

Against the Experts

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In the title I have used the word expert. But the talk is actually against establishmentarians, people who support the system. So how many of you are establishmentarians, supporting the system of IIT? Establishmentarians are not many, especially in a crowd like this, which is good. I am going to attack establishmentarians. But, the focus of the talk is on how I learnt spoken English, or English, actually.

I was an establishmentarian, was an “expert”, until about ten years ago. And then, when I left the British Council, I lost all the positions of the head of the unit, curriculum committees, chairperson, and similar other positions. When you lose these positions, you actually get the freedom to be an anti-establishmentarian, anti-expert. So, I am in a lucky position now to be an anti-establishmentarian and anti-expert. You can call me contrarian - not having typical popular views, not having a position, and, thus, not compelled to do certain things, but be a person who has absolute intellectual freedom, at least to think what he wants to think, if not to do what he wants to do.

My village is about three miles away from the small Taluk Headquarters called Tiruchendur, about 30 kms from the port city of Tuticorin.

The further south you go, circumstances to learn English actually become more difficult. What are the difficulties in a village? First of all, my home language was a non-English language, Tamil, only Tamil. My father was very keen on fighting cases in the court, and, therefore, he had a boxful of papers in English. They were all casesheets produced by my father’s lawyer, and also by the lawyers of other people in the village. These papers were there with my father because my father used to play the role of adviser to the local people. He was knowledgeable, as far as local law was concerned, the local politics was concerned. So, there were some papers in English related to court cases.

There was one book also in my home, two books, actually, in English. One was my sister’s *Lifco English – English- Tamil Dictionary*. *The Bible* we had at home was not in English, it was in Tamil; the other book was my sister’s English textbook.

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So, what were the terms we were using which were from English? About four hundred and fifty words were found to be borrowed from English into Tamil – paper, pencil, train. You know, such words have become Tamil now. And therefore, those words were familiar to me. But proper English words were unfamiliar to me and to the other members of the family. So I come from a family where Tamil was the home language.

Now what about my school? We had a Girls' Elementary School, a Boys' Elementary School, and a Training School in the village. Only two people conversed in English. The Head Master of the Boys' School, Susai Marian, used to speak in English. He had been educated in what was in those days called the Oxford of Tamil Nadu, Palayamkottai, or Tirunelveli. This district headquarters had many schools and colleges. They were all doing outstandingly well educationally, and also in sports. Many hockey players came from my college. Some represented Madras University. But many players for hockey, volleyball, some also for football, came from our colleges. In other words, these colleges, St John's and St Xavier's, were good at both sports and education. They were so reputable that they were known as the Oxford and Cambridge of that area of Tamil Nadu, actually. So this Susai Marian went to Palayamkottai to complete his tenth standard. That's how he learnt English.

And what about the village? There were occasions when there were three people who could speak English. The inspector of police, who came from Tiruchendur, the Taluk

headquarters, could speak English. Later, I am going to refer to these three people who were responsible for creating in me what I call Machiavellian, *chanakyan* motivation to learn English. These people were at least partly responsible for my motivation, my keen motivation to learn English. I will come back to this story in a minute. So that is the kind of school and village I come from.

Now the neighbouring town, Virpandianpattinam, where I had my high school education, is very peculiar. Because all the citizens of that town were Christians. They were Anglophiles; they loved English; they had Anglicized Indian culture. Or, you can say, they had the Westernized Indian culture, because of about two hundred years of Portuguese influence, the Western influence. Many people from this place worked abroad. They also went abroad to learn English, because that was prestigious in those days.

So, there was a small town, only about two miles from my village, where English was frequently spoken; where English was a home language; where English was the language of the school; where English was spoken even on the football field. Yet we could not benefit from that, because our village would not have anything to do with that village. Can you guess the reason? Is it religion? Language? Our mother tongue was common, Tamil. Why do you think even though there was opportunity to learn English from the neighbouring village I could not learn it? My peers, people like me, in the village could not pick up the language from that village, even though we

went to that school to get education up above the ninth standard. What was the reason? Caste came in the way. Therefore, they would have only religious activities with us, but not educational activities with us, not linguistic activities. Therefore, I lost the opportunity to learn English from them.

