

TEACHERS' VOICES

**STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM
2023**

VOL. 3

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FOREWORD



Dr. Premalatha Nair
CHIEF EDITOR

It has been a busy and memorable year for MELTA. We were overwhelmed with the responses from educators who despite heavy and tight schedule servicing the nation, managed to pen their experiences with the hope that these would kindle the hearts of many. Those who read these stories in this volume would be able to identify instances where they too would have gone through similar struggles and challenges while trying to cope and make a difference in the education fraternity. The writers who have contributed to this volume are indeed the unsung heroes who have made great impacts on the future of the new generation.

MELTA would like to acknowledge the contribution made by the late Associate Professor Aminabibi Saidalvi (who was the Director of Publication and the Editor for Teachers' Voices Volume 2) for her dedication and motivation in allowing teachers' voices to be heard through this volume. The committee admired her devotion to MELTA through her passion and attention to details that made her such an asset to this organization. Indeed, MELTA has lost a strong woman whose presence has made a great impact on each one of the committee members and to those who have known her personally.

'When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure'

Unknown

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Stars beneath the Moon

by Ami Amnaida Binti Hamid

The room where the meeting took place was not that cold, but I felt like I was having cold sweats. After a glance, I was thinking to myself, could it be the air conditioning that hung above my front view. Then it hit me. I'm fighting my case alone and nobody there wanted to support me, or at least agree with me. In the previous years, there had always been two categories for our district choral speaking competition. The science, cluster and boarding schools or the A-list schools were grouped together and then there was us, the average day schools. All the schools would be competing against each other, regardless of their categories, but two sets of winners would be announced to encourage the participations of the day schools' pupils. Instead of having three winners, we would have six, but the highest mark scored in either group would be selected to represent the district in the state level competition. One of the meeting agenda was to abolish the two-categories system. As if English is not intimidating enough, the idea of 'Kampung' students having to compete against the crème de la crème students would send chills down to their spine. They were already made known that they are not good enough when they had gotten no As in their UPSR result and now teachers want to ask them to compete on the same level? I opposed the idea as I know it would mean there would be more teams that would go back feeling beaten, despite being able to memorize and perform verses after verses of choral speaking scripts. What harm could it possibly bring when we celebrate the sheer efforts of our children? I was fuming mad, not because of the decision they made, but because I failed to make my voice count at that meeting. I was practically a nobody in that meeting, a young teacher, teaching in a kampung school and it made me realized that people don't just listen to a nobody, no matter how significant the idea is. Leaving that cold room, I still remembered how I vowed to myself that the other contenders wouldn't know what hit them or rather who because they won't see it coming, not by an inch, not by a tiniest micro dust. Maybe I'm over selling; this is a story of a group of paddy farmers' children, born and raised in a 'kampung', competed in a choral speaking competition for the first time, poured heart and soul into their first ever performance, and came back victorious. This is the David and Goliath of choral speaking.

I never wanted to be a teacher. At the age of 20, a teacher, in my eyes is not stylish, doesn't appear professional, doesn't get to make important executive decisions, doesn't get to wear suits and doesn't have the important access card, hung around the neck with a lanyard, getting access to restricted areas where common people couldn't get into. Nevertheless, fate was trying to be funny with me when it was the only job that I thought I was good at and

I was doing it for almost 7 years when I decided to create a choral speaking group that went beyond my own expectation. Creating a choral speaking group in this school was not an easy task. None of the pupils in the school had ever participated in one, and most of them have never even heard of it. Knowing the utter idea of performing in English on a stage would terrify ESL or even EFL learners. I had to convince myself that it's doable and just be positive about it which was against all the cells in my body as I was a rather pessimist person. The minimum members required for a competition is 30 on stage and a conductor. Since it was my second-year teaching in this school, I didn't really know all the pupils in the school and that alone was a true challenge. However, my biggest asset to me at that time was fear.

The pupils were terrified of me as I was not friendly or as chatty as the other female teachers there and I rarely allow any native language conversation in my classes, and I frequently punish those who didn't complete their homework. I made sure that my first impression on them was strict and fierce so that they wouldn't dare to mess with me. So, when I asked them to join the choral speaking group, most of them were reluctant to but had no other choice as they didn't want to be in my bad pupils' book, or so I thought. Only 7 pupils turned up for the first training and I remembered feeling dejected and funny at the same time. Funny how I thought the pupils would obey me when I myself was not even friendly to them. Funny how I thought that fear alone would suffice to motivate people. But then I thought to myself, maybe I didn't instil enough fear. So, I went on threatening the absentees the next day. Six more pupils turned up during the second practice. This time, I was prepared mentally for absentees, unlike during the first practice. "Expect nothing from your students." Somehow, I heard the line echoed in my head with the voice of my lecturer during my degree years. At that time, I didn't even meet half of the required numbers but all praises to Allah the almighty, I was gifted with the idea of making the second session fun. I taught the pupils how to correctly pronounce certain words and, in that process, I made funny faces and voices by over emphasizing certain sounds and words. It was amusing looking at how hard they tried to hold the laughter in, trying not to cross me, and finally burst into laughter when they couldn't stand my silliness.

Those who attended the first two training sessions, went on being present for a whole week and I made sure that no matter how small their achievement was, it would be made known to them that they had done great, so praises after praises were given to them when it was due. I deliberately chose an open space to have the training sessions so that passers-by would see how exciting it could be in hoping that some might



be interested and, also to familiarize the pupils with the presence of an audience. More and more pupils started to turn up to the training sessions during the next few weeks and finally, lo and behold, I completed the team, and I knew that the battle was only half won. As the trainings progressed, as I was doing all the works alone, I sometimes couldn't help but question some of my own ideas, my own decisions to alter certain lines. So, when I started to ask around for opinion, some of the teachers asked me why I need to work so hard. To some of them, being able to obtain certificates of participations alone was enough for the pupils as it was their first time competing. They also said that I had already done a tremendous job at gathering the pupils and that I should not get my hopes high. Baffled by their remark, I pointed out that the pupils could win the first place and I still can't forget the doubtful face they made when I said so. It is almost as if I appeared to be overconfident but all I had was hope. Who would even send a team and not expect them to win? If a win was not to be expected, then should I just admit defeat? Clearly, nobody in this school expected much from a newly formed choral speaking team because all the silvers and golds were always brought in by the marching team or the sports team.

Nevertheless, before we departed to the venue of the competition, with the help of the Islamic Education panels, all teachers and pupils of our school gathered in the school hall, and made dhua for the team, so that our journey and difficulties were made ease, and ultimately praying for victory. It was a gesture that truly humbled me down as I thought I didn't need any of their support, but it made the whole team stronger. It made them feel that their battle mattered to everyone and that validation alone had a big impact on the choral speaking members. Throughout the journey to the competition venue, the members of the choral speaking team recited verses of the Quran in the bus without me instructing them. Their sheer will and determination has already made me proud to call myself their teacher. Since they had never seen a live choral speaking competition and had never participated in one, perhaps, they realized that they lack the experience, and they knew that they needed all the help that they could get. They needed Allah the Almighty to be on their side to compensate what they lack. Their level of submission to god when facing difficult times amazed me because not many teenagers out there had their mindset and maturity.

As the team arrived at the competition venue, I instructed them not to enter the hall until it's their turn to perform so they continued to practise outside the hall, at a parking lot. As I watched the other teams' performance, it struck me that I had forgotten to take care of the team's uniform. Indeed, participants are required to wear the school uniform, but I had a couple of prefects and librarians as team members, so some of their uniforms were not white in colour but blue and purple. A pang of guilt hit me hard at that moment as my choral speaking team was the only odd one out. All the other teams wore single and identical coloured uniform; either all white, or all blue or all purple. Although no marks were allocated for appearance, it would be nice to watch synchronized movement and identical appearance

on stage. My school team was basically underdog to the point that when the time came for their performance, a lot of the audience went out of the hall. Some even stopped their recording because they didn't expect much from us. A lot of them recorded performances of the A-list schools, the science school, the boarding school, and not to forget, the cluster school of excellence. However, the hall went silent, a complete silence, when my school's team began their performance. The audience were awestruck, almost as if they were watching a magician lurking on stage, tugging, pulling, and cajoling their emotions and toying their anticipation. Instinctively, I pulled out my phone and called my school's Senior Assistant of Co-curricular Activities to come to the venue for the prize giving ceremony; I was confident about getting a placing on that day. To my surprise, the school principal herself showed up to offer her support.

After their performance, the pupils asked me for feedback, and I was just lost for words. Instead, with a stern look on my face, I instructed them to head to the canteen and finish their lunch before the prize giving ceremony. They were taken aback by my reaction and thought that they had done something wrong. My heart was racing with anxiety, suspense and excitement but I couldn't tell any of the team members. What if my prediction was baseless? What if what I just witnessed in the hall were all in my head? Did I just made up the illusions of captivated audience when they were silence all along because of how lousy my team was? These questions came back and forth at the back of my mind thus failing me to congratulate the team for a job well done. However, I also didn't want to get their hopes high, just in case they didn't make it to the top three. The time came for the prize giving ceremony and my school's choral speaking team were seated together, right behind me and the school principal. The emcee announced the third placing, not us. My heart was pounding hard, could it be the second placing? The emcee announced again, not us. I was dumbfounded for a moment. My heart longed and yearned for the first place but my brain said to hold it right there. I glanced back at my pupils, they were already carrying their bags, preparing to head back to the bus, with disappointment on their face which was quickly turn into tears of happiness when our school's name was announced as the winner! All praise to Allah the Almighty! Both me and the principal were up on our feet, literally jumping with joy, forgetting for a while that we were both grown women and I, was 8 months pregnant, carrying my third child. With a belly of the size of a basketball, it didn't stop me from receiving the prize, making me the only teacher who went up on stage during the prize giving ceremony.

Out of excitement, the principal took a blurry picture of the team receiving prizes on stage and sent it to the school's WhatsApp group, captioned, "Champion" and the replies were hilarious. Some of the initial replies were "Who?" and "So what did WE get?". Almost no soul on this earth expected the underdog to win the first prize. On paper, we were statistically destined to lose as only a few scored A in their English exam compared to the A-list school pupils who probably speak English at home and scored all As in their exam. As I was walking

down the stage, I saw that the other schools' pupils' stare and glare, perhaps internally questioning the result as some of them never even heard of our school's name, some did not even know that we existed. The news of the upset victory must've sent shockwaves to the schools in the district; I received a fair number of congratulatory messages on my WhatsApp application when I went back to my seat and picked up my phone, some of them were from officers of the district education office. At the same time, my pupils ran down towards me, hugged me while crying their eyes out, thanking me and the principal. Their tears of joy quickly turned into a synchronized yell of hooray when the principal announced that she would treat them to a KFC meal before we went back to our school. My heart was heavy when I overheard their conversations; some of them casually mentioned that they had never had KFC before in their life. My mind instantly lingered around the moments that I stuffed my kids with fast food whenever I was too busy to prepare a decent meal. I was ashamed of how I took those moments for granted as they could've easily been someone else's luxury meals.

Days passed by as my pupils were preparing for the state level competition. Since winning the district level competition, they had to work harder to represent the district. The other states' representatives were far more superior in term of academic achievement and choral speaking experience. Nevertheless, none of it mattered to me because my heart was set on giving my best. I've told them repeatedly; regret would be the worst feeling one could have. I didn't want them to regret either for not giving their best or not grabbing all the opportunities presented to them. After all, at the end of the day, one would only regret the chances one didn't take. On that account, the trainings became more intense as I tried to push their limits, knowing that the next stage would be much harder. The support we received from the school was overwhelming as well. Teachers donated money from their own pockets to buy new school uniforms for the choral speaking members. I didn't notice it before as I hardly focus on their appearance and only put my mind on their performance; some of their white uniforms, were not exactly white anymore. They appeared to be a bit dingy and discoloured because they were passed down not known from how many elder sisters and brothers before them. I finally knew the reason why other teams from the district level competition appeared 'good' on stage, their uniforms were crisp white and were all in the same tone. This fact came to light to me after being pointed out by senior teachers. Indeed, wisdom do come with age and experience. The support didn't even stop at uniforms, they also pulled some resources to buy new shoes for the pupils. As if that weren't enough, the teachers also took turn sponsoring the pupils' meals during the training session. They wanted to make sure that no one would train on empty stomach.

