“Don’t Forget Me, Sir”: Reflections on “Development” in Hubli, India

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Abstract
For the last several months, I have been holding in tension my beliefs about a fundamentally Eurocentric transnational finance system with the stories of the individual Indian students I met this past summer who want a “better life.” Because most of my time in India unexpectedly was spent teaching English, I’m grappling with the complexities of using English language instruction as a tool to increase opportunities. By participating in English language learning and teaching in India, in some ways, I am perpetuating a system that is not only grossly unfair, but also contributes to huge wealth and accessibility gaps on a global scale. Unfortunately, this problem will take many decades, if not generations, to address.

For now, I would like to share something that, to me, is of critical importance: India is not a state filled with victimhood. It is a thriving, beautiful place – with considerable social and economic challenges, in no small part due to a lengthy and substantial history of colonial invasion. While on a densely crowded public bus, one of my students turned to me and said, “I have one humble request. Do not forget me, sir.” I hope that I, as an individual, never forget the people I have met this summer. I’ve juxtaposed stories about my encounters with several of them into the largely theoretical essay that follows. But more importantly, we – as concerned citizens interested in collective liberation – ought not to forget stories such as these.

Introduction
I met Abhishek during my second day in Hubli. He wore a large grin and a tight purple collared shirt. During my time in Hubli, he quickly became my closest friend, as well as being a student with whom I worked closely. What made our relationship especially remarkable was the intensity of our time together – time that was often spent within the confines of mundane happenings. As our days and weeks together passed, I found that Abhishek exists – or rather, our relationship and interactions exist – at the exact location where polite formality and deeply knowing another person meet.

Very soon after I arrived at the Deshpande Foundation, I began to receive text messages from Abhishek. For the first few days I didn’t respond because I didn’t want to be perceived as having a “personal” relationship with some students, but not others. As the days passed, however, and as the messages continued to seem genuinely thoughtful and inquisitive, I changed my mind and began to respond with a “thank you” if he wished me well, or a “good morning” if he wished me the same. I promised myself that I would bear in mind the power dynamic in our relationship – that I, in

If you stretch your mind all the way as far as it goes
There’s someone out there who lives further than that
In a place you can never know

– Ani DiFranco, “Allergic To Water”
some ways, had significant power over him. I was his “teacher,” at least for a short
time. I understood this and wanted to be
as impartial as possible during my time
with the Deshpande Foundation – out of
fairness to the other students. But, on the
other hand, when he texted “ok shena can
I call you friend :-) ,” I couldn’t help but to
enthusiastically respond “yes.”

The night before we met in person, I
received a text message from Abhishek
that read, “Hi shane my name is Abhishek.
You teaching english is very nice really so
nice ok I will meet you tomorrow ok good
night :-) .” I was pleasantly surprised by
the message, but also embarrassed that
I would have no way of picking Abhishek
out from a crowd of Koutilya Fellowship
students to thank him.

My internship site, the Koutilya Fellowship,
a skill-training program within the
Deshpande Foundation, is a five-month
residential program open to students who
have earned a three-year bachelor of
commerce degree. My work was based in
Karnataka – and, more specifically, Hubli
– a place in India that is not popular for
tourists or study abroad groups. It is out
of the way and poor – but not “so” poor as
to attract a bombardment of non-Indian
led and funded NGOs. This is all to say
that I was certainly an oddity in Hubli, and
accordingly attracted a lot of attention
wherever I went. I did wind up meeting
Abhishek amid what felt like a barrage of
outstretched right hands.

The following evening, while walking
among the chaos of auto rickshaws and
motorcycles – whose indiscriminate horns
and occasional headlights cut through the
orange-brown tint of dusk in Hubli – the
song “unworry” by Ani DiFranco began
playing in my headphones. In “unworry,
DiFranco sings, “And I ain’t gonna waste
your time/Wronging and righting.” This
lyric immediately made me think of a
text message that Abhishek had sent me
earlier in the day in which he apologized
for his lack of English “fluencty.” I remember
receiving it and feeling so sad. Not sad at
or with him, per se, but sad that the world
is in such a state that he expressed shame
for not speaking English in the same way
that I do. Abhishek wrote, “shena firstapol
my english communication is very low
pliz you can understand my message or
not.” I think we should take DiFranco’s
warning seriously: What are we trying to
accomplish by teaching English abroad?

