want to so function” (Gee qtd in Weaver 2008: 150)

Grammar in context is a well-researched approach, with checks and balances in place. One word of caution given to the teacher is with regard to ‘error correction’ Vigorous error correction is discouraged: it is seen as intercepting the learning process by undermining the confidence of the learner. “Fluency First” is a cardinal principle for the practitioners of ‘grammar in context’

## **The ‘Affective Filter’ and ‘Fluency First’**

Popularly known as ‘the CUNY experiments’, “Fluency First: Reversing the Traditional ESL Sequence” (1991) and “Fluency Before Correctness: A Whole Language Experiment in College ESL” were two experiments in teaching English as a Second Language to students

aspiring to enter City University of New York (CUNY). “Fluency First” is a ‘whole-to-part’ approach: essentially it follows the sequence – “fluency-to-clarity-to-correctness” (Weaver 1996:52)

Conscious of the debilitating effect of ‘error correction’, Krashen put forward (in addition to the concept of “comprehensible input”) his “hypothesis that a *low affective filter* is necessary for language acquisition to take place. Briefly put, a low affective filter means that the person is relatively open to learning from the *comprehensible input*, which includes being relatively unafraid of taking risks and making mistakes. (Weaver 1996: 49-50)

“Behavioural versus constructivist approaches to teaching and learning:

The privileging of “fluency” over “correctness” marks ‘grammar in context’ as a ‘cognitive approach’ and quite the opposite of methods adopted by behavioural psychologists. In *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*, Weaver states that “behavioral teaching practices do not facilitate the learning of concepts and strategies to the point of application – as so often they don’t – [and this] confirms for those steeped in cognitive psychology that the behavioral learning theory is inevitably at fault, not the learner or the teacher.” (Weaver 2008: 151) Learners with their ingenuity “inevitably construct strategies and skills for themselves – this is simply the nature of human learning, regardless of our teaching”, Weaver reiterates. (Weaver 2008: 151)

## **Behavioural versus transformative approaches**

In the preference for “fluency” over “correctness”, ‘errors’ are not swept under the carpet, as it were. In the behaviourist approach writing “is often broken down into a number of discrete skills to be memorized and practiced. Errors are emphasized” Conversely, in a transformative classroom, the teacher is aware that students acquire language at their own pace and that they take risks with writing when they are in a comfortable and inviting environment. The transformative teacher is both a writing coach and a writer who shares his or her own process with the students.....In this environment, writing is natural and everyone is a writer. Most important, all students aspire to work on their individual craft because the writing is relevant.” (Weaver 2008: 266)



## Productivity (Illustrated)

The almost futile and unproductive teaching of grammar as a separate subject divorced from writing finds an illustration in the strides towards improvement made by an ‘Asian student’ in Constance Weaver’s teaching programme in the USA. The student recalls, “At the beginning of the semester, I could read only three or four pages at a time in English and write just a few sentences, but by the end I could read a hundred pages and write several pages.” Weaver points out that “In her home country, instruction in English focused exclusively on studying grammar, learning vocabulary by memorizing definitions, and translating texts word for word. This student and classmates with a similar background had scored high enough in the TOEFL to get into an American university “but most had not really learned to read or write in English – or to speak more than a few halting sentences” This illustration of their improvement shows the difference between “learning” and “acquiring.” (Weaver 2008: 148)

“In the Bazaars of Hyderabad” by Sarojini Naidu served as a lynchpin in the Foundation English course for BA/BSc students in the fourth semester, in the recent past, January 2019. The students of II BSc Chemistry enjoyed their reading of “In the Bazaars of Hyderabad”, a text resplendent with all the colours of a market place in India. The students were told that this was an “evocative” piece of writing which conjured up before the very eyes of the reader “turbans of crimson and silver” and “tunics of purple brocade” apart from delectable fruits like “citron, pomegranate and plum”, the heady perfume of flowers and the music of the “sitar, sarangi and drum.” The students were encouraged to “Write an *evocative piece* on a place, event or experience from your sphere of life using the structure of the poem, In the Bazaars of Hyderabad”. Two stanza’s of the poem are given below to showcase, the “structure” of the poem (which is like a dialogue)

What do you sell, O ye merchants?