After days of preparations and training, the choral speaking team managed to win the third place in the state level competition. They were surprised to even get a placing since this was their first time competing and they were up against the best in the state. When they



won the 1st place during the district level competition, some teachers hinted to me that it was just pure luck; the A-list schools didn't win after being disqualified for various reasons they said. So, if it were luck that brought the pupils to the state level , competition, then it must have been quite some luck that made them win the third place in the state level competition. Where was Lady Luck when they had to wear old uniforms to school and where was she when they attended training with empty stomach. The fact that these pupils shed blood

and tears to even get Lady Luck to be on their side taught me a thing or two about life. Some of us had it easy, but only some. As cliché as it may sound, whether you are a teacher or a student, never stop aiming for the moon, luck might just help you land the stars.



Ami Amnaida Binti Hamid

Ami Amnaida is an English language teacher with more than 10 years of teaching experience. She holds Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from Universiti Putra Malaysia and Master Degree in English Language Teaching from Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Undergraduate Teacher

by Maisarah Binti Noorezam

“It is neither wealth nor splendor; but tranquility and occupation which give you happiness.” Thomas Jefferson

“Finding the right work is like discovering your own soul in the world.”

Thomas Moore

PART I

When I was a kid, I remembered that the most cliché question an adult would always ask was ‘What is your ambition?’

I vividly recalled there were a few times in my primary school years that I had to fill in forms of the same request. As someone who was easily influenced by what was aired on television, images in the newspapers and magazines, stories from elder cousins who successfully had careers, my answer to the question vary from time to time.

One day when I saw the news commentator on TV, I wanted to become one. I tried to imitate the style while reporting the news from the popular Malay printed newspaper. When my mother told me and my siblings about her nephew who flew around the globe as a flight attendant, I was fond of the idea to travel for free and to look beautiful in the blue alluring kebaya. But one thing that I remembered was the fact that I never even once fail to write these words; ‘cikgu’ or ‘pensyarah’ whenever I fill in my personal details in the form.

I guess what made me resort to that was maybe I was (and still am) surrounded by teachers in my family. My late grandfather whom I never met was a headmaster and many of my uncles, aunts and cousins are teachers too. Little did I know that I am destined to be one. So, I can proudly say that I am living my dream!

“Hard work without talent is a shame but talent without hard work is a tragedy”. This saying suits me perfectly as I think I have the passion and determination to achieve my dream to be in the teaching profession. I developed the skills as early as my school years.

I always volunteer to help my friends in their studies. We usually did group discussions for Maths and Science subjects. Even though the study group sessions would be filled with more laughter than lessons, and sometimes ended up with pyjama-sleepover parties, I noticed that I have the ability in making my friends understand what I have shared. My parents who also realised my preference for teaching were so supportive by providing us with a table and chairs at the porch, setting additional lamps to light our study area, and preparing titbits for the 2-3 hour sitting. Thank you mak, ayah!

My very first 'official' teaching experience ('baju kurung' and name tag appearance) was in my alma mater. It was the semester break before my third year degree. I took the opportunity to apply for the substitute teacher post and went through the interview that was a nerve-racking experience for me. I was an undergraduate student who had 2 more years to complete. I didn't have the scroll (except for the earlier 4 semester results) nor to say that I was an ideal candidate for the job. So, without half of the 'official' requirement, I wasn't quite mentally ready to respond to the principal's questions during the interview session. When they called me to offer the job, I was in shock and disbelief. I may just be lucky but proud at the same time.

Nonetheless, the almost chap-fallen beginning at the school changed to be an incredible experience. I was pleased to walk by my old classrooms, to smell the same canteen you used to lepak with your buddies and to helplessly notice the exact same spooky toilets after years of leaving the school. It was also funny that my own former teachers asked me to call them 'kak' as they regarded me as their colleague! It was also weird to be in front of the class, as the teacher. The spot I always avoided for 5 years as a student.

I was assigned to teach the lower form classes. I thought it would be easy as I would just walk to the classroom with a planned lesson and teach. I had no clue that it took more than prepared teaching points, a marker and a wide whiteboard. As an under-trained teacher, I felt quite overwhelmed with the side work that I had to perform. This included the documentations, reports, co-curriculum activities, and meetings. There was a time when I had to attend more than 2 hours of teachers' meeting that I didn't have anything to do with the agenda. Yet, because I was one of the teachers, I needed to be there. My face couldn't hide the suffering and disappointment till one of the teachers signalled me a gesture to stop the smirking.

Though there were unexpected situations and matters that happened out of my control, it didn't kill my excitement and enthusiasm when I got to see my students. At least I knew there was something that I could be in charge of. I remembered the time I brought the LCD projector into the classroom. The students were so excited to see it as they knew it was the latest teaching tool at that time and that their teachers rarely used it. I googled for games

and fun activities and we played online interactive games together. Everyone was so thrilled and they got the fair chance to try and compete among their classmates.

As much as I enjoyed my computer-assisted lessons, I felt my students' disappointment when it came to technology and stuff in learning. It was not the 90s, where computers and the internet were aliens to many of us, however, these students did not get the exposure and opportunity to learn with the current technological teaching tools and aids at that time. Many teachers were not well equipped with the knowledge to utilise it and sadly stuck with the same old teaching approaches for many internal and external factors.

I wasn't a graduate yet at that time, but the 2-year course so far had taught me a lot about methodology and the current trends. As learning a language can be dry and drop-dead boring to some students, teachers should do something to attract students' attention. Besides optimising the 'giant torchlight' (the LCD projector) to keep up with the trend and technology in teaching, I spontaneously uplifted the traditional chalk and talk method by conducting classes outdoors. As the school is located on top of a hill, and the bird's eyes' view of the beautiful scenery of Kuala Kangsar can be seen from there, I thought that my students would like to explore a 'wall-less' class. I chose the shadiest tree near the assembly field and asked them to sit. We started with an excellent induction and the one hour lesson passed by in a jiffy. The new setting had really boosted their mood and the kids demanded the same approach in the following lessons. They loved it, though, initially surprised by my command to bring their books and stationaries along. I hope I did make a huge impact on some of these kids in seeing, treating and loving English.

Apart from teaching, I became aware that a language teacher is among the likeable people at school. I guess because we are bubbly and easy going, students somehow trust their teachers more than their parents. Plus, I was very young and our age gap was not huge either in which the students regarded me more as a big sister than a teacher. I acknowledged that when a 14-year-old student came to me confessing about her mental state and how she thought about committing suicide! I was honestly frozen and clueless the moment she said that. I did not see that coming and had no idea how to react. I was just using my senses, logic, and religion basis to let her see the future she will have if she were to take that path. That was my first experience facing a flabbergasting situation that required a different hat from teaching. Since then, I clearly understood that teachers hold bigger responsibility, sometimes as a friend, a parent, and even a counsellor. The 'people person' trait in teachers somehow makes students comfortable to open up to us. Hmm..now I wonder, how is she ya?

Though many unexpected things happened, it was a wonderful memory teaching in my high school although it was for a couple of months. It is such a noteworthy event of my 'teaching-life' as I believe that's how I progressively learn and build my own 'character' as a teacher. I've to keep up with the latest trend and be flexible to get my students' interests to learn the language. Make them in the mood to embrace new things or on their least favourite topics. We have to be the one whom they should feel comfortable to learn with, to ask questions and even to have a chit-chat. After all, that's what language is all about. By getting them to speak, it is actually a practice for them to improve the language.

PART II

My undergraduate teaching experience did not end there. The next undaunted story was in my senior years in UPM. My friend told me about his lecturer who was looking for a home tutor for his son. Without thinking, I just grabbed the opportunity without realizing the consequences. I was offered to teach Bahasa to this client. Well, I was not trained for the particular subject, but I self-assured myself that it was going to be okay since it is my mother tongue. I was 100% wrong and entirely unaware that it was tougher than I expected.

The first struggle was to find a way to travel from Serdang to Semenyih. I didn't have the car licence yet, so my next option was to travel on a bike. Unfortunately, I didn't have a motorcycle either! My good friend, Mazwin, (if you are reading this, I want to say THANK YOU) lent me her black Modenas Kriss so that I can make the journey to the tutoring place once a week. The riding-alone adventure along the menacing busy highway, accompanied by flying stones, dust and small sand, while avoiding road debris was an unforgettable experience. It was scary and each time I took the 40 minutes (one-way) ride, I was welcomed by a fierce watchdog at the entrance of the house.

The second adjustment that I had to make was to control my fear towards the high anticipation of the kid's parents, especially the mother. Just by looking at the gated and guarded neighbourhood and upon entering the white end-lot Semi D house, I knew they were willing to spend a lot for their son's education. Though I prepared all my lessons, I learnt that I didn't really adhere to their expected outcome. After four sessions, I received their call to discontinue the tuition.

I blamed myself for the money-driven intention to do this. The distraction to earn money killed my passion to teach. I didn't glean much information as I thought it would be easy to teach just one primary school student. Less effort was made to prepare the lessons and it turned out that I missed out the huge opportunity right under my nose.

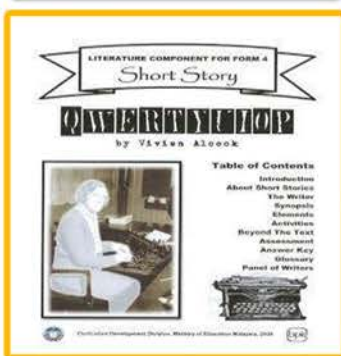
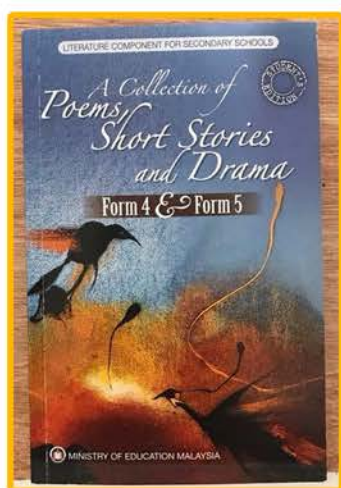
Nevertheless, this experience was definitely an eye opener for me to realize that different methods and styles of teaching apply to different groups of students and settings. Teaching my super-duper juniors in my high school with a low to middle socioeconomic background and one-to-one tutoring an Indian rich city boy was totally a different ball game. Apart from the dissimilar socio-cultural upbringing, there were many things to adjust and adapt and it was difficult to tell whether I had successfully delivered the lessons. The facial expression and body gesture from one person means the whole world to me as compared to the feedback of one group of students. I easily got demotivated when I sensed disappointment when my input and teaching styles did not match the students' and their parents' expectations. I learned that I need to be mentally strong and a quick thinker if things did not get my way.

PART III

In 2010, I had my teaching practicum in Malacca. I was posted with another three of my TESLian classmates to a rural area. I thought with the previous teaching experiences I had before, I was well prepared for this. It turned out that it was a different kettle of fish altogether. To think of it now, I believe that is what I like about my career. It's full of challenges and surprises.

I remembered getting a Form 4 class to teach and they were labelled as not the brightest in the batch. Each time I planned a lesson was like starting a new experiment. I really did push myself to teach these kids English, the language they believed will not be used outside of the classroom. Majority of them have no motivation to improve the language. One of them said, "My father 'kerja kampung' teacher. I will just be like him. No need to learn English". Another one mentioned, "I will just work at my father's workshop, teacher", while the other uttered, "Me too, I have to look after my siblings, so I can't go far".