English, Power and Globalization
Since my return to Boston, I have been
struggling to articulate why I found teaching
English in India to be so unsettling. Maybe
it is because my own politics – those
claiming that the presence of English in
India, and the accompanying enterprise of
American college students doing unpaid
internships to spread the language, is
necessarily a form of neo-colonial invasion
– cannot account for Abhishek’s comments.
This is not to suggest that language
hybridity does not have a place in India,
but rather, that the reverence associated
with English feels unearned at best, and, at
worst, like a dangerous product of a rapidly
globalizing world.

For the purpose of clarity, this essay
will employ the word “globalization” to
signify the “emergence of disjunctive
flows of persons, ideas, texts, art forms,
languages, and all sorts of ‘stuff’ also
mak[ing] possible a condition in which
fixity becomes untenable.” 6 Benedicto
writes that this “disjunctive flow” “must be
understood in the plural (globalizations)
and cannot be reduced to a particular
(macroeconomic) logic.” 7 Although
processes of globalization and histories
of colonial conquest reveal major global
power imbalances, a unilateral flow of
power through “Western” imperialism does
not account for Abhishek’s comments. Put
differently, English, and English Language
Learning, is not simply transferred
and copied in new contexts. Instead,
the migrations of peoples and ideas
necessarily reform and blur distinctions
between the “original” concept, as well
as their hybridized forms. As English
terms take on new meanings as they are
adopted in different contexts, it would
be an oversimplification to assume, for
example, that the adoption of English into
non-“Western” contexts is both exclusive to
the upwardly mobile, transnational citizen,
and the end result of a unilateral power
flowing from the “West” to an unspecified
“Other.” 8 As Herbst reminds us, “there are
profound, power-laden complexities of
label making.” 9

The presence of English in India serves
as strong evidence to suggest that any
clear separation or distinction between
“East” and “West” is a false paradigm.
English’s presence in India does, however,
raise questions about exactly whose
body, society and context is assumed
to be politically neutral, and therefore
universalizing and transferable. In other
words, whose body, society and context
are used as the human body, society and
context?

Instead of reproducing distinctly Euro-
American standards associated with
English in non-Euro-American contexts
through what Benedicto calls the
“production of a regime of Whiteness,”
globalization is fundamentally changing
the nature of transnational subjectivities.
In essence, then, Abhishek’s comments
suggest that a process of globalization
collapses any inherent distinction between
the so-called “before,” “during” and “after”
segments of transnational exchange.

Instead of thinking of English
Language Learning in India as
“postcolonial,” I would advocate
instead for understanding it as an
adoption of a particular rationality – one that values quantifying “progress” as a linear trajectory. English is used to serve a belief in a rational, more capable, more complete, and more “modern” state of being. In this way, English Language Learning is not so much “postcolonial” as it is an endorsement of modernity. I came to this conclusion as I reflected on a question-and-answer session between the Koutilya Fellows and an executive employee of the Deshpande Foundation, during which the topic of rational modernity was continually endorsed as a “path forward” for both the Koutilya Fellows and India as a whole. The executive employee rhetorically asked, “How can India grow?” He then responded, “If you all improve [the] way of thinking about [a] problem. If you will improve India, you must change your mindset.” In order to “improve” the Fellows’ “mindset,” the same executive employee heavily endorsed English Language Learning as a critical component in accessing employment opportunities. He commented, “There are lots of jobs – it’s not that there are no jobs. But, you [Koutilya Fellows] are not ready for the jobs. This program [the Koutilya Fellowship] helps you be ready for jobs.”

The link between English literacy and upward mobility is certainly well founded. I wondered, however, if by learning English the Fellows actually saw the significant shift in access to stable employment, disposable income and the social capital that many have come to associate with English speaking in India.

In another question-and-answer session with the same executive employee, one Koutilya Fellow remarked, “Why do you only teach in English? Hindi is also [a] very important language.” In response, the executive employee said, “Okay. Let’s do a poll. Who wants to learn English?” Nearly every student raised his or her hand, and I wondered why. It may be that, since English is associated with significant access to social capital as a “global language,” even if learning English did not concretely improve the students’ day-to-day lives, it does reinforce the idea that rational modernity is of chief importance in India’s future. To account for a discrepancy between the promises of a better life and the many Koutilya Fellows’ relatively stagnant access to stable employment, disposable income and the social capital associated with English literacy, the individual student’s lack of ambition in learning is found responsible. For example, the executive employee reflected, “If you work hard, all jobs are secure. If you don’t work hard, all jobs are insecure.” He also asserted, “If you are different, [a] job will follow you. If you are not different, you will follow [a] job.”