In the whole village, there were about 250 voters at that time. There must have been at least 2000 people in the village. And yet there was only one newspaper in English, and only two speakers of English. I had to walk three miles to Tiruchendhur, the Taluk Head Quarters, to have access to English newspapers. Remember even when I walked the three miles, went to the library, run by the Panchayat Office, I had to wait for my turn. Because I was not the only one there, but there was only one newspaper. We could not separate the sheets of the paper. They were all stitched together, and, therefore, after one person finished reading, the next person in the queue could read the paper. They were very strict with that. And, therefore, access to English materials was extremely limited.

Paucity of time was another important obstacle which I had to overcome. I used to get up at three thirty or four o'clock in the morning. Otherwise, we were not in a position to get money for food. Therefore, I used to get up at three thirty or four o'clock, walk about a mile, and go to the grove of casuarina trees; this is a kind of tree we were supposed to water to earn our livelihood. Sounless you got up early, and worked for about three hours in the casuarina grove, you would not be able to

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get any food. All your sparetime, thus, was spent on working for food.

Poverty does another thing to the learner. It doesn't give any opportunity where you have a sense of hope, hope for the future. You do not have many opportunities where you can think of a bright future. But then somebody, who may be a total stranger, will appear in your life and will help. Or, somebody who can be a role model for you, in your village, or in the neighbouring village, will transform you. So, when there is utter poverty, there is only hopelessness. Now when you are hopeless, everything gets affected; whether you want to learn English, or you want to learn to play football. When you are not hopeful, then you can learn neither this nor that. So, I was in that situation, and, therefore, eventhough I wanted to learn English, I could not do so because of poverty.

How did I overcome all these challenges? After my pre-university course, I was working in Kodaikanal, in a hotel, as a waiter. There, waiters are also called room boys. So I was one of those room boys in a hotel. Because my plan was to earn some money for two months in the summer vacation in the summer resort, and then pay the first semester fee for my Chemistry course. When I was working as a waiter, I was about seventeen or eighteen.

One day I noticed that a rather large family came from Gujarat. They stayed in the deluxe suite. There were many young and old people in the group, men and women, but I was attracted by one member of the group. It was a girl, about my age, not fat,

not too thin, of very fair skin, very attractive! At that age, any girl is attractive. But I was especially attracted towards this girl.

You know what I did? As a room boy, if I had to take tea, I would make a mistake. If they said five cups of tea and five cups of coffee, I would take six cups of coffee and four cups of tea, making the mistake deliberately so that they would ask me to come to the room again. This way I could have a look at the girl again. Now this continued for about ten days because they were staying there only for ten days. And the tenth day came, and I knew they were leaving. That meant that this girl was also leaving. That is what mattered to me. And, therefore, that day when there was an hour before they left, I went to the room with cups of tea, biscuits, snacks and so on, and when they were distributing these things among themselves, among the members of that Gujarati family, then I heard suddenly somebody shouting at me. It was this girl. She said, "Why are you staring at me like a cur!" Yes, that was the sentence.

She shouted at the top of her voice, "Why are you staring at me like a cur!" Now what is the meaning of the word "cur"? That's what attracted me. The girl was abusing me, cursing me, shouting at me, therefore, it sounded something like a swear word, a curse. It is an animal. Cur is a special kind of dog. Do you think dog is clean? Do you think a dog is well-fed? No, do you think it is somebody's pet? It's a street dog, stray dog, hungry dog, dirty dog!

Actually, I was not sure of the meaning of

the word. I was not bothered about whether she cursed me, or, whether she praised me! Now that was not what mattered to me on that occasion. I was focusing my attention entirely on the term 'cur'. In other words, what mattered to me in my life at that point, in spite of the girl, was English. In other words, I was so madly in love with English that even when somebody cursed me, abused me, called me pariah dog, I was interested in learning a word rather than feel sorry about being cursed by that girl. The point I am making here is whenever opportunities arose for me to learn English, that is what mattered to me. Whether it was a negative feeling, whether it was an occasion when somebody abused me, it didn't matter. If that could give me an opportunity to learn a single word, I valued it highly. And I learnt it.

So what I did was to run to my room, open my old tin trunk, take my *Lifco Dictionary*, and refer to the meaning of the word. And that word became one of my possessions. Even today I have not forgotten it. Even though I have not called anybody a cur, I know what that word means, how it is different from the "dog", the puppy.

So, the first point I am trying to make is we can learn, not only you and I, anybody can learn a second language, not only English, any second language, whether its spoken aspect or the written aspect, if the motivation to learn, especially genuine, deep, keen motivation is there. So that is the first point I am making.

Do experts agree with me? You will listen to

it after I list a few more lessons we can learn.