It was too disheartening for me and I believed it did demotivate their friends as well. Though I understood how they perceived the importance of English from their perspectives, I knew I had to do something before this doctrine was installed in their mind forever. It was not a healthy mindset and it should be changed before it's too late. I might not do enough, but at least I wanted to play a small part in the process of changing their views about learning the language. Besides, they were not exposed to social media like FB, IG, Twitter or YouTube back then. They had less exposure to the outside world and lack of ways to apply the language even if they try so hard to learn it.



Well, I did work so hard to make them feel jumpy to join my class. There was this one time where I had to teach them a short story entitled QWERTYUIOP from the literature syllabus; I brought a real heavy, rusty, dusty typewriter as realia for my set induction which I borrowed from the school office (thank God the class and the office was just next to each other). I continued with a graphic organiser for the plot and a few sketches to detail out the characters. All this was to make them comprehend the prose and primarily to attract their attention to the lesson. It went so well and the students got the grasp of the story and were able to retell it.

Once I got the rhythm to their 'tune' in learning English, I felt the weight on my shoulders were lifted immediately. I enjoyed preparing every single lesson and delivered them even though it was time consuming with more research and creative thinking processes involved. This was where I learned about perseverance as one of the biggest attributes a teacher should have. Students' engagement is also pivotal to ensure the success of a lesson. Students' attention and participation is needed as part of the execution process of the well-versed plan. Both parties, the teacher and students need to mutually communicate, unless the teacher is happy enough to talk and listen to himself.

The sweat and tears as an unofficial undergraduate teacher were remarkable. It is just a small piece of a unique experience that adds to a large pole of bittersweet process to be better in this profession. I feel thankful and could not ask for more other than the knowledge I gained from the 'university of life'. It was the best hands-on experience which I really missed till today. There's nothing that I would trade it off with.



Maisarah Binti Noorezam

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The Springboard and the High Jump

by Mazilah Binti Abdullah


When I returned to teaching after a four-year hiatus, I immediately found that my childhood dream profession was far more complicated than before, even during the first week of class itself. The students were now more open-minded, they constantly craved technology and they were critical and competitive. They seemed to desire convenience and immediacy and had a short attention span. They were also cautious and concerned with emotional safety.

I realised that something needed to be modified. Was it my common teaching practice and philosophy that was the problem? Or was it the attitude of my students? The question was what and how. How could I change? What needed to be changed? I started to feel as though I was losing the teaching spirit. I began to think that I might need to step back. I was frustrated and overwhelmed in some way; I was filled with doubt and felt like I was 'drowning'.

One day, a friend shared some information with me regarding a course on facilitated learning. I jumped at the opportunity. I believed that participating in the course was an excellent idea, as nothing I had previously attempted had worked. I hoped that by enrolling in the course, I would be able to understand my students better. Initially, I felt that the course would be helpful in terms of giving me ideas on how I can change my students. Instead, I was taken aback when I realised that it was perhaps me, the educator, who needed to change in certain ways.

The said course on facilitated learning emphasized the fact that while an educator would teach, facilitators do not teach or train, but rather they excite the senses, encourage critical thinking, and facilitate learning. The speaker was a wonderful person who delivered a fantastic presentation and helped me realise many things in ways I never imagined.

A few months later, I had the opportunity to join yet another course, this time related to digital classroom strategies. WOW! I was surprised to learn that there is so much that we can do with technology to make our job as educator easier to help our students feel more engaged. During the training, we were questioned about some of the more common teaching techniques we had become accustomed to. I discovered that my teaching methods have not changed from the first year I started teaching, which was eight years ago, to be exact. With my outdated teaching methods, my students lacked the opportunity to make choices. "It has always been done this way", which is essentially my predestined way, was the most damaging phrase in the English language, according to Dr Hopper, the famous American Computer Scientist.



“The most dangerous phrase in the English language is we have always done it this way”.

The idea was eye-opening for me, but initially I was not ready to embark on this unconventional method. I was not thrilled, but I decided that I was desperate enough to give it a shot. Therefore I began to study the behaviour of this Generation Z. Slowly I managed to gain some understanding about their strengths, weaknesses, needs, preferences, and interests. And lo and behold, when they were given the chance to do something they enjoyed and felt good about, I noticed that they could work like crazy, nonstop.

Thus, I concluded that my students needed to always be in a realm of opportunities and possibilities, and you will be able to see wonders. I have realised by that point that they had a lot to give and share. I took the golden opportunity to learn as much as possible. The more I give them affirmation, the more I think they feel safe. The more I find something that excites them, the more they are willing to communicate. I had to become someone they trusted and enjoyed communicating with.

With add-ons incorporated into my teaching method, I enjoyed exploring and leveraging all these teaching tools. I began to use more and more advanced interactive technology-assisted teaching applications and gamification, with the assumption that technology could keep my students engaged and boost their retention of the knowledge they were learning. I thought that was the tail end of my teaching modification journey. However, at a later point, I was shocked to receive mixed feedback from my students; some enjoyed my new teaching method while others complained about how burdened they were in having to catch up with the use of these technologies. Then, I realised that something was not right; it appeared that the use of technology-assisted teaching tools were unimportant to some.

One particular day, I received this feedback from one of my students:

“As a lecturer, she is very anonymous, passionate and motivated to teach us. Although the lecturer conducted the class very well, it also made me feel stressed. This is happening because the lecture always asks us to do different activities to explore a new platform for learning. I know it is very good to explore new things, but it also makes me feel tired, burdened, stress.”

Oh no! What have I done? I became more confused. Last year, the Covid-19 pandemic took its toll on everyday life. I believe that I've always been a competent lecturer who always planned lessons carefully. But, I started to suffer from anxiety and inferiority complex when I had to teach using an online platform instead of teaching a physical class, as I had never delivered lessons online before in my teaching career. To me, it's a totally different ball game. I have been trained to conduct live face-to-face classes. I decided I first needed the confidence and courage to run my own virtual classes. To do this, I must understand the platform in order to know what to expect. People say, "If you can't beat them, join them so as not to be left behind."

A fool with a tool is still a fool
Grady Brooch

Thereafter I enrolled in another course on no physical boundary virtual learning. I realised that the second course which I had attended was not wrong in the strategies it taught, but I was the one who was wrong, thinking that the more tools I used, the more advanced the application, and the more effective my teaching would be. I signed up for the third course popularised by Grady Brooch (a computer scientist) on the principles of teaching and learning who mentioned that "A fool with a tool is still a fool."

A wise person uses any tool to impart wisdom. Hence, the online platform, gamification and application is just a channel, a tool. In a way, the educator is more important than the tool, but an educator without the right tools would not be as efficient. Having no tools can make it challenging to ensure that the learning objectives are met, considering today's generation of students and the rapid growth of technological advancement. We have no choice but to embrace it. Once one has mastered the platform or tool, the teaching experiences would take over much more easily, and you will be empowered.

Students don't care how much you know
until they know how much you care
John Maxwell

The coach in the virtual learning course that I took often reminded us to design our class for the lowest common functionality. The online class is a new norm for everyone at that time, and human beings are often allergic to changes, which complicates the learning process. So, start low, follow their lead. Break the lessons up into small sequences and take one baby step, bite-sized piece at a time, which would be more reassuring for

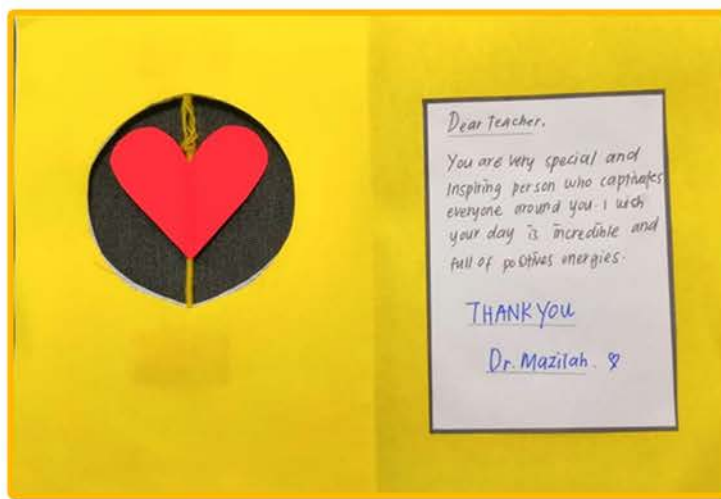
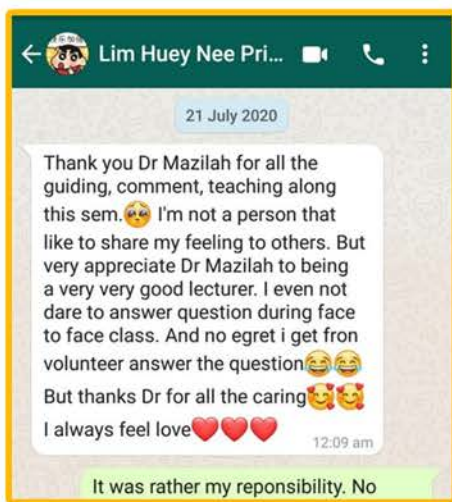
the student. Then, later, go over the process and make changes as needed. I realised that the obvious path is not always the most practical. This was extremely helpful in putting a lot of things into perspective for me.

I was not fully ready at that time as I'm not that tech-savvy, but I knew I had to start somewhere. When I started, was my training adequate? No, it was not. Did I have all the information that I needed? The answer to that was a big NO too. But this means a lot to me. This was perhaps not a good time to start, but my work is too important, I could not stop. I could not afford to wait, the world does not wait. No choice, I have to do it.

Considering all the challenges of online learning and the problems my students had in terms of online accessibility, my first semester of online classes were conducted mainly through Telegram for tutorials and discussion. Later, I moved to recorded videos on YouTube and conducted live Facebook sessions, which students can access at their own time and convenience. The course I took had taught me that there are plenty of teaching and learning tools, but ultimately, what is most important is to know your learners.

So I had to learn to go back to my students and listen to them with an open heart. When I began to 'listen' to them, address their concerns, and be willing to change how I do things, the difference became apparent. I learnt to only choose the appropriate tools for each class to ensure effective knowledge transfer. What is appropriate can only be figured out by listening to my students. My major takeaway was that online classes can be fun if proper tools and methods of teaching are used, added to that is the need for the educators to show that they care. John Maxwell, a leadership expert once said, "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

As I progressed in teaching my class using the method taught, the most amazing thing was that my students gradually became more involved in my lessons. I was not sure how effective the method was, but it didn't matter at the time. What mattered was that there was a buzz of excitement in the class. Their enthusiasm motivated me to keep improving. To me, it was a good start. At first, I thought I wanted to help my students change, but instead, I succeeded in figuring out what was important and what wasn't when it comes to teaching these students. I realised that our students frequently teach us a lot more than we teach them. We just have to listen and be willing to learn. In retrospect, what I did was merely a first step that kept them motivated to transition towards a more significant transformation.



I was pretty much amazed at the feedback I received on how my students had altered their behaviour and changed their minds about my classes. Some students still despised the subject, but they did enjoy the classes. Hey! I suppose that is already an achievement. I was excited, and the euphoria lasted for a long time. Since my perspectives has shifted, I was much more aware of instances that were actually opportunities for me to learn more about my students and their learning needs.

Since then, I've been learning and experimenting with various teaching methods to better prepare myself for the challenging world out there. I'm still trying, still making mistakes, and still improving. Talking about technology, I do feel that it moves too fast. Before we can really master one thing, something new has already appeared. But I believe that change is something inevitable, and educators must be agile thinkers.

