

BOOK REVIEWS

A Handbook of English Grammar. Rajiva Wijesingha, Foundation Books, 4764/2A.23 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002. 2004. 131 pages. Price: Rs 65 and **Explorations: A Course in Reading, Thinking and Communication Skills.** Orancee Jansz (ed.), Foundation Books, 4764/2A.23 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002. 2004. 134 pages. Price: Rs 65.

This review concerns a pair of books from Sri Lanka to help science students learn English better. In Sri Lanka, science students, educated in their mother tongue, have to take English medium courses at the university. Efforts are required – a crash course usually – to bring such science students up to the required level of proficiency in English. This pair of books seeks to do just that. The books have emerged from several field trials and have been class-tested using a national team of teachers.

After independence, noting that privilege was based on English proficiency, a misadventurous Sri Lankan government imposed a ban on studying in the English medium. This was a fitting way of abolishing the privileges conferred by English and thereby achieving equality through vernacular education, according to the then government.

Unfortunately, the result has been an accentuation of privilege. Previously, a village boy going to a central school picked up an English education, entered government service, and moved to Colombo to see himself and his children joining the privileged. But today the village boy has no such opportunities. Instead, the privileged English-knowing public teach their children English at their homes, while the children study in the vernacular at school. The gap has widened. Him that hath, now hath more.

The follies of the past are widely recognized across party lines today. Education policy has remained unusually constant throughout the last 15 years, despite changes in government. Currently, however, the government is determined to effect the required changes in curriculum. Schools have been authorized to teach once again through the medium of the English language. The terminology includes, as in India, functional English, communicative English, spoken English, and business English.

As a member of Sri Lanka's University Grants Commission (UGC) and Chairman of its Standing Committee on the Teaching of English, it has been my lot to worry about this problem. I therefore welcome these two books that have been selected for special programmes by a Task Force that I chair on 'Life skills for arts undergraduates'. The purpose of this Task Force, generously supported by the government, is, as its name implies, to give a crash course in English to arts graduates so as to increase the chances of their obtaining employment.

The UGC has now for well over a year, had a policy of promoting English language teaching departments. The purpose is to train as many people as possible who can teach practical English or teach their own discipline in the English medium. The debate has been acrimonious as traditionalists do not like the downgrading of Shakespeare, while the practical English folk see little use for Shakespeare. To the latter, the ability to use an article properly must take precedence over the ability to appreciate Shakespeare or Milton.

The two books are well suited for the purpose of teaching English language (or practical English) and are equally well suited for self-learning. Essentially of the same cover design, they indicate their common origin in the Sri Lankan English scene. They are good-quality books internationally published by Sri Lankan authors, something that is rare.

In background, it is useful to say that General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE Ordinary Level) in English in Sri Lanka in the old days had its classic language–literature dichotomy. A few did Syllabus A that consisted of grammar. The rest did Syllabus B that focused on the use of the language. The Syllabus B examinations consisted of an essay, a précis, a translation and questions from a passage. Those who went through Syllabus B, for all practical purposes, were as good at the use of English as those who went through Syllabus A were.

From the mid-1970s onwards however, all students went through the same common syllabus with grammar, but the emphasis on sentence formation was dropped through fill-in-the-blank kind of grammar questions. The end result was a disaster – a random sample of one-page letters by 13 executives of the Sri Lankan system over a period of six months

showed that only three could be relied on to write grammatically correct letters.

The two books under review seek, together, to bridge the gap between the old Syllabus A and Syllabus B. This bridging is effectively done emphasizing grammar through Wijesingha's book, while finding a place for sentence formation abilities through Jansz's book. The books spring from a wealth of experience that the authors have in teaching English, much of which was in helping students (who were earlier taught in their mother-tongue) to cope with English at the university level. As the experiment in restoring English went into full gear, the authors were also involved in introducing a compulsory subject titled General English to all students doing their GCE (Advanced Level).

Together, the authors (and their two separate books) form an effective team in teaching English at a later stage. Perhaps, Wijesingha's is the most daring of these two books for it seeks to teach grammar at an advanced stage of education to those who missed the opportunity earlier to learn it naturally. As the author states, the book seeks to teach grammar overcoming the long-held but mistaken belief 'that grammar is not to be taught but to be 'picked up''. I am an engineer who picked up grammar (rather than formally learning it) by reading good authors. I function reasonably well in English without formally knowing good parts of Wijesingha's book. Therefore I am fascinated with his thesis that grammar can be easily taught at a later stage rather than getting picked up.

It is indeed true that formal grammar helps those who are not yet fluent to break up a sentence and understand why it is correct or not. Wijesingha's book is admirable for teaching grammar in a simple way.

On the other hand, I can say from personal experience that merely through natural fluency in the language, one can tell right English from wrong English without explicitly knowing the rules of grammar beyond Fowler¹. Indeed, I find knowledge of rules such as on 'object complements', 'gerunds', 'intransitive verbs' and 'linking verbs' totally irrelevant to me, although my sentences would automatically conform to these rules. That is because much of grammar is the application of natural logic. For example, in a matter that baffles and befuddles many South Asian speakers of English – whether

it is 'one of my friend' or 'one of my friends' – the puzzle is more easily answered by ordinary, simple logic than by a grammar book.