Earlier, I referred to the Machiavellian motivation. Can anybody find out who I am referring to. I am not sure of his nationality, it doesn't matter. Italian? He wrote a book called *The Prince*. That book was used by the royal families in Europe as a textbook to train their children in the art of ruling, the art of politics. So Machiavelli is supposed to be the father of politics. That is why, earlier I referred to Chanakya. What is Machiavellian motivation?

Let me return to my story of the Inspector from Thiruchendur. Whenever the inspector came to our village, the three people joined together – the parish priest, the headmaster of my school, and this inspector of police. These three joined together and spoke in English. They knew Tamil, but they wouldn't speak in Tamil. Why? Only then the Panchayat, the villagers, will not actually understand what they were saying.

The second thing is whenever somebody used English, these three people believed that whatever was said was true. If a woman is giving witness, and if that woman could utter one or two words in English, especially a complete sentence, they would believe her, but they would not believe the man who would really be speaking the truth. In other words, English was considered by these three people as the language of power; more importantly, as the language of truth.

Now, my father, as I told you before, used to fight for the villagers, he was very active

in the local politics. So, if my father spoke the truth, in the panchayat during the discussion, he was not believed, he was not trusted, his statements were not valued, because he could not speak English. Whereas the police officer, the parish priest, and the headmaster, when they said something, especially using English, then people who had the authority to judge thought that that was the truth. In other words, English was presumed as not only the language of power, but also of truth. And, therefore, I decided to learn the language so that one day I could use it against them, against the inspector of police, against parish priest and against the head master. That is what I achieved about ten years later.

I was able to get my M A degree, I was able to go abroad, and then come back and get the lecturer's job, and then use my position, use my English language proficiency to work against them. I went even to the Episcopal court set up by the Pope from Rome and argued my case in Tuticorin and won it. Because I spoke in English fluently, perhaps more fluently than the bishop, they passed the judgment in my family's favour. That is how my sister's marriage was saved. So at that young age I was able to see English as the language of not only power, but also the language of truth.

Earlier, I told you that I used to get up at three thirty or four o'clock. That is because I had to water the casuarinatrees. But that practice had to continue because the BBC Radio, started special English programmes for learners like us at four thirty in the

morning. Even now at four thirty there is news, and after that, till about six thirty, there are special programmes for learners of English. So, even in those days with an old radio set at four thirty in the morning I started listening to good spoken English. And it went on up to six thirty in the morning. So, for two continuous hours, if I had some freedom from work, then I listened to the British Broadcasting Corporation's radio programme.

How many of you are familiar with Wren and Martin's Grammar & Composition? Good that it is taught even now! Now I am going to make an important distinction between knowledge about English and knowledge of English. If you look at the first half dealing with articles, prepositions, relative clauses, etc, then the authors deal with knowledge about English; but if you come to the second half of the book, where there are letters, essays, paraphrases of poems, and things like that, then that section deals with knowledge of English.

In the second part, they actually teach you or develop your skill to use English – to help you understand poetry, use English to understand a letter of complaint, use English to understand anything, or to write anything. So, these days we make an important distinction between knowledge **of** English and knowledge **about** English. Even in those days, even though I had not met any English language expert, I somehow felt that the second part of Wren and Martin was more important than the first part, and, therefore, I focused on knowledge **of** English, not knowledge **about** English. In

other words, I did not bother about grammar **of** English, but bothered about use of English. And that is how I was able to pick up English very quickly, even without the teacher.

1975 was a turning point in my life, because that was the time when I got an application form for which I had not made any request. From somewhere, it came to my Madurai home, and it was an application form for a fat scholarship. I was able to go to the UK for one year, carry out a post graduate education, M Sc in Applied Linguistics, with all the expenses met, including air fare, food and accommodation, money for books, money for travel, money to get even materials from abroad, like the U S and France. It was a very rich scholarship, and I did not ask for it, but the application came to my house. I knew who sent it later. What I am saying is that showed that the British Council, which sent me the application, started recognizing me as a good user of English. That's why I am choosing 1975 as the tipping point in my life.

The first point is that if you want to really overcome the difficulties, if you want to really master the language, especially spoken language, it is not enough to know the tricks of the trade. But on top of them, you need some general success mantra. That is why self-development books are so important. Today, I don't know anybody in the world, any expert in the world, who says to master English you need to know some rules of good language learning, besides some general success *mantras*, success secrets.