Rather than holding the system responsible for inequities in access to jobs, I observed that an emphasis on English Language Learning endorsed modernism’s endorsement of hyper-individualism. Attributing a student’s ability to secure stable employment to how “special” or “smart” he or she is serves to excuse English Language Learning from critical consideration, because, in this case, it becomes a neutral and apolitical force. In addition, English Language Learning serves modernism’s tendency to attribute success or failure to individual “will power,” without much consideration for structural forces that help some “succeed” much more than others. In this logic, only the individual can do right or wrong by either “improving” his or her “mindset,” or unwittingly trapping him or herself in India’s anti-modernism through a lack of “progress.” Since this logic is based in the individual, modernism as a system and the English Language Learning’s service to the “rational” are never subjected to the same scrutiny.

She looked at me with eyes of desperation and said, “Sir, please correct my mistake.” She was gripping my left wrist with her soft palm, interrupting my attempt to sneak out the door after our class session. During the session, for which I prepared a lesson plan on interview skills, I invited each student to be seated at the front of the class. I individually interviewed each of the 34 students. The exercise had left my body and mind heavy. Saying, “so, tell me a little bit about yourself?” to each of the students made me realize that a legacy of intolerance had become so loud that it drowned out the sound of the students’ voices. The irony of asking the students to talk about themselves in English – the language of the colonizer – was not lost on me.

I smiled weakly and glanced at the clock and again at her, hoping that, maybe, if I said nothing, she would realize that I wasn’t going to be helpful to her – that I couldn’t give her what she wanted. She stood patiently, kindly, as my heart sank. I said, “It was very good. Perhaps a little more eye contact – and you could talk about the program more, if you want.” She replied, “No, sir. Really. I want you to find my mistake.”
Then I realized that I was not teaching English. I was complicit in a system that uses English as a tool to enforce a rationality that leaves no room for all of the language that exists outside of resumes, interviews, and job promotions. I began to question my exclusion of the spaces outside modernity. What could happen if we taught ourselves that valuing our commitment and connection to one another is a skill worth learning, even if it will never have a place on our resumes? What if we taught love, instead of conformity?

Perhaps “love” was not taught because it lacks “practical” use in the world of international finance. It would likely never come up in an interview. There was no place for “love” on her resume. Maybe I was not teaching English, but instructing a very specific kind of rationality.

I let go of her hand, sighed, and said, “Let’s meet tomorrow. I will talk to the whole class about ways to improve.”

It may be useful to think of transnational English Language Learning as a very tall ladder leading to a rooftop — supported by a house structure — with people situated at every rung. While the ladder is used to reach the peak of the rooftop, the people on the rungs closest to the ground are unable to see the destination of their climbing because of obstruction from clouds, although the ladder’s contact with the house is visible to them. In this analogy, globalization acts as the house that the ladder is leaning against. While, at first glance, it may appear that the house is solely responsible for holding up the ladder, upon further examination, we find that both the ladder and the house are actually each exerting force on each other — which allows the ladder to balance against the house. Similarly, while it may appear that a unilateral flow of power from high income, post-industrial countries is entirely supporting English Language Learning in India, in reality, this transnational flow is hybridizing English, India, and our concepts of transnational exchange. Conceptions of the English language, the state of India, and the processes of teaching and learning are all made more complex as both the ladder and the house exert pressure on each other.