It struck me that change usually takes us in the direction that we do not want to go. Ironically, I've been asking my students to learn in the way that I assumed was best, without considering their needs and preferences. Instead, I wondered why they haven't changed and did not behave like my past students who were from a different generation.

In the end, success is not defined by what I wished for them to be. Instead, today's generation dreams and thrive when they can fly free and get to live the rest of their lives the way they want; at least it helps them to know that they have some control over what happens to them. Allow them to spread their wings and learn to fly up the mountain. They will then shift from being a responder to being an initiator. Such an approach will give them a sense of self-worth and belonging. Once given the opportunity, they will cherish it and never forget it. They actually need to be consulted and 'touched.' This makes them feel accepted, and classes can turn out to be a caring place. Basically, I've learned that an educator's ability

and willingness to listen really helps students to have the learning experiences they want to have every day. This is an essential aspect of positive behaviour support.

Reflecting on my journey, I would say that one should never give up on anything too soon. Give yourself and your students a chance to reach an understanding about the teaching method that would work for everyone. Value yourself and your students. Don't kill the dreams of your students and yours; instead, build on it, and you'll see beautiful things unfolding naturally. The title of the Karate Kid soundtrack song by Justin Bieber comes into my mind that goes like this, "Never say never! Hold on to that dream; though it might start dark, and a wild journey is expected, there's always light at the end of the tunnel".

Don't limit the expectations and possibilities of what you and your students might be able to accomplish together. Think big and work hard to make those dreams come true. Before you blame them for their attitude problem, try to really see things from their perspective, understand them, and try a new way of engaging with them instead of being judgmental.

The illiterate of the future are not those who can't read or write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn
Alvin Toffler

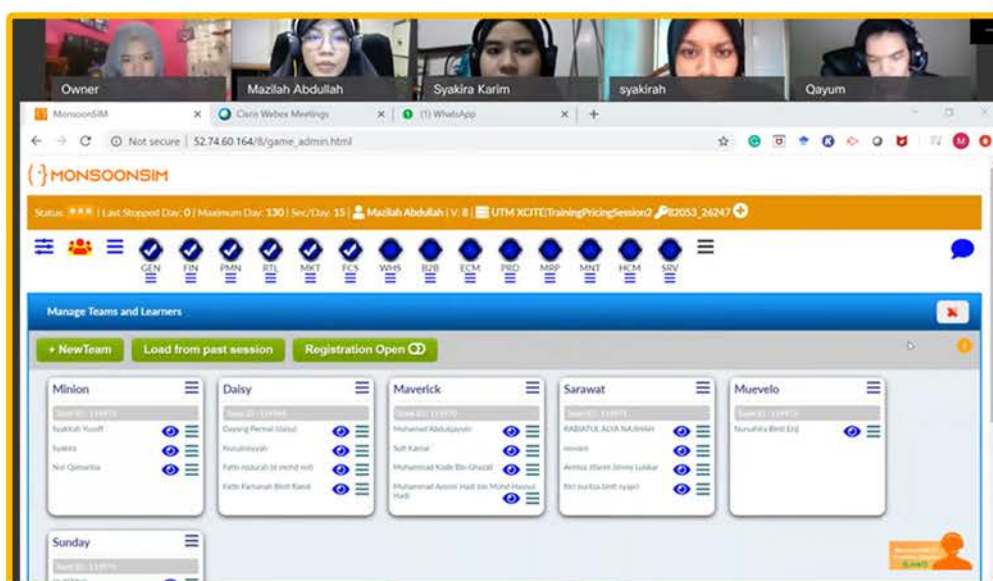


This was my first blunder, and it hit me in the face hard. I've learned that as educators, we don't always realise what students had discovered and picked up as a result of our teaching. It might not be something that stays just within the four walls of the classroom, and it might be something that will have long-term positive effects. Making these positive effects requires long-term commitment: it's an ongoing task. We will never be done even when we have completed an impact; there will always be other opportunities for the subsequent influence. But rest assured that the results will last

a lifetime. As an educator, our success is reflected by the success of our students. Therefore, I wish to express my gratitude to my past and present students for having shaped me into the person that I am today. Literally, “we did grow together; we played together, we won together, and we laughed together”. To the future, please, keep me constantly enthusiastic in growing and learning.



As for all the courses that I've attended, I noticed that they provide embedded guidance. They can guide us on how to handle the complexities, but we need to experiment to master skills and develop creativity. Adaptability is also required. Metaphorically, as one of the coaches mentioned, these courses can serve as a springboard. How successful you are and how high you reach depends on how far you would like to jump. Teaching and learning are all about team collaboration and balancing between educators' and students' wants and needs. It's a dynamic process. Change requires working together. There is certainly no one-size-fits-all best practice approach. Definitely, there is also no single 'yes' or 'no' answer. We must recognise that there will always be adversity and challenges to be faced in this world. Thus, we must equip our students for their present lives as well as prepare them for the future. As Alvin Toffler (the futurist and businessman) had put it, “the illiterates of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn”.



I hope that my story about my experience as a teacher makes some sense and that you can relate to it in one way or another. At the end of the day, our objective in whatever we do is to get HIS blessings. Acquiring knowledge and delivering wisdom is not meant to be seen as an end in itself. But instead, it is a means to stimulate a higher moral and spiritual consciousness. This leads to faith and righteous action; the ultimate end is a 'token' to the other world, the eternal world.



Mazilah Binti Abdullah

Mazilah Binti Abdullah is currently a Marketing Lecturer at Azman Hashim International Business School, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. She believes that holistic education nurtures the student's mind, body, soul and spirits. Her teaching motto is that a great teacher can "shift-gears" and is always flexible. She has her own love of learning new teaching strategies to incorporate them into lessons. She reckons that students should have the freedom to express themselves to grow while setting appropriate limits. Personally, she experiences delayed success and considers delayed success is sweeter if gotten through many struggles. She can be contacted through mazilah@utm.my

A Diamond in the Rust

by Nooral Izainee Binti Ibrahim

When I was growing up, I didn't intend to be a teacher – let alone to be in the education line. I saw my mum who was always busy with school, burdened with exams scripts, lesson plans and co-curricular activities – she was a teacher for more than 30 years. Hence, that explained why I wasn't even interested in becoming a teacher; that I even told my friends during secondary years that it would be the last profession on earth that I would be one day. You see, I dreamt of being a paediatrician; to work with children especially and I could never ever imagine going to school every single day for the rest of my working life. But I guess God has other plans for me.

What I didn't know was, the single one job that I would despise the most, would be the only thing that I would get. That is, to be a teacher. An English Language teacher, precisely. The truth was, I didn't excel in my pure Science subjects during my SPM. It was a difficult moment upon discovering the sheer reality of giving up your childhood ambition of becoming a doctor and accepting the idea of teaching a bunch of teenagers for the rest of your life. The truth finally crept in, and saying goodbye to my dream wasn't that easy. It's just like a shattered dream; broken into pieces. Dreams are just our imaginations, so they say. However, despite not doing well in Chemistry and Physics, my results for Malay and English subjects were excellent that I managed to secure a place in the TESL Matriculation Programme way back in 1994. And for that I spent six years of my life just to learn English and ways to teach it

Fast forward the years, I am now in my 21st year of teaching English to secondary students. It's still an on-going process; there were tears and laughter along the way – generations of wide-eyed kids who are eager to explore the world. Batches of students that I have managed to teach English; they might forget me – but that is normal just like me forgetting their names in the course of 21 years of service. Of course, there were quite a handful of students who have actually touched my heart – those that I have always regarded as my own children. Surprisingly they were mostly boys. But over the years, one particular student stood out; his name was Elias whom I met for the first-time way back in 2017 when he was in Form 4.

Well, I didn't actually know the real reason among all the students at the time; I singled out and called him to speak in front of the class. It was just a spur of the moment thing. I remember up to this day the puzzled look he had on his face when I pointed my

finger at him and made him talk in front of the whole class. Apparently, it was his first time talking in public. So, you could say that he was blushing. His cheeks were quite reddish out of embarrassment, he was ready to be swallowed into the earth. At first, Elias was a bit hesitant but being an experienced teacher, I managed to coax him just to get up, walk and talk in front of the class.

By then, I noticed the way he spoke in English – it was with an accent. It sounded like a native speaker to my teacher's ears. Well, later on I got to know that he spent some of his formative years in New Zealand, as his mother was doing postgrad studies there. That was like a discovery to me- suddenly there was a single ray of sunshine after a monsoon season. Being Elias, he was a bit shy actually; quiet, normal built – he looked kind of nerdy; but instincts told me that he has got lots of potential yearning to be discovered by one lucky or unlucky teacher. A diamond in the rust, it clearly needed some good tough polishing, I think –waiting to be moulded by a jeweller. So, I unintentionally became the jeweller.

True to my instincts, lucky me – Elias was like gold discovered in a remote, uncharted mine. A brilliant lad in English with top notch vocabulary to match - the only thing he lacked was confidence and social skills. For two years, I molded him according to my whims and preferences. I personally took him under my wings and gave him tasks such as becoming the leader of groups for presentations and even menial jobs such as collecting and sending exercise books to the staffroom. At times, I purposely scolded him in front of his classmates whenever he forgot to do my everyday tasks. This was just to test his patience, and he never complained at all.

Even if he was always good in his essays, I had never even awarded him 90 and above. It would always be 88 (that is just an A), simply because I didn't want him to feel that he had done that well, and that he would stop improving. As a matter of fact, I even forced him to write narratives or stories for SPM essays instead of his usual factual ones. It sounded a little bit cruel, but I meant well. Deep down in my heart, I wanted him to get the best marks for his English SPM – I even told him that his narratives lacked that “umph” for readers to continue reading. At times, I even yawned in front of him while reading his essays and told him straight away that his stories were kind of boring. Well, being Elias, the ever-obedient boy- he was just beaming innocently; not even once he took heart whatever that I had said to him.

What was even touching, was when he gladly followed my advice including those such as stop spending time with online games and start writing stories for essays. Not only that, I even made him the school rep for Scrabble competition for two consecutive years just to give him some exposures in life. As time went by, Elias bloomed like a white rose in the wilderness. Pure and straight, with likeable characteristics – he was finally out of his own

cocoon. The next thing I know, other teachers started noticing him and he definitely enjoyed the attention. Imagine being obscure for the past 15 years of your life, and suddenly you are being celebrated like the school genius. Alas, a butterfly was born, and Elias slowly built up his confidence level and social skills. He was no longer shy among his classmates and friends started paying more attention to him –always asking for study tips and in the end, he became the English master of the class, not to mention other subjects like Add Maths.

I remember during one of those presentations in class when Elias was in Form 5, I asked him something about love and girls. He sheepishly answered but his answer was quite mature for his age. It was something like this, “Let’s say the one girl whom you loved is falling in love with another guy, would you fight for her love?”. Elias’ answer was somehow rather quite shocking, “Well, I would let her go – I want her to be happy”. And the whole class went wild; his friends – boys especially were pleasantly surprised and they were shouting hilariously at Elias. There and then, I stated to the whole class that Elias was actually a fine gentleman and hopelessly a romantic at heart. He was just grinning naturally; his face was full of uneasiness. And the class went berserk. Again!

As I write the story - it’s now August 2021- Elias is no longer a fifth former at my old school. As I have earlier predicted the first moment I met him, that he was secretly a genius. Well, I was right all the way, he unquestionably managed to achieve A+ for his English 1119 and 1A for the Cambridge paper as well in SPM 2018. The other subjects were all straight As. But what was even more touching was that Elias’ mother thanked me for recognising his potential. The once quiet shy boy is now moving towards a greater undetermined path, ever ready to spread his wings; chasing the rainbow beyond the mountains of hopes.

