

Emergent Language and the Exigency of Teaching English Unplugged

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the implications of Dogme ELT, the concept introduced by Luke Medding and Scott Thornbury, on the ESL scene in India today. We have made strides in the area of student-centred learning and the use of technology in the area of ESL. The article expresses concern about the increasing emphasis on teaching material and technology, often at the expense of empowerment and training of English language teachers. In the specific context of our country, where there is a ubiquitous dearth of resources, it is an imperative to set priorities, and focus much more on teacher development, while giving due importance to infrastructure facilities which are largely technology based. The philosophy of frugality advocated by Dogme ELT, and the notion that second language learning can effectively happen in a materials-light and conversation driven classroom where the teacher is a crucial resource, is of great relevance in this context.

Key words: Dogme ELT, Teaching material

Nearly a decade has passed since Luke Meddings and Scott Thornbury announced their notion of Dogme, with the exhortation to English language teachers to unplug their classes from teaching aids including the coursebook. They presented this in the IATEFL Annual Conference at Cardiff in spring 2009, and the present paper offers certain reflections on the ramifications of this and subsequent presentations, online discussions, and their book titled *Teaching Unplugged: Dogme in English Language Teaching* (2009), from the specific ESL context of India.

The Communicative Language Teaching mode has been in India for quite some time now, though in most contexts we are still struggling with the conflict between the ingrained fixation on a largely explicit grammar focussed learning methodology, and the pressure to shift to a communicative mode of teaching. Technological advancements in imparting education, which includes the use of sophisticated equipment like the interactive whiteboard, digital language labs and innumerable other gadgets have come in to the aid of the language teacher. In fact technology has revolutionised the way

language is learned and taught today. The ubiquitous presence of smartphones has empowered each learner to be equipped with a highly versatile language learning tool with hitherto unheard of potentials. Along with this, immense lot of resources are being expended by schools, colleges and universities on smart classrooms and digital language laboratories. It is an imperative at this point to review our priorities on investing resources in this area, the direction in which we are moving, and the results we seem to gain.

The Dogme perspective in ELT advocates a nearly complete avoidance of all teaching aids, including coursebooks, and promotes a conversation driven, materials-light mode of teaching, with intense focus on emergent language. As Thornbury states in his interview with Albert Rayan, “Dogme ELT certainly hasn’t become mainstream in practice... [b]ut it has entered the mainstream as an idea which many people who are serious about ELT feel is worthy of consideration” (Rayan 12). It is quite evident that a total avoidance of coursebook and teaching aids is not a viable, practical or wise idea, particularly in the Indian context, with its dearth of informed and trained language teachers, and where large classrooms will ever remain a reality one has to accept and find ways to manage. Still, the philosophy behind the Dogme negation of study material including coursebook needs a close scrutiny, as it is bound to yield significant insights, beneficial to our ESL context.

A paper presented in a seminar in the

University of Kerala in 2010 discussed the opinion that Dogme ELT has some serious bearings on the language learning scene in India. It posited that we did have serious problems with resources, and many schools, and even in urban areas, suffered from a dearth in basic infrastructure on a desirable level. Dogme ELT seemed to offer some solutions to our concerns, and the paper was concluded with the statement that the teacher is the most significant resource and teaching aid in the classroom. S/he is the agent who could convert the learners too into resources, whereby the classroom dynamics will yield intense results in terms of contextual and purposeful language learning.

The Communicative Language Teaching strategies have produced the world over very positive results in the language classroom, with its focus on a highly functional methodology, with form based explicit grammar teaching almost invisible. With “affective filters” (www.sdkrashen.com) lowered to an optimal level, particularly due to the confidence gained by the learners through structured peer level interaction in groups and pairs, working on topics close to their hearts and homes, the learners were rapidly gaining communicative competence, particularly when the CLT classes were managed by practitioners who had imbibed the essential spirit of the method, and had the freedom to structure their courses and study material on their own.

Very often however there have been limiting factors. In the countries where the teacher

student ratio has always been optimal, even as few as ten students per teacher, the problem was largely that of the limiting impact of the CLT coursebooks that were rapidly gaining very profitable grounds in the scene. Thornbury notes how the compulsion to rely on a prescribed coursebook for teaching English communicatively proved to be a self-defeating exercise, “[b]ecause, when you have a syllabus of grammatical forms, the tendency is to teach those forms for their own sake, rather than teaching them when they are needed for communicative effectiveness” (Rayan 11). It is to be remembered that this observation is about an ostensibly functional syllabus. The fact is, the enormous weight of a long tradition of overt grammar teaching still pervades the ELT scene, and particularly so in the Indian context.