My objective is not to outright reject the ladder-climbing process — the process of English Language Learning — but, rather, to ask questions about how and why people became motivated to climb the ladder — to learn English. Utilizing this analogy, I wish to suggest that language is influenced by the circumstances in which it is taught and used. In other words, like the relationship between the ladder and the house, a process of globalization exists in the space where various, often contradictory, forces exert influence on one another. In addition, like the climbing process, I propose that we examine the kinds of power that the industry of English Language Learning promises to the people whose view is obstructed by the clouds — those who are not upwardly mobile, transnational citizens. When we move away from an assumption of English’s inherent goodness, we can adopt a self-reflective practice in order to confront the social, political and economic power that English holds. English does not pose inherent goodness, but rather, promises goodness. We must confront that stark reality that English, taught transnationally, has become heavy with racist, classist and xenophobic underpinning. For example, in the same question-and-answer session between the Koutilya Fellows and an executive employee of the Deshpande Foundation, one student remarked, “My village is very poor.” The executive employee responded, “You need to be the champion of your village. You are saying very negative [comments] and I [may] think your village is the most backward place. You need to say positive [comments], so [your village will] have good branding.” He continued, “There are no villages that are very good or very bad. All villages need improvement.” These comments may reveal a new attitude towards modernity, one that is obsessed with constant “improvement.” If English Language Learning is thought of as an avenue of “improvement,” I fear that its implementation has the potential to exacerbate existing claims to knowledge and legitimacy.

Raise your hand if you speak one language,” I said. Mine was the only hand raised. I put a single line next to the number “one” on the board. I continued, “Raise your hand if you speak two languages.” A handful of students raised their hands. I noted this on the board with five lines next to the number “two.” “Three language?” “Four languages?” “Five or more languages?” Hands rose and fell.

I began almost every class session in this way. I said, “I’m standing at the front of the class, but, I’m actually the person with the least knowledge of languages in the room.”

In her story “Targeted,” featured on The Moth, Jen Lee says, “Whenever you have something — whether it’s a religion or a business, or anything else that you think is the right solution for everybody — through that lens you can’t help but look at everyone in the world as if they are broken, and need to be fixed.” To me, teaching English felt like I was doing just that — that I was trying to “fix” something.

I don’t think that teaching English is always appropriate, but, after my summer in Hubli, I also can’t say that teaching English is always inappropriate. Jen Lee says, “I lost
the ability to ever be that certain and righteous about anything ever again." In Hubli, I lost my ability to condemn outright. And I lost my ability to endorse enthusiastically. Both positions are equally dangerous, because they are both predicated on sameness. To me, both positions say, “What’s good for me is always also good for you.” I am continuing to challenge myself to embrace the “in between.” For me, the “in between” is where human connection rests.

An Ethical “Witnessing”

In “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White,” Alok Vaid-Menon comments, speaking of the protagonist in his poem, “He clung on to a word like a mirror until he could no longer tell the difference between himself and his own reflection.” How can we resist reducing our relationships to what we stand for – when what we stand for, in many ways, creates who we are? In many ways, we are what we look like. In many ways, we look like what we are. In the same poem, Alok Vaid-Menon comments, “We do not yet have a word to account for all the harm that hurt people do to each other. Because this, this is not what English is for. You see? English is for hurting people. English has no words to discuss itself because then English would have to stop speaking.”

If the nature and meaning of words can (and does) change in transnational contexts, it is reasonable to conclude that all language may encompass the same flexibility, under the right circumstances. This is why, in part, it may not be useful to think of English speakers in India as a postcolonial phenomenon. Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate our participation in documenting and witnessing experiences that are “outside” our own. In his TEDx Middlebury talk “we are nothing (and that is beautiful)” Alok Vaid-Menon remarks, “What is the point of a thesis written in a language inaccessible by the very people that it is about? What is the point of a thesis – and a researcher – who is familiar with the names of theories, but not the actual names of her own neighbors?” We need to re-consider what it means to “look.”

This summer, I did a lot of “looking” – which through this essay I’m trying to transform into witnessing. This is not an apolitical act. It is not enough to record events. One must to fully consider the implications of who gets to control knowledge. In her essay “The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology” Scheper-Hughes radically reimagines an overtly morally engaged anthropology. She writes, “I suggest that cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live and that anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded.” Through an acknowledgement of the overtly political nature of “naming,” a philosophically grounded anthropology would ask the ethnographer to consider: “As writers and producers of demanding images and texts, what do we want from our readers? To shock? To evoke pity? To create new forms of narrative, an ‘aesthetic’ of misery, an anthropology of suffering, an anthropological theodicy? And what of the people whose suffering and fearful accommodations to it are transformed into a public spectacle? What is our obligation to them?”