Apparently from his mother, I got to know that Elias has successfully achieved (2A*1A) for his A levels and has been offered to do Chemical Engineering at UCL, United Kingdom. UCL (University College London) is one of the best top ten universities of the world. Presently waiting for the date for the autumn college admission – I am definitely proud of how Elias has turned out. Like any other teachers, I always pray for the success of my students. No longer the diamond in the rust, Elias is now the ever-shining jewel just in time to brighten others’ life. And being accepted to do engineering at UCL is the epitome of his life and I’m very sure that he will be someone important in life, one day and ready to contribute to the nation and give back to the society.

All in all, students are in fact gems in the hidden undiscovered mine, if and only if the teacher uncover their potentials and talents, mold and hand out opportunities, only by then, they will flourish. The only thing is, as teachers we always need to believe in our own instincts. To set the record straight, I loved all my students. Elias is just a classic case of one person who needs some assurances that he could always prosper in life, albeit his shyness and

and lack of confidence. Don't get me wrong, I am not taking credits for Elias' success – I truly believe it's 100 percent of his own diligence and determination. Soft spoken with easy-going demeanours; he has got all the makings of a successful person. Well, I could say his mother has taught him well in that area and that's probably why he's such a blue-eyed boy to me.

In real fact, I am definitely proud and honoured to be Elias' teacher for two years, and who wouldn't be right? All teachers would always want their "children" to be more successful than them. If only people know how much we actually pray for our "children", then society would not even think of downgrading teachers' contributions and deeds. I eventually believe that "children" should always be given chances and motivation to do well in their future, that everybody deserves to be heard once in a while.



In 2018, when he was in Form 5, Elias became one of the best students of the school for the Majlis Graduasi Sekolah.



In 2018, I made him mentor a Form 3 junior for Scrabble. They made such a good team.



Seen here, Elias and Kartik representing the school for Scrabble competition in February, 2018



August 2021 -Elias became one of the best students at Kolej Mara Banting in 2021 for A level exams.



9 May 2019, “Buka Puasa” time - by this time I was teaching at my current school, and these 5 Perdana kids would always want to spend time with their old teacher. They had finished their SPM anyway.

In time, looking back now, I have essentially comprehended the mere reasons on why I couldn't achieve my childhood ambition. Personally, there could only be three anyway;

- 1) I think I am born to be a teacher
- 2) I always say yes when they say no
- 3) I reprimand my students as if they are my own children

Oh wait, there's another one.... (My boys used to tell me this)

- I am like their mother with all the nagging and strictness, strict but lovable. Easy going and sporting. Most importantly, I am a devoted English Language teacher.

With that, I end my story....

Nooral Izainee Binti Ibrahim

Nooral Izainee binti Ibrahim regards herself as the unconventional English Language teacher, simply because she believes in out-of-the-box thinking and teaching. An alumni of Malacca Girls' High School in 1993, she obtained her Bachelor of Education in Tesol (Hons) degree from the University of Chichester, West Sussex, United Kingdom in June 2000. She is an experienced English Language teacher for 21 years and has been teaching in three schools, (rural, suburban and urban) so far.



Eventually, Nooral started her career in the year 2000 at a remote felda secondary school in Segamat, Johor and rising to the challenge, she even brought the NST team to conduct the Newspaper in Education workshop in 2003. Currently the head of English Language Panel in an urban secondary school in Shah Alam, Selangor - she was previously an Excellent English Language Teacher (Guru Cemerlang Bahasa Inggeris) from 2010 to 2018 at her former suburban school. She can be contacted at nooral_76@yahoo.com.

They Taught me Life

by Aini Binti Ahamd

This is a story of a time I regret most in my life. This is a story of one face, one girl, who was constantly on my mind.

There were days when I was too young, too naïve to understand what it meant to be a teacher. A real teacher. More than a decade ago, I stepped into the world of teaching for the first time. It was just a few months after graduation and I was just too inexperienced. Being assigned to teach college students, I was too insecure. They were just a few years younger than me. I was afraid of the perception they might have on me. The pressure to prove myself hit me too much. Every time I walked to class, my only aim was just to achieve my teaching objective of the day. My mind focused solely on getting my lesson delivered just as planned.



My very first cohort.

I put a boundary between me and the students. Creating a bond beyond the lessons? That was a big no. I just meet them for one semester and then off they go. As long as I did my part, which is literally just teaching, I thought that was enough. My only focus was always on proving that I am a good teacher. Yes, that was it. It was all about me and my lessons. Quite narcissist, wasn't I?

Things changed when I met a girl named Qistina. Qistina was pretty. I would say she's the prettiest student I've ever met so far. She was dazzling. As soon as she walked into my class, everybody's eyes were glued to her. I usually didn't really care how my students looked, as long as they dressed well to class. But this one girl caught everybody's attention, especially the naughty boys who were sitting in the last row. They elected her to be the class representative. I was quite sceptical at first. Well, sometimes, pretty girls are just about looks. But she proved herself. She was a beauty with brains. An outspoken one, who, I always love to have in my language class.

One fine day, I planned a lesson that required everyone to write their problem on a piece of paper anonymously. All the papers would be put in a box, and we would randomly choose a few problems, read them out loud and discuss the solutions together. My focus was solely on their communication skills as well as problem solving skills.

Qistina was very excited with the activity. I only gave 10 minutes for everyone to write their problems but Qistina asked for extra time. To be precise, she asked for another 10 minutes. I was a bit wowed. Perhaps, she had a lot to share. But I didn't take everything too seriously. What kind of problem could a 20 year-old have? Perhaps, some love issues, or homesickness maybe.

As everyone gave away their papers, Qistina was the last person putting her paper in that box. I randomly took out some papers and discussed the problems written on them with the class. But Qistina's paper was not selected. I noticed her dejected look. But again, I was too ignorant. I couldn't care less. It was just some class activities and hers was just not lucky enough to be chosen. That's all.

Unfortunately, Qistina didn't think so. She came to see me as the lesson ended.

"I hope my paper got chosen," she said softly.

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry. It was random and I don't know which paper belongs to whom," I replied.

She nodded and gave me that sweet smile she always had on her face. She took the box and dug out for her paper.

"This is mine, miss. Please spare me some time. I really want to share this with you. Perhaps, you can help me with my problem," she asked very slowly, almost whispering, as if the words were dragged out of her mouth.



She looked deep into my eyes and handed her paper. There was a glimpse of a hopeful look on her face. I sighed. It was already 9.50 AM. I had another class in the other building at 10.00 AM. I was in a hurry but the look on her face stopped me. I bit my lips. I can't walk away just like that.

The students were excited to join the class activities

“Sure! Let me see.” I hesitantly took the paper and faked my smile. My mind was busy thinking about my next class. I needed at least 10 minutes to get there. The campus is quite big and I hate being late.

I slowly unfolded her paper. What kind of a problem did she have that she desperately wanted to share with me?

I began to read her problem. It was quite long. 1 full page. The first sentence stopped me for a while. Oh, wow! I was shocked! She was having an affair with a married man?

I grabbed a chair and sat next to the teacher’s table. I put down all my books and bag. There was nobody in the classroom. All the other students had already left for their next class.

“Come, sit with me, Qistina.” Again, I faked my smile.

She pulled up a chair and sat in front of me. It was awkward. I continued reading her paper while peeking at her face. She was not just any ordinary Malay girl you see every day. In a glance, she looked very similar to Marsha Milan Londoh, that famous celebrity you see on TV. She was gorgeous. Any man would simply fall for her. And she was still too young, just started college. Her future was way ahead of her.

“How long has it been?” I looked into her eyes, trying to understand her.

“Three months,” she trembled. “I know it’s wrong. But I can’t help it.” She sniffled quietly as tears started running down her red cheeks.

I was baffled. My heart was heavy. What should I say to her? I’ve never been in such a situation before. I myself am still single. What do I know about relationships? Having an affair with a married man? Everyone knows it’s wrong. But feeling is too abstract. How could I judge her?

“How did it happen?” I asked again.

She glanced at her watch. Her tears were still running down her cheeks.

“It’s ok. I’ve told my students I’ll be late,” I said. It was 10.00 AM. I’ve texted my next class, telling them that we’ll start at 10.15 AM.

“Tell me more, Qis. So I can understand you.” I looked into her teary eyes and put the paper down on the table.

"I work part-time at AC Printing, miss. And he's my boss. He was just so nice and I don't know how to decline him." She sobbed. "I know he's married, but I don't know how to stop this," she continued with a suppressed sound of hiccups.

Oh, I know that man. I used to go there. He was in late 40s. But, I didn't know him personally. And I chose not to judge any of them. I was not in their situation. I didn't know anything. What should I say to this sweet girl?

"Look, Qistina. This is a very serious issue. You can't just talk to me. I'm sorry but I really didn't know much. You need to discuss this with your parents." I said as I tried to hold her hands.

Her hands were trembling. She narrowed her eyes and her face was hardened. There was sadness in her eyes. Being the young me, I didn't understand her. Not until 3 years later and I regret it my whole life.

"Thank you, miss. Thank you for listening to me," she replied. She took her bag and quickly walk out of the class.

She left me sitting there, trying to reason myself. Did I do the right thing? I was pretty confused.



UUM Convocation day

The next day, Qistina acted as if nothing happened. She smiled and laughed with her friends. Little did I know she already made up her mind. Little did I know that my action yesterday destroyed her future. And I only knew everything three years later when I met her classmates, Sheila, on their convocation day.

Yes, I haven't heard from any of them after the semester ended. That's normal for a servicing teacher like me. Three years later, I went to the convocation fiesta and I met a familiar face. It was Sheila, Qistina's friend. Quite a close one I would say.

Sheila was wearing her graduation robe, so I knew she was graduating that year. She came hugging me when she saw me buying snacks from a stall.

"Congratulations, Sheila! You look great in that robe!" I smiled.

"Thank you, miss. You look great too," Sheila replied. She was happy as any student would be on their graduation day.

"Where's your friends? Qistina? You're in the same batch right?" I asked, out of curiosity.

Sheila's smile suddenly faded. The shine on her face was suddenly gone.

"Miss, haven't you heard the news?" Sheila replied with watery eyes.

I was puzzled. "What news?" I asked.

"Qistina. She...she..," Sheila bit her lips and tears started streaming down from her eyes. People started looking at us as Sheila cried. I didn't know what happened. There must be something very wrong with Qistina.

"Come, let's sit and talk." I took Sheila's hand and we sat on a bench quite a far from the loudness of the fiesta.

"Tell me, what happened to Qistina? I never heard of any news after that semester ended." I said as I held her hand.

"Qistina..she dropped out..and..and she passed away last year." Sheila cried hard. I was shocked. Too shocked. What happened? She was too young. My eyes were welled up with tears.

"How? What happened?" I could feel tears streaming down my face.

"She died, giving birth alone at home. That man, he left her alone," Sheila replied. Her eyes were red.

"She's married? When?" I was shocked. My heart felt heavy.

"She married the man from the printing shop, the same year she met him. She's the second wife. They had a boy and that man married another," said Sheila. Her face was red. She choked on her tears.

“Her parents? Why didn’t they do anything?” I asked again as I tried to hold my tears.

“They were divorced years ago. They never care about her. She’s all alone.” Sheila’s words nearly killed me.

What have I done? My words three years ago came haunting me. How could I turn her down when she came to me? My body was trembling. I left Sheila after giving her a hug.

I made a big mistake and it destroyed Qistina’s future. I should have spent more time talking to her. I was too afraid of being judgmental that I turned her down. I was not confident enough to give her good advice so I asked her to turn to her parents, who never cared about her. She chose to talk to me and yet, I disappointed her.