Richly your wares are displayed

Turbans of crimson and silver

Tunics of purple brocade

Mirrors with panels of amber,  
Daggers with handles of jade.

What do you weigh, O ye vendors?  
Saffron and lentil and rice.  
What do you grind, O ye maidens?  
Sandalwood, henna and spice.  
What do you call, O ye pedlars  
Chessmen and ivory dice

The students (mostly) worked in pairs and came up with their compositions. With the permission of students (Swarnalakshmi, Dhanalakshmi and Dillirani) the full text of two compositions are presented here:

## **Indian Marriage Function ( Swanalakshmi&Dhanalakshmi)**

Why do you celebrate a marriage like a festival, O ye Indians?

It is our tradition to do so.

We join together as a family and celebrate it like a festival.

How do you decorate your marriage halls, O ye Indians?

Full of colourful flowers and banana trees at the entrance.

We have colourful lights in the night.

We invite all by sprinkling rosewater and chandhan

How does the bridegroom look, O ye Indians?

The bridegroom wears a cotton shirt and a cotton dhoti

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In north India, they wear rich brocade kurtas

How does the bride look, O ye Indians?

The bride wears a Kancheepuram silk saree.

She wears heavy jhimkis.

The saree is red and gold and her eyes are lined with black kajal.

In north India, they wear lehngas.

How is the wedding food, O ye Indians?

The banana leaf is filled with rice, sambar, rasam, avial, and curries made of potato and brinjal

There is also appalam, vada and payasam

What is special about your weddings, O ye Indians?

Our weddings are colourful and we have delicious dishes to serve all

To make the special day magical.

## **Village Market (Dillirani)**

Where are you going, O my friend?

I'm going to the village market

Why are you going, O my friend?

To buy vegetables, fruits and other home needs

Why do you like to go to the village market, O my friend?

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Because they sell everything fresh:

It does not contain chemicals.

I saw that the village market is very attractive.

Can I join you, O my friend?

Of course, please do !

But, why do you go to the village market on Monday?

The market opens only on that day

Don't you find it difficult to buy in that crowded place?

No, I like to meet everybody on that day in the market

Because the market is filled with people of my village

It is the best place to meet my friends and share our thoughts with each other

Are there any other benefits of the village market?

We can buy a whole lot of things at affordable prices

Everything here is fresh and at low cost

Village markets are special for the rural people.

The following list of titles and authors is presented with the permission of the students and the full text of these compositions is slated for publication (along with the two published here) in a forthcoming volume.

*In the Bazaars of Ranganathan Street* - Revathi and Venda

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*My Village Festival*– S.P. Eswari and P.S. Bharathi

*My Library* – Praveena& R. Manimegalai

*Going to the Supermarket* – Priya and Jothika

*ThanjaiPeriyaKovil (Big Temple in Thanjavur)*–Manjula&Karthiga

*College Campus* - J. Angel & P.S. Rekha

*We like Sports* - Yamuna and Guna

*A Visit to the National Park* -B. Manimegalai& K. Kowsalya

*A Journey By Train* - Aarunisha&Shakila

*My Grandma's Hometown Carnival – The Lake Carnival (PaatiOoruYerikaraiThiruvizha)*

Shunmathi&Keerthana

*Going to School* - R. Sandhya& B. Pachaiammal

*Shopping in Washermanpet* - L. Sushmitha&D.Nithya

*Journey to Pondicherry* - S. Sangeetha (as Tourist) & R. Rathika (as Guide)

*Famous Temples* - Rajeswari &Bhuvaneshwari

*The Thirukkural* - S. Sandhiya& P. Devaki

*Fear* - S. Nathiya& P. Renuga

For all the compositions listed above, “In the Bazaars of Hyderabad”, served as a “model or mentor text”, an exercise in language acquisition through ‘grammar in context’. These poems by the students of Queen Mary’s College, Chennai are also a tribute “intertextuality”

Intertextuality is one of the most celebrated attributes of a text. These enthusiastic outpourings epitomize intertextuality: the (ad)ventures of the students resulted in teasing out texts from texts, putting flesh on the skeleton of an older text, using a text as a lynchpin (making another text revolve around it) or even a springboard, catapulting the new text to another plane !

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