Since my return to Boston, I have been considering: what was the purpose of my “witnessing” in Hubli? What is the use of my documentation? What is my ethical obligation after I have documented? Scheper-Hughes makes an important distinction between “looking” and “witnessing.” She writes, “In the act of writing culture what emerges is always a highly subjective, partial, and fragmentary but also deeply personal record of human lives based in eye-witness accounts and testimony. If ‘observation’ links anthropology to the natural sciences, ‘witnessing’ links anthropology to moral philosophy.” We must transform our documentation into social accountability. Scheper-Hughes writes, “Anthropologists as witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations.”

Perhaps social accountability can come through “witnessing” as an act of rebellion. It is powerful to observe pain and name it – to sanctify an experience by assigning it a word. In a world so filled with pain, we must begin the work of naming to demonstrate that temporalities, ontologies, lives and day-to-day experiences outside of our own are worth sharing. It is not enough to “look.” We must demonstrate a commitment to the ethnographic subject, the storyteller, through “witnessing.” What happens to the storyteller once the ethnographer’s thesis has been published? Her life and her story must be recognized as more than a testament to a visitor’s aloof theory. How will her story become sacred through naming? These are the questions that we must ask ourselves.

“Is your mommy the rice and sambar Madam?” she asked. “Yes, boss,” I replied. I called her “boss” because she held my hand when we dodged cars, motorcycles and cattle to cross the highway. She led, I followed. “Come, sir,” she would say, as she tightened her grip along my pointer finger.

Wetness began to form at the corners of her eyes. In a strained voice she asked, “Do you have the photo?” I took a wallet-sized picture of my mom out my front pocket and stretched out my palm towards her. She didn’t take the photo, but cupped my hand in hers.
“The Lord Shiva will keep mommy, Madam in good health,” she said. We sat on the floor. “Sir,” she protested, uncomfortable that I was seated on the same plane as her. “It’s okay,” I said. She said, “Your mommy Madam saved my life.” I smiled, as the wetness of her eyes transferred to mine.

She asked, “Sir, do you have lunch in your school?” I nodded, with shame suturing the ends of my mouth shut. We both cried. Maybe for different reasons, but maybe for the same.

“You saved me,” I said. “Remember when we cross the road together? I can’t get across the road without you at night,” I remarked. “No, sir. I do not save you,” she protested.

“Why don’t we just try to save each other?” I suggested. I said, “I need you. What would I do without my boss? I would be a mess.” I’m not sure if she understood my words, but we both smiled.¹⁴

Developing Towards What? Or: The Danger of Sameness

This summer, I came to understand that “development” is not just an abstract concept, but also a concrete manifestation within an industry. Like in other industries, the concept of development involves selling an idea to the consumer, reader or development practitioner. Within this industry’s ideology, the two states of being – either “developed” or “not-developed” – are often read in motion and in juxtaposition to one another. Sachs writes, “In order for someone to conceive the possibility of escaping from a particular condition, it is necessary first to fear that one has fallen into that condition. For those who make up two-thirds of the world’s population today, to think of development – of any kind of development – requires first the perception of themselves as underdeveloped, with the whole burden of connotations that this carries.” The concept of “developed” – and, consequently “not developed” – takes on a “suspicious colonizing view”¹⁶ because, in order to achieve a “developed” status, one must start in the realm of “not developed.” We must more deeply consider the question, “What are we ‘developing’ towards and why?”

Sachs comments, speaking of the Truman administration’s characterization of development, “Since then, development has connoted at least one thing: to escape from the undignified condition called underdevelopment.”¹⁷ In order to “escape,” the development industry has created a set of ideals around minimizing differences and emphasizing “unity” to reinforce the concept that high income, post-industrial countries and communities are the pinnacle all other communities should strive to emulate. Sachs writes, “From then on, ‘humanity’ became the common denominator uniting all peoples, causing differences in skin colour, beliefs and social customs to decline in significance.”¹⁸ “Humanity” may be thought of as a way of justifying a false dichotomy between “developed” and “not developed” – one that is predicated on a single path and trajectory for every society.

I fear that English Language Learning has become a site of “humanity,” understood in this homogenizing sense of the word. Instead of invoking “humanity” to mean “unity” or “cohesion,” it may be helpful to consider humanity as a reverence for dignity. In “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White,” Alok Vaid-Menon calls English “a language of loneliness.” He notes that English is used as a mechanism through which “we are just walking around – trying to find ourselves in one another – I mean, colonizing the entire world and calling it ‘building community.’”