A section that I consider important is that dealing with articles, the incorrect use (or non-use) of which plagues many a South Asian. I do not think that the chapter is extensive enough for a raw student to be comfortable with the use of articles after studying the book. As a teacher teaching engineering students, I know how my students struggle to understand why 'Poisson's equation' and 'the Poisson equation' are correct, but not 'the Poisson's equation' or 'Poisson equation'.

I also think that there would have been some benefit if at least one of the books had addressed the matter of US English versus the Commonwealth English that we use. Particularly, in these days of the word processor – that dreadful but indispensable corporate supervisor of our writings, Microsoft Word – which automatically changes what we type as 'travelling' into 'traveling' and marks the word 'favour' with a red-underline. Such a section would have been useful to young undergraduates to churn out written assignments.

It is in pushing the use of English or practical English that Jansz's book admirably complements Wijesingha's. For it explores the other side of the Syllabus A – Syllabus-B division, I think the most important side. Although the cover misleadingly lists her as the editor, she really is the single author of the book. She simply uses the published writings of several persons in an intelligent way to teach. The focus is on practical English, i.e. the skills of speaking, writing, reading and listening. The book uses extensive essay-like material from various authors – consisting of stories, histories, biographies, etc. – to engage the students and promote these skills in them. Well-structured exercises, including group exercises, build on the pedagogy of each chapter.

The drawings and illustrations with local scenes are quite welcome. However, if I have a complaint, it is that the book, in seeking to indigenize English, commits the very political incorrectness it seeks to avoid. For instance, in a country where some 26% are Tamil-speaking, to use the majority-language words in the middle of a sentence (albeit in italics), as if everyone knows or, more ominously, has to know the language, creates fear,

annoyance and hurt. The same feelings are evoked in me on reading well-known English magazines from India, where suddenly there is a full Hindi phrase. This oversight in Jansz's book would also be a hindrance to Indian readers, particularly because the names in the stories will also be a little alien and this weakness would hurt the Indian market, particularly if the intention in publishing in India is also to make inroads there. It is well to remember – and easy to accept if we leave political positions aside – that, to a general reader, John Smith is a more familiar name than is Padmalal Dhammananda.

The deficiency is to be excused because it does not arise from insensitivity, but rather because Jansz's teaching experience is mainly with a mono-ethnic class at her university and especially because her book overcomes this deficiency by rising to pedagogic heights with its experienced use of story and conversation. In fact, the stories themselves are so delightful that they can be used as light reading for entertainment. The group exercises that come from several years of her teaching experience are thoughtfully designed to get students to converse. Topics for debates are used for enabling students to express themselves. Jansz's methods are most useful to teachers who struggle with grown-up students not familiar with English and are perhaps a little shy about their mistakes.

As an aside the important US/Commonwealth difference shows in the books. In the matter of a quoted passage on Abraham Lincoln, presumably from the US, Jansz's book has the close-quotation mark and then the comma, whereas in the other parts by Commonwealth authors, it is first the comma and then the quotation mark. Such questions are of everyday occurrence to students who write thoughtfully and must be usefully dealt with – for some of them will see the difference and wonder why, without being told why.

In Sri Lanka, where the English language divides people into classes, to make a mistake in public is a shameful thing. In that milieu, to presume to teach English through a book is daring, especially since even a single grammatical mistake would evoke snide comments and would be doubly shameful. The authors have dared and have generally succeeded. If there are mistakes to grumble about, it would be over the prefix 'sub'-being used as a stand-alone word and – a

matter for debate – whether a shortened form of refrigerator is a fridge, as the authors use (and Microsoft Word accepts) or, as I would say, 'frig' corresponding to the middle of the word 'refrigerator'. Other gaps are in using the superfluous conjunction 'and so' and the phrase 'three spoons full of sugar' (rather than 'three spoonfuls of sugar'). A sentence beginning with 'And' is said to be unusual. But, as I recall from Fowler¹, a look at King James' Version of the Holy Bible, which is considered a masterpiece of the English language, shows how wrong it is to argue that sentences should not begin with the word 'And'.

It is said that at a publisher's a dictionary uses five copy-editors and, given its even greater importance, a pharmacopoeia seven. How many for a language book? I do not know, but given the skills in English in Sri Lanka and how they are today confined mainly to people in retirement, the book is well edited.

To conclude, the two books meet the needs for which they were written. Even old hands who function well in English but know no formal grammar, would find the books fascinating and useful. Indeed, at the level for which they are designed, they can make a useful vade-mecum for young undergraduates.

1. Fowler, H. W., *Modern English Usage*, 2nd edn as revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, Oxford, 1965.

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LASERS – Principles, Types and Applications. K. R. Nambiar. New Age International Publishers, 4835/24, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002. 2004. 772 pp. Price: Rs 325.

Nobel Laureate Glenn T. Seaborg, who was also the former US Atomic Energy Commission Chairman, once commented that if Samuel Glasstone were not born, then science would not have lost much; but the world would have lost a great