The guilt was too overwhelming. It was a big slap on my face. It changes the teacher in me. Being a teacher is not only about teaching your courses. It is about educating your students about life, giving them advice when they need it. Sometimes, the students are just too young and immature to make their own judgement and decisions. Teachers should always be there, not to make decisions for them, but to guide them so they choose the right path for themselves.

SHORT STORY 2

Being an educator is always a blessing to me. Teaching is not just a career or a mere profession. It is a journey to lifelong learning commitment. As I work hard to teach my students, I learn a lot of life lessons from them in return. Each semester, I’ll encounter many new students and become a part of their learning journey as they too, become a part of mine.



A few of my students in 2018

Many years ago, I met a student who taught me a very valuable lesson as an educator and fellow human. He was a disabled person. His hands and legs were crippled. He didn’t have enough fingers. He had some problems with his mouth and tongue that he struggled to utter even a single word. His name is Irfan.

That year, I was assigned to teach ESP courses. Irfan enrolled in one of the courses. The course required a lot of writing and group presentations. On the first day of class, Irfan came 20 minutes late. I still remember that day. I was giving a course briefing to the new students when a loud noise disturbed the class. It came from the door which was never locked. It seemed as if someone was trying hard to get it opened. I was quite furious at first. This student was super late and he's disturbing my lesson.

As I opened the door, I was stunned. Everybody's eyes were locked on the person standing in front of the door, Irfan. There he was, looking at me with sweat running down his face. His shirt clung into his chest, soaked with sweat.

"Aaa...aam..ssss...ssoo..rryyy...mm..mmissss.." he struggled so hard to apologize. His hands were busy sweeping the drools he couldn't control.

"lii..it..it..ttt..ttoo...ffff...ffaaarr," he continued. Of course it was. My class was in the third floor and he had to climb so high with his crippled legs and heavy bag.

My heart sank. The anger I had before was gone. On his first day of class, Irfan touched my heart. It felt so heavy looking at him struggling hard just to get to class and yet, he's still feeling apologetic for being late. But I didn't say anything. I asked him to sit and took his breath.

Irfan sat slowly, and sipped some water. His face was pale but he never cared. He looked around and said hi to all his classmates. Then, he quickly took out his notebook and copied everything I wrote on the whiteboard. What a diligent student he was!

Soon after that, the class was dismissed. And again, we had to watch Irfan struggled to get down to the first floor. I could never get that view out of my mind. That day, I thought of nothing but ways to find a better classroom for him. I called all my colleagues I could think of, asking for any available classroom on the first floor during my class hour so Irfan didn't have to sweat too much coming to class.



Fortunately, I managed to find one. Irfan was happy, but he still sweated a lot as he needed to walk to class. He thanked me, saying it was nothing but just a tiny part of the challenges he faced on campus. It was true indeed. As the time passed by, I began to witness a fighter, who never bent down to his fate.

Yes, Irfan was a real fighter. With his crippled hands, he never stopped writing notes during my lesson. Too many times he had to pick his pen from the floor as it fell down from his crippled fingers. But he never sighed. I never met a normal student who's as diligent as he was.

In the second week of the semester, I instructed all students to create groups for their final project and presentation. The number of students in my class was uneven, so one student was bound to be left behind. Just like I expected, Irfan was the one who was left behind without a group. As if his life wasn't hard enough, Irfan met another challenge. Nobody was willing to accept him into their group. The class was so silent when Irfan stood up, looking for a group who was willing to take him in.

I didn't blame them. I was teaching a college core subject, and these students were from different programmes. So they hardly knew each other. Irfan was the only one from his programme. Nobody knew much about him. In fact, it was not easy to communicate with Irfan as he was struggling with speech impairment. Accepting him into the group meant extra effort, perhaps extra patience too. After long silence, I had no choice but to use my authority to assign Irfan to a random group. I could see their unhappy faces but I had to be firm. It was time for these students to learn some values as fellow humans.

When the class ended, Irfan said nothing and walked out of the classroom quietly. His group members rushed to see me. There were four of them; Khairina, Natasya, Jia Wei and Tanusha. I looked at them and smiled, pretending to know nothing.

"Anything you would like to discuss?" I approached them calmly as I sat next to the teacher's table. They seemed to hesitate, pushing each other to talk to me.

"I'm sorry I've to say this, but we are worried, miss," said Jia Wei as he kept looking at his friends.

"What is it?" I replied, still pretending to know nothing.

"Irfan. We are worried about having him in our group. You see, miss. The final project is very important for us. It might affect our final grade." Natasya answered. There was guilt on her face as she kept looking at the floor.

"Can you tell me more about it? So, what's wrong if Irfan joins your group?" I continued to question them.

"He's disabled, miss." Tanusha hesitantly replied.

"Is he mentally disabled? No, right? So, what's the problem now?" I looked them in the

eyes, asking for a better clarification.

“He’ll slow us down,” Jia Wei answered my question.

I sighed. These students were too focused on getting the best grade that they forgot about human values.

“Listen to me. Irfan might be disabled, but he has strong will. Can’t you see how hard he struggled to climb to the third floor, last time?” I asked.

There was no reply from any of them. They looked down at the floor with guilt.

“This college won’t accept him if he’s not eligible enough to study here. Give him a chance. Remember, learning is not only about what you learn in class. It’s about what you give and share with others too. When you help Irfan, perhaps there are some good things you can learn from him.” I uttered my words slowly hoping that they could understand what I really meant.

“You are right, miss. Perhaps, we can try working with him. We don’t know much about Irfan. Who knows he might be better than us.” Khairina stepped in and tried to convince her friends.

“Yaa, we could give it a try,” replied Tanusha while Jia Wei and Natasya nodded their heads.

I smiled. These students are going through a new learning phase. It was their first time working with a disabled person. Hopefully, they’ll get to learn more about people and life.

The semester went smoothly with Irfan kept on being as diligent as before. He asked many questions and participated a lot in the class activities. His classmates started to love him. I was happy to see my other students being patient enough to put effort and waited for him as he struggled to communicate with everyone. After a few months spending time together in class, I could see how brilliant Irfan is. His hands and legs could be crippled, but not his brain. He shined bright as his friends started to accept him and gave him a chance to prove himself.

The last week of the semester was the time everyone had been waiting for. It was time for the final project presentation. I was looking forward to listening to Irfan’s presentation. Just like his group mates, Irfan came to class in a black suit. They were all ready to present their project.



A group of my students presenting their project.

As his groupmates were preparing to present, Irfan became a little bit jumpier than usual.

“Aaa..aa..aam nn..nn..ner...vouss,” he said while holding Jia Wei’s hand. Jia Wei tapped his back, trying to console him.

Out of the blue, Irfan fell on the floor. His whole body was shaking. Irfan was having a drop seizure. Everyone was terrified. Jia Wei held his body and tried to help. I quickly reached my phone to call an ambulance. Irfan was conscious but his body just couldn’t stop trembling.

“Nnn..nnooo..dd..ddont..cc..ccall..th..th..them,” Irfan shook his head. His body then slowly stopped shaking and trembling. Khairina grabbed a bottle of water and asked him to drink some.

“Aaa...amm..oo..oo..ookaaay,” said Irfan. Everyone was relieved.

Being a special person as he was, I was informed that Irfan might have some attacks once in a while. But, it never happened in my class until that day. Perhaps, the pressure to present well hit Irfan too hard and triggered the drop seizure attack.

“Miss, can we present our project some other day?” asked Jia Wei. His face was pale. He must have been very shocked when Irfan collapsed right next to him.

“Nn..nn..noooo..Aaa..aamm..oo..ookaayy..Aa..aa..aaii..ww..ww..want..tt..tt..tto..pp..pre..pre sent.” Irfan stopped Jia Wei.

Everyone’s eyes were looking at him. He was so determined that he pushed his leg to stand as quick as he could. He dragged his leg to stand next to the white screen, and gave me a thumbs up so I was convinced that he’s okay.

I nodded, giving Irfan and his group members permission to start their project presentation.

The presentation was great. Irfan’s presentation amazed me. Besides his glitch, everything else was awesome. He presented so well without even looking at any notes. He even helped Tanusha to demonstrate their project together.

I was very content. Irfan’s disability never stopped him. Although he did come across some hiccups, he knew he was not alone as he came to consult me a few times. He finally proved himself well.

Khairina, Natasya, Jia Wei, and Tanusha learnt some lessons too. Working with a disabled person was never easy, but they put their effort and nailed it together.

Irfan has taught me a valuable lesson. He showed me how determination and will power defeats all. Being an educator, I sometimes face many challenges and difficulties. So, I too, must be able to grab myself and fight to be a better teacher.

After that semester, I realized that teaching is not only about delivering the content. Teaching is about helping your students understand the life lesson, being more compassionate and better human. It is about understanding your students, accepting their uniqueness and helping them find their strength and be the best of themselves.

Good teacher helps students change grades, but the best teacher makes them change their minds.



Aini Binti Ahmad

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Remembering Why I Started...

by Ambiga Sugunabalan



We (my kids and I) had so many things planned together for the next six weeks in this classroom before the school year ends; but now I'm sitting here by myself thinking about how to reach out to all of them through remote teaching which didn't quite work the last time since they had limited access to gadgets and the Internet. How am I going to get through this second time around? Will my kids be able to get through this second time around?

Are they all going to be okay? Will I ever see them again? So many questions were lingering in my mind after they left reluctantly.

It was already 20 minutes after school hours as all my kids just stood there with tears in their eyes, refusing to leave the class. The whole school was quiet, because all the other kids had already left. While all the teachers and staff were by now gathered in the meeting room for a brief discussion. This meeting was to discuss matters needed to be done as schools close down nationwide due to the pandemic; again. It was November 8, 2020; the shutdown had just been announced.

It was just me and my 33 kids in our Year 6 class; as we received the most unpleasant news that schools are closing for the second time this year due to COVID-19,

I wish I could have hugged them tightly and said "It's all gonna be okay"; but there were restrictions as listed in the SOP for schools operating during this pandemic. Hence, I couldn't and that hurt even worse; to watch them cry and being unable to console them with a hug or even a pat on the shoulder. Surprisingly, even some of the boys who used to be the cheekiest or always seemed tough were sobbing away; and I was repeating myself numerous times saying it will get better with time.

Suddenly, the school counselor was at the front door to inform me that the meeting was about to start. He was shocked to see all the kids still there with their school bags on

their shoulders and holding a bunch of books in their hands, sobbing away. At that point then, I deliberately forced them out of the class. I told them to go back and call or text me if they needed anything at all. I remember them eagerly taking out their notebooks to jot down my number as I wrote it on the whiteboard earlier. I reassured them it's been the same number for the last 13 years; hence chances of me changing it are nearly impossible; so they should save it and keep in touch no matter how many years down the road.

This scene on the last day of school in one of my favourite classes left me deeply saddened inside. I couldn't walk out of the class. I sat down for a while at the teacher's table and started sobbing; after so long of holding my tears in. There and then, my heart ached so much not knowing how they will move on with their lives since my job for this year was not done yet and knowing, chances are I would never see some of them ever again.



They were supposed to graduate and move to their respective secondary schools. No one knows when we will ever have the chance to gather again in a room like this and share precious moments as we have always had. There was no graduation day or farewell party for them; this moment was farewell and for me personally this was the most difficult goodbye I have ever experienced with any of the batches of pupils in the so many years of teaching. This batch was rather special because these kids have challenged my way of thinking and teaching too; all thanks to COVID-19. From being a teacher, I became their good friend and most importantly a student too. I learnt a lot from them; several occasions when I had to ask for their favor; yet it was all delightful.