Instead of using “humanity” as an ambiguous post-racial, post-class, post-
Camelot of free trade that echoes the marketplace rhetoric of global capitalism, a making of the world and social sciences safe for “low-intensity democracy” backed by World Bank capital. The flight from the local in hot pursuit of a transnational, borderless anthropology implies a parallel flight from local engagements, local commitments, and local accountability. Once the circuits of power are seen as capillary, diffuse, global, and difficult to trace to their sources, the idea of resistance becomes meaningless. It can be either nothing or anything at all.¹⁹ Scheper-Hughes reminds us that it is possible, and possibly more productive, to advocate on the behalf of informants if we refrain from invoking a “sameness” of the human condition. Such a perspective has the danger of reserving ethical intervention only in situations in which we can see ourselves reflected in the conflict.

During my summer in Hubli and since my return to Boston, I have been seriously considering the implications of teaching English abroad. I have been reflecting – often with deep sadness, considerable anger and unwavering disdain – on the complexities of unpacking a global and transnational banking and finance industry that demands English literacy. It is not my intention to minimize the importance of learning English for the Koutilya Fellowship students. Rather, I feel deeply ambivalent about English being a “gatekeeper.”

In “unworry” DiFranco sings:
And I gotta say I’m amazed – not in a good way – at how much I don’t remember. I just gotta hope – though I’m slow – it’s all part of what I know. And the facts are just pretend, anyway. Yeah, the facts are pretend. These lyrics have a renewed meaning to me in light of Abhishek’s concern: “You going to USA then who are help me in learning English [?]” For now, I cannot claim to understand the complexities of learning English in order to achieve “success” – both defined by the students themselves and a global banking industry.

This essay is not meant to provide answers, but rather to ask questions about whose agenda we are enforcing by teaching English. English, as a language, is not the problem. Rather, I wish to question English as an arbiter of knowledge, as an arbiter of a “good” life, as an arbiter of extreme power imbalances on a global scale. I’m grappling with a sense of profound unfairness that directly underlies an inter-state and transnational promotion of English Language Learning. This is – to my mind – a direct implication of centuries of colonial conquest, structural racism, cyclical poverty and unbalanced access to various forms of social, political and economic legitimacy and power. I’m struggling to understand how to negotiate interpersonal relationships that are politically conscious without being reductionist, tokenizing, or objectifying.

“We would like to put their sentence on the board?” I asked, as three dozen hands shot up from nearly as many wooden desks. I arched my bare heels and stood on my tip-toes, taking care not to allow the slippery tile floor to uproot me. I pretended that I had been standing here for a long time, although I have only just arrived. Maybe, if my feet stayed grounded, my presence at the front of the classroom – as the “knower” in the classroom – was warranted, even fair. I had prepared a lesson on sentence structure. “Subject. Verb. Object.” I instructed. “Subject. Verb. Object.” They repeated.

They stretched their tongues and pencils out like safety nets, trying to catch the sales pitch of a “better life.” I considered: What is the difference between me and them? “Everything and nothing,” I thought.

She raised her hand so stringently that I could almost see her veins, pulsing with anticipation, under her fingernails. I invited her up to the chalkboard. When she was done, we went through word by word, until her sentence became legible to prosperity’s promise.

I smiled a smile that showed all of my teeth. Once, someone told me that if you smile really big for a long time, it ticks your body out of sadness. I always smiled really big when I was “correcting” the student’s work – when I was endorsing prosperity’s promise.

I pointed to words on the board and said, “Subject. Verb. Object.” It felt like I was saying, “English. >. Kannada.” It felt like they were repeating “English. >. Kannada.”

Perhaps the only path forward is to hear in Abhishek’s voice – and in the countless other systematically devalued voices – the legitimacy, deep consideration, and appropriate political power that have been stripped from them. In his talk “we are nothing (and that is beautiful),” Alok Vaid-Menon asks, “Who is invited to speak about a movement, and who must die for it?” Our job is to hold space for each other – to recognize difference and be accountable to each other. I went to India for a summer – spent precious time with people who so generously shared their space, food, work environment, and stories with me – and now, like a mismatched children’s toy set, I’m trying to fit the stories of Abhishek’s round pegs into my square-hole life. How can we hold space for each other, when some of us get to take up so much more space than others?
Towards an Ethical English