Now one of the first success secrets I learnt in my life even at that young age was that all of us are gifted to learn any language. This is a general rule, though the English Language Teaching specialists may not say this so openly. They write reams and reams of papers, they publish in journals, but do they openly say that all our learners actually have the gift given by God, or Nature, to learn a second language? They don't tell you that. But that is something which I observe when I notice people around. People who want to learn something can learn it.

So the first lesson I would like to pass on to you is that all of us are wired to learn a second language. There is research evidence also to prove this. A professor called Pitt Corder² of Edinburgh university, where I carried out my M Sc in Applied Linguistics, has studied this problem very deeply, and he claims that if learners have two things when learning a language, learning will automatically follow. Number one, motivation; number two, exposure. Given motivation and exposure, second language learning is automatic.

Where is this other piece of proof? You look at English medium schools. Why do you think my servant wants to send her children to the English medium school? Why do you think 500 CBSE English medium schools have been started in Tamil Nadu in one year? It is a record breaking

number. Why do you think so many parents are keen to send their children to English medium schools. Why? It is because of this, because of exposure, because that is the best situation to learn English. You have got motivation, but they are needed to give you exposure. And the exposure is ideal in the English medium situation. So, whenever English medium is used, you know, people learn the language automatically. The best way to learn a language is to use that language as the medium of instruction.

Do experts say this? No! That is the problem. They know that this is a fact; my servant knows that this is a fact; and a majority of parents know that this is a fact. But the experts don't say this. Instead, in their own institutions, in the government of Tamil Nadu maybe, in the university system, Madras University, or Madurai University, what do these experts do? They try to produce not the English medium situation. To teach English, they try to produce a separate English curriculum. They have a separate set of English text books. They have separate English language texts, and they claim that their curriculum can teach English. Is it true? Does it succeed? Does the system succeed? No!

I am teaching slum children now, in the evening. And there is a sixth standard child

²Stephen Pit Corder (6 October 1918 – 27 January 1990), generally known as **Pit Corder**, was a professor of applied linguistics at Edinburgh University, known for his contribution to the study of error analysis. He was the first chairman of the British Association for Applied Linguistics, 1967–70, and was instrumental in developing the field of applied linguistics in the United Kingdom See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pit_Corder>

who is not able to write his own name in English! Remember, English is begun in Tamil Nadu in Standard One. This boy has learnt English for six years, and yet he is not able to write his own name in English! I tried to find out, if he was suffering from dyslexia, or any brain deficiency. No, he is normal.

What does it mean? What do the experts say? This is my final point. Have you heard about a famous agricultural scientist, in America? I am referring to George Washington Carver³, who was one of the few people to create the agricultural science in America. People were not ready to eat tomato. The Blacks in America at that point of time thought that tomato was poisonous. So Carver had to go from village to village to eradicate poverty, and to show them how to eat tomato, and yet survive, be alive. He also became a great scientist. He discovered about 200 derivatives from the peanut.

Now, I am going to tell you an anecdote from his life and then compare it with actions of today's English language teaching experts.

One day Carver's students wanted to pull his leg. They wanted to play a trick on the professor. Therefore, they brought a display board with a very new kind of bug they had found. Could the professor name this specimen, this bug?

You know what they had done. They, these mischievous students, had created this bug

by putting three different parts of three different bugs together, and had tried to design a new bug. They took the body of the beetle, the legs of the spider, and the head of the ant, and fixed them here as the new kind of bug, and they showed it to Prof Carver, and said, "Can you name it?" Carver looked at it and said this was called "humbug". What is humbug? This is not a bug, this is cheating.

So what English language teaching experts are doing in the name of magical kind of syllabus, text books, learning material, training material, etc is actually humbug. What they need to do is to revise their knowledge in the light of the successful learners who are in thousands and millions in the English medium schools. Let them look at the English medium school children and how they have quickly, efficiently and effectively mastered the language. This is why when they don't learn lessons from such institutions, we say what you are doing is humbug.

So what are the lessons for us? Let me stop by saying that we should follow the successful learners if we want to continue to improve our English. Let us not listen to the experts, they are humbugs!

Thank you very much for your attention!

[Transcribed & edited by Shreesh Chaudhary, Dept of English, GLA University, Mathura 281 406]

³**George Washington Carver**(1860s^{[1][2]} – January 5, 1943), was an American botanist and inventor. He actively promoted alternative crops to cotton and methods to prevent soil depletion. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington_Carver>