I don't know if anyone else feels similarly but after teaching for many years; sometimes I guess we forget why we started or how we started as a novice teacher who was excited about everything. It's inevitable that normalcy could make us complacent and we just get stuck in a routine without realizing how dull it had been. This batch of pupils knocked me off that routine wheel and nudged me towards a more fun-filled path; and truly, I should give all

the credit to COVID-19. If the pandemic never did strike and the Ministry of Education chose not to cancel the national exam (UPSR) probably I would not have done things differently with these kids. Perhaps, I would still be occupied with boring drilling practices and tedious amounts of regular testing preparing them for the national examination as had happened every single year since I started teaching here.

I miss them so much already, their voices and our classroom noises. Images of them in the classroom start flashing in my head as I sit there in the meeting not being able to focus on whatever the headmaster was saying. I was drifting away in my own thoughts worrying about my kids who just walked out of my classroom permanently and out of their primary school.



Let me tell you what was so wonderful about those kids that it made me teary eyed as they left and how COVID-19 much despised by the whole world, actually left a positive impact on me. As teachers, hellos and goodbyes aren't something new to us. Every year we have a batch that leaves and another that enrolls; but sometimes some batch of pupils is just magical. They remind us of the things we have overlooked; thus teaching us some valuable lessons.

For instance, there was this kid who always liked to ask weird questions in the classroom; and when I say weird, they are just random thoughts that he was incredibly curious about. All the other teachers constantly asked him to just keep quiet and continued delivering their lessons; I too initially was guilty of doing that; because as teachers, we are always under the pressure of examinations, more than the students in fact. We are constantly rushing in completing so much reports, testing, marking, planning, meetings, etc. In our minds, we have to catch up with the syllabus, we have to make sure the kids have mastered all the language

skills and of course they have to score well in the examinations. All these standards defined the way others perceived our competency; labeled us as either a good or bad teacher. Nobody wants to be labeled bad, so we end up ignoring the out-of-the box questions simply because we do not have the time. Not because we are incapable, but merely due to the lack of time and pressure of examination.

However, after the first lockdown, as when the Education Ministry announced the cancellation of UPSR in the current year; when I got back to school, things changed rapidly. In particular, the examination stress was taken away; hence I could finally focus on my kids as amazing individuals who are capable of great things. Of course as usual, Aqil was shooting his questions again. At the end of every lesson, when I ask if they have questions for me; he'll be the first one to raise his hand rather hesitantly and everyday he would always start with, "Teacher don't be angry okay." Then, he would try his best to word his questions in English. Which I would usually laugh at, at first, but then I will give him my honest opinion afterwards.

The interaction dynamics in the classroom between my kids and I took a huge transformation following that routine. That boy set an important example to the rest of the class; I started labeling his questions 'interesting' instead of 'weird' now. My kids were assured that no matter how silly some questions may sound; I still listened to them and responded from my own critical perspective. Even though at times the questions had nothing to do with whatever we just learnt for that day; me patiently listening, acknowledging their doubts and responding respectfully brought us all so much closer. As days passed, more of them started asking questions, even the previously quiet and nerdy ones.

Another boy, who moved to this class the previous year from the other class found it really hard to fit in. He was constantly getting into arguments with the rest, over petty things mostly. Then, he started asking questions too. One day, in the classroom we were learning about some worldwide famous people with physical disabilities in Unit 13 of the textbook. At the end during our sharing session, he said to me "My friends, people I meet always say I'm crazy or weird cause I always say weird things" with tears ready to roll down from his cheeks. To that, I instantly said, "You're not crazy Wafiy, you're unique. Different doesn't mean crazy. I am different from all of you in this class, do you think I'm crazy?" and the class burst into laughter screaming "No!" and they turned to him and said the same thing. They told him he was just different and that's okay. That smile on his face afterwards made me feel so peaceful inside; satisfied that I've done a good job with these kids; I believe they will be really kind people in the future.

Besides the cheeky boys, I could see a noteworthy difference among the girls too. They were now more confident when asking questions while also being able to give stronger,

critical personal opinions. Previously shy ones were now braver and responded better to their classmates during tasks or group projects. No one was intimidated by the idea of being mocked or teased when they made a mistake; because they understood that their classmates would extend a helping hand. Moreover, the classroom conversations we had did not affect my English lessons alone; they also improved communications outside my English lessons and even out of school as my kids would at times share stories about things that happened at their evening religious school or back home; I was delightfully surprised.

These classroom questions became very significant to us in every lesson as we kept learning beyond merely facts in the textbooks. We learned about cultures, people of the world, racism, feminism and most importantly, at the end of the day we learnt about respecting each other. A beautiful bond was created not only between me and the kids but amongst the kids themselves. They were a lot more receptive to criticism and developed respect for each other and their opinions; because I made it a point to constantly remind them that every voice matters even when you may choose to disagree with it.

Consequently, in order to encourage this, we planned creative, engaging activities together every week. I would ask them what and how they wanted to learn the content in the textbook; and we planned accordingly as a team. I was not working alone anymore since I made sure my kids were as actively involved as I was as a teacher planning and delivering my lessons every day. They shared a fair role in selecting content and designing classroom activities to reach the objectives as required in the syllabus. They were becoming independent learners who were mindful of the things that need to be acquired, and it made learning English specifically more meaningful. This would have never happened if we were still stressed out about sitting for UPSR at the end of the year; so yes, huge thanks dedicated to COVID-19 for making this possible.



It is undeniable that by far this pandemic is the biggest challenge I have experienced in my teaching career. It has impacted nations worldwide and has changed our lives in so many unimaginable ways. Most of the people I meet complain endlessly about this pandemic and how it has affected us negatively. However, I would like to see it through a positive lens as I have shared earlier how it changed my classroom dynamics. Yes, I've done an equal amount of complaining and worrying as everyone else did initially. But now looking back, I see there was a lot more to be grateful for, than to complain about. This pandemic didn't only cause us all to grow closer to each other and actually appreciate our existence in each other's life; but it had changed the normal in our lives thus creating new ways of doing even the regular stuff that we have been doing. And for me, it transformed my regular lessons to interactive ones that helped me get to know my kids better through our classroom conversations.

As I said earlier, classroom questions are often overlooked by teachers for many reasons. We constantly rush to forget to listen and empathize with our pupils. Kids are so smart; at times they know more stuff than us. I think as teachers, we need to recognize that and be ready to take on the role of a learner whenever necessary in the classes. Just because we do not know how to tackle an 'interesting' question asked, doesn't mean it's a wrong question. We should not ignore those kinds of questions, instead we should go find the answers or if we couldn't; we could ask for someone's help. There are so many ways to tackle these questions from our curious pupils; we just need to take the first step to hearing them out first.

While in training, I'm sure we were constantly reminded about creating a conducive, supportive environment for learners to learn but why these questions, which also makes up that desired supportive environment habitually ignored? These classroom questions are so imperative, not only because they affirm how well the kids have received the content delivered but also to help them become more critical learners. Teachers dismissing the pupils' questions not only affect their self-esteem but also hinder them from cultivating critical thinking skills. Through those questions, it will be reflected how well they have processed the information provided to them. We can identify if they will be able to analyze and evaluate critically from their 'creative questions'. As a nation, we aspire to produce learners who are creative and critical as described in a 21st century classroom these days, however it could not be achieved if all we do is merely tiresome drilling practices or just one way communication where the teacher ignores 'creative questions' from their learners.

I think we need to be reminded that we are in a position to help, to educate and to shape these young minds and hearts. Don't just do the job of teaching content, facts and language or whatever that's in the syllabus alone; move beyond the textbooks; converse with your pupils and learn from them about how to make learning meaningful and relatable. Factual knowledge is not all that needs to be taught in schools, values and real world problems

need to be uncovered too. This brings to mind a quote from Aristotle which says “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”

Honestly, I would say that it was my kids who have saved me from all the sadness inflicted by COVID-19, because the moment I walked into my classrooms; they would just cheer me up every single time with their enthusiasm to learn. These kids have helped me embrace life in such a rural area by becoming a passionate teacher at work and a happy human being in general because giving them my best made me realize their lives could change in the future for the better and I’d be happy to have played a tiny role in the process.

I know times are really rough during this pandemic; however, it's crucial that if we, as teachers, could learn to be a little more positive and keep moving forward; we shall be rewarded abundantly. Some rewards are not instant like the gifts you receive or watching your kids improve academically; you reap what you sow so much later in life. It’s been 11 years, and I still live in this little rural village here and occasionally when I’m outside buying groceries or stuff; parents of former pupils would greet me warmly and it makes me feel all was worth it as they share how their kids are doing right now.

Once at a workshop, a stranger asked me “Are you teacher Ambiga?” As uninterested I was to entertain him, I still said yes and continued to ask who he was. I got to know that he was actually a former pupil’s father, and he said his daughter always spoke about me at home, being the first Indian whom she had ever met in her life and an English teacher she found very amusing. And that currently she was enrolled in one of the local universities pursuing her degree. He was thanking me over and over again for teaching his daughter and for having left a positive influence on her. At that moment, I was so proud and I can certainly say that I’ve given my best in educating these young minds. As a teacher, this is what we crave to hear-that we have touched someone’s life in a wonderful way and the kids actually remember us despite the years.

Today, as I look back; there’s not much regret since I have always chosen to stay positive and reassure myself that probably me not getting a transfer out of this place is God’s way of saying that my work here is not done. I believe so strongly in that notion and therefore I shall keep giving my best. So for all the teachers out there who are far away from your families and loved ones, posted somewhere rural; who keep losing hope every time your transfer application gets rejected; let’s choose to be hopeful and keep giving the best until it’s time for you to move out. I’m positive that everything will fall into place when the time is right; till then good luck to all of us, striving to help our kids learn most effectively. Let’s just not teach but let us educate these young minds for a better future not only for them personally, but for our nation as a whole.



Ambiga Sugunabalan

Ambiga Sugunabalan is a qualified primary school teacher working with the Ministry of Education Malaysia since the year 2010. SK LKTP Adela, a primary school in a rural area in Johor is where she was first posted and is still teaching to date. She also recently completed her postgraduate course in Master of Education (TESL) at Universiti Teknologi, Malaysia.

Trust

by Muhammad Irfan Bin Mokhtar

“Indeed, we offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant.” (Surah Al-Ahzab: 72)

....

I always believe that there is a reason behind every action and decision, as to how and why one is in his or her current place or position. I also believe that each one of us carries responsibility towards others in their circles. And responsibility requires trustworthiness; a trait that would motivate one to work his/ her best to deliver the responsibility set based on their capability. Being an educator, trustworthiness is one of the traits that one must have. It may sound simple, yet this trait would determine how one would operate the approach in teaching, the method used, the delivery, the assessment and more.

This is my story, and this is my experience in teaching.

Trust Is the Glue of Life

Educators are seen as someone who has the highest level of knowledge and integrity by students. This can be seen in the classes where no matter what was said or shared by the teacher, students would take it as a whole without doubting the teacher. I remember back in 2010, when I first stepped into the teaching world, students were excited to listen to my story and they would believe every word I said. They focused on what was shared and were excited to share their story with me. They would then share the story with their friends, other teachers and even their parents. Anything that is shared by their teachers would be a hot topic for them, and it brings me joy and excitement to share more with them. But this is not one way; as they would share their everyday activities, what happened at home, what they watched, what they played and many more. This whole sharing and trust that we have between teacher and students is partly, as I believe, because they feel safe around me. The surroundings, the figure in front of them and the mutual trust and respect that we have, have led them to feel safe around me.

Students would come to me and treat me as someone that they trust. Some of them even saw me as their big brother or their parents. There was no faking in how they felt towards you as their teacher. This is where we can see the full trust given by the students. They are honest with their feelings, and it is shown. As an adult, you should not betray that trust. It is easy to take advantage of the trust, and no one will know about it except you, but this is where you as a teacher should be the matured one and to be the one with integrity. They are pure and it is us, the adults who paint their surroundings. School is a place where students be who they are, for them to express their feelings and curiosity. Teachers should have the love towards teaching, to provide all knowledge and lessons for the students, and they should feel the love for the students to give their best.

