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Title:

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Date:

2018-01

Citation:

Tan, J. (2018). My evolving English teacher identity. *Idiom*, 54 (3), pp.32-33

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/355157>

My evolving English teacher identity

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I remember how I first became interested in English as a discipline. Coming from the pragmatic Singaporean society, where those who excelled in school were quickly channelled into professional degree programs at University, ie. Medicine, Engineering, Architecture and Law, English majors were a rarity.

I had two English teachers in my final year at school who opened the wonders of close reading to me. One spent an entire week reading Chapter 1 of *Jane Eyre* with us. The story of Jane retiring from the world through reading resonated with those who relished some quiet. The other teacher taught practical criticism, where we read Sylvia Plath's *Miss Drake proceeds to Supper*:

No novice
In those elaborate rituals
Which allay the malice
Of knotted table and crooked chair,
The new woman in the ward
Wears purple, steps carefully
Among her secret combinations
Of eggshells...

Finding my way through the 'elaborate rituals' of literary texts by decoding their 'secret combinations' became a fascinating puzzle.

I taught my first English class as part of a job interview at an independent school in Singapore with its own hiring policy. I picked that very *Jane Eyre* opening

which had made me fall in love with English. I remember writing up a worksheet focussed on the standard literary features—setting, tone, narrator and imagery. I recall doing basic things—cold calling students to read, breaking them into groups to work on questions and then reconvening for a whole class report.

I went so overtime that the observing Head of the Department had to leave for her next class. Somehow, I still got the job. Later, I learnt that despite my inexperience, they felt comfortable with my content knowledge and genuine wish to engage with students.

Teaching as an untrained teacher, I was mentored by the school's best English teachers. We team-taught, I attended all their classes and they sat in mine. Without a formal teaching degree but with expertise gained by being apprenticed to experienced teachers, my initial approach to teaching could best be described as intuitive—echoing what the expert did without really knowing why.

This auspicious start to my English teaching career was interrupted when I moved to Shanghai after two years. There, I taught primary school English in an international school. With a multinational student cohort, whose staying duration was often determined by the length of their expatriate parents' employment postings, the sense of academic learning was much more transient.

I remember being quite concerned when a particularly headstrong student had difficulty reading, writing and speaking in English. I rang her dad with the intention of partnering with him to support the student's academic English. To my surprise, he told me firmly but kindly that he just wanted his daughter to be happy and to enjoy school.

With less focus on assessments and a uniform curriculum, I could leave off unit plans and try out new things. I procured documentary DVDs sold everywhere on the streets of Shanghai for my lessons. I organised an afternoon of music and poetry performed for students and by students. I collected examples of Chinglish to add authenticity to my lessons.

Weekends were spent travelling the vast country or traversing its peopled streets. On these trips, I was always on the lookout for lesson ideas, a practice I still observe today. Like any other school discipline, teaching resources could be found all around us. For English, we look for everyday objects of culture, meaning and language. Being in an international school in China also meant coming into contact with EFL students. Although I wasn't fully aware at the time, EFL students bring with them vast cultural capital, not limited to their bilingualism.

The honeymoon period in China drew to a close when I felt ready to undertake further study and to work with older students. The first stop upon my arrival in Melbourne was Readings Bookshop

on Lygon Street, Carlton. In this city, everyone reads. You don't have to be studying English Literature to be in a book group or to hold insightful conversations about new release fiction. How wonderful it is to be living in a UNESCO City of Literature.

I worked as a Resident Tutor at Janet Clarke Hall, a College of the University of Melbourne. Here is a Literature-loving community who counts eminent Australian writers Helen Garner, Anna Goldsworthy and Alice Pung as alumni and tutors. Its academic track record also produced numerous scientists of international standing. How many times have I spoken with high-achieving Biomedicine students who reminisce about their brilliant English teachers in school?

My first few years in Melbourne consisted of completing a graduate degree at the University while tutoring undergraduates in English Literature and Creative Writing. These small-group tutorials cemented my skill of *drawing out* student voices in discussion, a phrase from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* I often quote in my teaching philosophy. So, how does a background of academically-driven and teacher-centred pedagogy sit with this new experience of teaching? I had to question this seriously when I decided to enrol in the Master of Teaching program at the University.

Student inclusion and engagement form the lynchpin of this program. Paulo Freire and Nancy Fraser are the go-to gurus in the core subjects. My prior experience with teaching English to speakers of other languages, my predilection for facilitating group discussion and my love of integrating the other Arts into the study of Literature all informed my practice as a pre-service English teacher.

My English Learning Area seminars introduced the Four Models of English. I found out that my own schooling and prior teaching experiences were grounded in the Skills and Cultural Heritage models. In an assessment-focussed school system, even English became a measurable discipline of decoding texts. In bilingual societies, English often had to compete with a significant mother tongue. This limited contact time resulted in the push to focus on what is traditionally perceived as the great works of English Literature. However, being a sensitive close reader has gone beyond my academic study and teaching, to influence the way I read all texts, from the printed word on the page to the nuances of human conversations and behaviour.

At placement schools, I have drawn on my own interests in Literature and the other Arts and multi-modal approaches to devise learning activities. With a Year 7 EAL class, I used Shaun Tan's

wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* to appeal to the immigrant backgrounds of students. We finished the unit with everyone singing Henry Bishop's *Home Sweet Home* as I accompanied them on the piano. I would not be able to do these enrichment activities in a time-pressured school environment.

In each school that I have been placed, I found myself sparing a thought for students whose first languages are not English. However, instead of seeing them as lower literacy students, I now value their cultural capital and their ability to code-switch and negotiate information in multiple voices. In a communicative language approach, you are not measured exclusively on your accuracy in assessments. My own experience with two languages and the study and work I have done in Asian countries have made me see the value in linguistic diversity.

Finally, the relationship between a student teacher and his mentor teacher is more than just apprenticeship. Subject English goes beyond the study of texts, or the testing of language and literacy. Everyone in the English classroom, whether experienced teacher, beginning teacher, or student, brings their unique cultural resources into the shared learning space.