In “we are nothing (and that is beautiful)’’ Alok Vaid-Menon notes, “Because we have allowed the crisis of success to go unregulated, we find ourselves in a peculiarly awkward position – celebrating every new success story – while, by and large, the world continues to get more unequal, more unhealthy, and more unbearable for the majority of people.” The concept of development is an especially dangerous one because it asks people to think of themselves as ‘‘pre-successful’’ and “post-successful,” with the former corresponding to “not-developed” and the latter to “developed.” Later in his talk, Vaid-Menon argues that if we refuse to think of our lives as a competition toward the goal of “development,” “we are failing to accept our lives as a competition toward the goal. Menon says, “We do not have a word that said “brotherhood.” We each kissed the other lightly on the forehead. When his lips touched my brow, I hoped that they would transfer all of our bond into my brain, so that I could remember our connection for a long time.

If we throw out the word “help,” and un-learn the principles that transnational aid is predicated upon, we may allow growth in directions that don’t lead back to ourselves. If there will ever be truly just living, we must reevaluate who has power and why. I didn’t volunteer in India because I was smarter, more capable, or wanted something more than anybody else. These things are far from random, but rather the result of a historical legacy of power concentrated in a way that benefits me, and harms others.

It now becomes our responsibility to address systems whose power imbalances are so cruel to so many. Our challenge is to make the profound unfairness of life motivate us to witness each other’s experiences. Our challenge is to do this not because, on some fundamental level, we are the same – but because, by embracing difference, we make room for so much that we don’t already know.

By not being special, we can build justice.

Fluent in the Language of Truth

We must reconsider the pedagogy of how English language knowledge is created, validated and transferred. English Language Learning is a symptom of a development industry that “both promises progress in improving the lives of the marginalized masses and threatens this progress with advanced capitalist forces antithetical to these changes.” To reimagine interventions such as English Language Learning in an egalitarian style that is conscious of power-laden claims to knowledge is to disrupt the silence of compliance in a system that validates massive human suffering. We must resist “all of the white men who designed your curriculum – I mean, empire – and disguised it as an education.” As those who are empowered to teach English, it becomes our challenge and responsibility to teach in an ethical way. In our learning, we must not “forget how to speak, forget how to act, forget how to resist.” In our teaching, we must not become indifferent to the thousands of languages that do not have the “better life” sales pitch that English holds. In other words, we must not “forget how to brown, forget how to poor, forget how to human.” In order to realize this transformation – to teach and learn in a way that celebrates difference and recognizes power – we must reframe our lessons. In “When Brown Looks in the Mirror and Comes Out White,” Vaid-Menon says, “We do not have a word in the English language to apologize, and actually mean it.” It is time for us, those who are in a teaching role, to talk openly about how and why English has gained power. Let us teach self-reflexivity, empathy, tolerance and listening. Let us, the American intern-teachers, name historical traumas and teach ourselves openly about how and why English has gained power. Let us teach self-reflexivity, empathy, tolerance and listening. Let us, the American intern-teachers, name historical traumas and teach ourselves and each other to say “I’m sorry” – and really mean it.

To create a just English Language Learning we must reject the premise that it is predicated upon, namely, that students must enter the English-speaking world in order to “improve” their day-to-day lives. Instead, we, the English teachers, must reexamine our own complicity in global knowledge and commerce that demands
English fluency. Of our formal educations and informal social relations, Vaid-Menon says, “They have not taught you to become fluent in the language of truth.”

Now is the time to teach each other and ourselves to become fluent in the language of tolerance; in the language of justice; in the language of truth.

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Notes


3. Ibid., 303.


5. Herbst, 641.


11. Ibid., 416.

12. Ibid., 419.

13. Ibid., 419.

14. The name of the organization the student is referring to is the the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The student I wrote about in the vignette was able to stay in school because she received a midday meal each school day supplied by the Akshaya Patra Foundation. The Akshaya Patra Foundation operates a centralized kitchen in Hubli that serves 126,693 children in 789 government schools. Across India, as of this essay’s publication, Akshaya Patra serves midday meals each school day to 1.4 million students in 10,661 Indian government schools. Because each meal costs Akshaya Patra 5 cents to produce, it costs only 15 dollars to feed a child for an entire year. My mother works for the Akshaya Patra Foundation at their Stoneham, Massachusetts office. https://www.foodforeducation.org/about-us/contact-us


16. Ibid., 7.

17. Ibid., 7.

18. Ibid., 103.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

Additional Reference