The central argument of CLT, reiterated in Dogme ELT is that language learning happens in the classroom when the learners interact with the teacher and the teacher with the learners in a dynamic relationship, that are based largely on the human factor, rather than on technology or printed material. CLT has its base on constant interpersonal communication, even from the very early sessions of working with the target language. This base was seriously marred by the coursebooks, though they were apparently designed to enable communicative language teaching in the classroom. This was the original provocation behind Dogme ELT, which went to the extreme of asking teachers of English to take

the “vow of chastity” (Thornbury, 2000, 2), and abandon texts books totally, and go to the classroom with themselves as the material.

It is not argued here that one should do away with coursebooks, and such an extreme step is very unlikely to yield positive results in our context. What is attempted here is to address a condition where the central premises of CLT is often thwarted or made feeble by the overuse of technology and even coursebooks. Though the Dogme ELT precepts did not work as such in any part of the world, they have a few very valid points for English language teachers and researcher to look at. The central argument is that, when we hook our English language teaching to technology, half our attention moves to technology as such, and our focus on emergent language learning is seriously challenged. In our contexts, this aspect of technology is even more significant.

The notion of emergent language, of the target language emerging in the classroom through the unique conversation driven, materials-light environment created by the teacher, is by and large the central premise of Dogme ELT. Medding and Thornbury affirms that language learning “is an *emergent* process” which has “less to do with *covering* items in the syllabus than *uncovering* the ‘the syllabus within’”. That is, if learners are supplied with optimal conditions for language use, and are motivated to take advantage of these opportunities, their inherent learning capacities will be activated, and language –

rather than being *acquired*—will *emerge*” (16).

This idea of the teacher as the major resource in the language classroom, is a valid point of concern in the Indian context, where very often the dearth of material, technology, or even sufficient classroom facilities is a keen feature, particularly in the suburban and rural parts across the country, leaving the onus of teaching almost entirely, and rightfully the responsibility of the teacher. This is where the frugality advocated by DogmeELT becomes crucial, a state where the teachers do not have to worry about technology of teaching aids as an imperative. This is not to underplay the relevance of technology in ELT in anyway, but only to look at the practical aspect of it, in a context where resource allocation needs to be carefully prioritised. The responsibility on the teacher implied in the Dogme ELT conception of “the classroom as simply a room with a few chairs, a blackboard, a teacher and some learners, and where learning is jointly constructed out of the talk that evolves in that simplest, and most prototypical of situations” (Medding and Thornbury, 12), is immense. Thus it happens in our context that the need to keep the teachers empowered and well trained becomes a very major priority, for more than one reason.

The discussion leads to the prime focus in this paper, which is the need for training teachers to such levels that they can confidently and effectively be resources in themselves. We do have elaborate systems to train teachers, particularly in the school level, even beyond the BEd programme

which is mandatory for qualifying to be school teachers. Still there is much to be desired, both in the quality of the training currently imparted, and to make training more systematic and regular. It is sometimes feared whether in the avid quest to shift to a student centric mode of teaching, there has been the exigency of the baby being thrown out with the bath water, with the vital teacher component reduced to the role of mere ‘facilitation’. Any amount of technology or material support will be of little organic, holistic and sustainable use, unless the crucial teacher factor is restored to its rightful place, not as an autocratic omniscient entity, but as the sole agent who can take the learners through the challenging process of language learning, significantly because, among all the ‘learner factors’ the emotive aspect reigns supreme. “Students’ feelings (often referred to as *affect*) go way beyond concerns about how people learn and remember language items. They relate to the whole learning experience and influence how students feel about themselves” (Harmer 58). This is something technology or even the best study material can never hope to replicate, something only a teacher can provide.

There is the great need to ensure that the efficacy of our ESL model is well in place, lest the resources we invest in the area of language education should be unwisely spent. There is a great need to prioritise. Often it is observed that while fund requests for teacher training are treated with an unjustifiable casualness, large amounts are invested on smart classrooms, language

labs, and language learning software, which even the most cursory but studied glance would reveal as largely wasteful spending. An alarming percentage of these gadgets are heavily underused and do not yield results commensurate to the amounts invested on them. The following lines from the article “Technology Can’t Replace a Teacher,” that appeared in *Deccan Chronicle* become pertinent at this point; “Schools are spending money on technology but fail in empowering teachers [. . .] Teachers in this new environment will become more orchestrators of information than instructors” (www.deccanchronicle.com).

The argument therefore is, where we have technology it is most welcome, but where we do not, there is no need to worry overmuch about the technological support systems, when it comes to language teaching. Language teaching can happen most effectively with an equipped teacher, a classroom and a bunch of students who are willing to stay in the classroom for the stipulated hours. What needs to be ensured is, in Dogme ELT terms, that even in a materials-light environment, emergent language can be ensured, which Thornbury believes, and to which one can agree without reservations, is how language learning should happen. The endeavour of teaching English in the communicative mode need

not be dampened by the dearth of material resources, but on the contrary, this can be, and have to be overcome by equipping the teachers more, through systematic trainings and opportunities of exposure to best practices in ELT.

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