*"The teacher's task is to initiate the learning process and then get out of the way."
~ John Warren*

Trust Is a Central Part of All Human Relationships

It is a different story for secondary school students. For my case, they treated me as their big brother, or as their friends. This was perhaps because I was 23 years old when I entered secondary school for my practicum. The age gap between them and I was not big , and it led to them feeling okay to build closer rapport with me.

Back in the day, I remember my students asked me about the newly released movie, my favourite pastime, and even the game I played just to check if we were playing the same game. I also remember this one event; students asked me for advice related to relationships. For me, I might know one or two things about relationships, but I surely am not an expert on this. But there they are, asking and hoping for me to console, to advise them with their problems. Those experiences taught me again about the feeling of security that they have towards me as their teacher. The trust was also there, for them to be open with me about almost everything that happened, is happening or will happen in the future.

For me this is both a blessing and a big responsibility to carry. I believe so because, with the students, I can open up about almost everything, I can get to know them better and this helps me a lot in having good relationships with them and for me to use this in my teaching. With all the trust and faith they have in me, it was easy and painless should I choose to manipulate and betray the trust to my benefit. But this again comes back to my point earlier, where the teacher should have the maturity to control everything that happened in class. I used all these as one of my approaches in teaching. Knowing that students would engage better when teachers use something that is near to them, it makes teaching a little bit easier and I will be able to achieve my goals for the day.

But sometimes students tend to forget that this is their teacher who is standing in front. They play around, don't pay attention, and don't do the work as asked. And in some cases, they don't perform well due to personal problems. As a teacher, I have to be smart. Possess empathy, be understanding, be flexible, but be firm. We never know what is in their mind, and we never know what problem they are facing. Hence, try to understand them first to see things from their perspective but at the same time be firm for them to know what is important and what is not. Another thing I noticed is students tend to go to teachers who treat them well. Students feel safer and closer to them. Students learn through observation. Knowledge is not transferred only via teaching, but through action. A good teaching approach with a good attitude and treatment of students are the perfect recipe for a successful learning.

"Students don't remember what you try to teach them. They remember what you are."
~ Jim Henson

Learn To Trust the Journey

And it is a lot different with tertiary level students, particularly final year diploma and degree level students. Due to their age and maturity, tertiary level students are operating in a different way compared to how they were in school years. This is because tertiary is the last level of learning before they enter the working world, hence the motivation is different. Teaching at the tertiary level brings different kinds of challenges for me. Approach in teaching in the 21st century is not the same as how we know it. Students are exposed to information from multiple resources. You cannot expect punishment and caning to be the only way to educate, as they are not entirely effective nowadays.

What one can do is to be resourceful, upgrade yourselves and upgrade your knowledge. You might need to relearn to cope with the current demand in teaching.

"Knowledge without application is like a book that is never read" ~ Christopher Crawford.

For students, the best reward that they can give to their teacher is their success. It meant the world to the teachers to see their students' success and become someone. To share my experience in teaching at tertiary level, I have one student who is now owning her own company. And her company helps others in the education field too. Another student of mine is pursuing her PhD this year, a fast-track student. From degree, she applied for a PhD as her degree results were excellent. More than ten of my students are now working in the education field, teaching multiple subjects, and loving their life as an educator. Seeing my students with their success stories and where they are today, somehow makes me proud of them. Yes, their success is entirely based on their own effort and hard work, but I am glad that I was once part of their life.

I have this belief in doing your best for your students, but do not be so hard on yourselves if they do not turn out as expected. You can only do so much; it is up to them at the end of the day.

"In teaching you cannot see the fruit of a day's work. It is invisible and remains so, maybe for twenty years." — Jacques Barzun

Always Tell the Truth

Parents of these students sent their children with a confident feeling towards the institution and the teachers. They send their children with an understanding that their children will be taken good care of and at the same time learn new knowledge that is crucial to face the world. This is where they put their trust on, and this is where the teachers deliver it.

Delivering what that is stated in the syllabus is you as a teacher enabling the trust. Ensuring the students safety at school is you as a teacher relates to trust. Sharing and exposing the students with knowledge that is both beneficial for in and out of the class is you as a teacher, reinforcing the trust. The way I see it, trust carries responsibility. Imagine you send your kid to an unknown place, for 5 to 6 hours and you expect to see your kid at the end of the day, safe from any harm, and learn something along the way. This is a huge step any parents need to take, and this requires confidence towards the system. And for them to have the confidence, is by having a trust towards the system.

Trust Thyself

Classroom is a 4 walls room, with 1 teacher and 20 – 40 students. This classroom is the stage for the teacher to act and to deliver. No matter what the teacher wants to do, it is up to him or her, and no one has control over that. Classroom. It is the place where creativity is poured, it is where the exchange of knowledge and information happens, and it is where the teacher controls everything and students express what they feel.

One thing everyone might overlook is the fact that the effect of one mistake would lead to many things. This is because the stake is too high. This stems from the fact that various parties are involved in one class. One simple example on how a mistake could lead to disaster is students might misinterpret the knowledge and use it for something bad. Words uttered might trigger motivation for the students to do the complete opposite of what the teacher is actually talking. Teachers' approaches in teaching might touch the students in a way we never imagine, and sometimes, it could lead to something worse. There are risks in everything we

do in the classroom and teachers should be careful in classes. But this one example cannot deny the fact that teachers are there to share the knowledge and students should learn and ask if they are confused. Get confirmation from the teachers and apply the knowledge learnt for meaningful application.

The job of a teacher is not only to deliver the knowledge and to ensure students' success but also to develop the human capital for the nation. Students are the future leader of tomorrow, and education is the foundation for everything. Imagine the future leaders that we could mould by having a good education system and an excellent group of teachers who teach them. This comes back to the trust and responsibility set to the teachers. As every step taken, every approach in lesson and every teaching delivered has a long-term effect towards each future leader in front of us.

"A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." ~ Henry B. Adams

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Trust: Leading Edge

With the current pandemic, the lesson has shifted to online learning. All face-to-face classes are now conducted via distance learning. This requires students and teachers to learn new knowledge of learning online and this skill is crucial. As it has been almost 2 years now since the start of the pandemic, everyone now can get used to online learning as we have adapted to this approach in teaching.

Online learning not only provides many advantages and new knowledge for everyone, but it can also bring harm. For example, it is very easy to find free exercises and practices for the students. And it is very easy to just give them those exercises without conducting any online face – to face if you feel tired or not in the mood. Teachers can abuse this and betray the trust given by giving them exercises that are not worth the time and lesson. The choice is also in your hands, the teacher. You can decide on whatever approach and method of teaching, but you should always remember the responsibility that follows the trust given. No one will know how you conduct your class, but integrity is doing the right thing when no one is watching . How you uphold your responsibility and how you respect the trust given by involved parties.

"The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." ~ William Arthur Ward

Teaching is one of the challenging occupations there is. It requires a great deal of motivation and energy. Sometimes we will feel down, sometimes we will feel burnout. But like every other teacher, we will rise up again and move forward for our students. Carrying the trust and upholding the responsibility should be our push factors to give our best and be the best for our students.

Saying The Words

Poet: Catherine Pulsifer

Just saying the words, trust me
Does not feel people with glee.
Your actions will determine
Your life better than a sermon.

The actions of your daily life
When pressures build up, do you take it in strife?
When someone else tells you a secret
Do you always keep it?
When you say you will do it,
Do you do it now or wait a bit?
Do people depend on you
to do the things you say you will do?

You see trust is made up of a lot of little things
It is everyday actions and what you bring,
That will depend on the level that people trust you
So rather than talk, stay true to your word and just do!



Muhammad Irfan Bin Mokhtar

Muhammad Irfan Bin Mokhtar is a full time educator in the southern part of Malaysia. He enjoys reading life stories and watching movies.

"Sorry Teacher, I do not Know How..."

by Nadzrah Binti Sa'adan

Suzanna was just hired as a teacher at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Seri Kota. She had always wanted to be a teacher since she was a child. Her exposure to teaching by observing her parents work as educators inspired her to follow in their footsteps.



She dressed herself as a teacher, donning a bright kebaya or kurung outfit with 2-inch-high heels in the hopes of catching the attention of the students. Updated lesson plans were always ready on her desk, and she, of course, had a teaching credential.

Nobody warned her, however, that being a teacher entails more than just a credential...

"Arif! "How come you didn't finish your work?" Suzanna yelled at one of her students.

Arif simply sat there passively, making no attempt to answer or pay attention to the question.

"Arif! "What's the matter with you? Why aren't you responding?"

Again. The situation was taken over by silence. The atmosphere of Form 3E had shifted.

"Arif, step forward! Now do 30 squats!"

Without protesting, Arif marched to the front and did squats.

Suzanna sensed a sense of accomplishment. She believed that once Arif received this punishment, he would no longer dare to miss the work. Unfortunately, the answer was no. Arif made the same error again and over again. He left his book untouched. Suzanna was enraged as she considered how difficult it must be for this student to simply complete the task.

The activity was straightforward: students were to paste the literary elements notes and worksheet into their literature exercise book and respond to the questions. How difficult could it possibly be? She was perplexed. She was aware that this was the last class of form three and to say, the majority of the students in that class were regarded as low academic achievers. To accommodate the students' academic needs, she ensured that all tasks were basic and straightforward to accomplish.



Despite the fact that it was a straightforward assignment, Arif maintained the same attitude. He couldn't care less about any assignment that was handed to him. Suzanna became irritated by this and began to give up on Arif. She continued to teach as usual, punishing those who did not complete the assigned work. She believed that in order to govern a class, the teacher must be strict, and the only way to be good at your studies was to practice a lot! She did motivate students who completed the work on time by rewarding them with candies or stationeries. Most of her students were driven to complete their assignments in the hopes of receiving a reward.

However, Arif appeared to be uninterested in this strategy. He wasn't interested in the reward scheme. As a result, Arif should be punished. Suzanna pondered. She believed that punishment in the classroom is a means to help control the environment so that the students will be afraid to misbehave. In her mind, punishment was useful in maintaining the environment quiet and professional to enhance studies.

Suzanna also inquired about Arif's demeanor among his friends.

"Is Arif always like that, Aizad?" Suzanna inquired of one of Arif's classmates.

"He's like that all the time. He is never able to do his assignment. Not only your subject, but also other subjects."

Suzanna felt relieved when she learned about this. She had always assumed that Arif despised her or that there was something wrong with her lesson that made Arif unwilling to accomplish the tasks. As time passed, she began to notice that every time Arif was punished, he seemed unconcerned. He made a point of doing the squats as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, Arif never wore a disgruntled or hostile expression towards Suzanna or her lesson.

One fine day, Suzanna had to perform a relief class on Form 3E. All the students were told to focus on their work and not to make as much noise as possible. She walked around the classroom, checking on the students' activities. Arif was conversing with his small circle of buddies. Suzanna made the decision to join the party.

"What are you guys talking about?" Suzanna inquired.

Some of the members were friendly and informed her about the current trends at the time.

She felt a strong bond with these students. Arif also appeared to be willing to share his personal experiences with the group. He was, in fact, a pretty kind student. He grinned from ear to ear as he described his time as a 'mat rempit.' Suzanna seemed a little lost on the subject, but she urged the kids to elaborate on matters she didn't understand.



"Will your parents be upset if you fail your studies?" Suzanna inquired abruptly.

"Of course, teacher," said one of the members. If I fail any topic, my mother will badger me all day. However, I suppose I'm just plain stupid. So, I'll simply have to accept that I'm not very bright intellectually. Hehe..." Zikri, the group's friendliest student, explained.

"What about you Arif?"

"Yes, teacher. I am constantly chastised by my mum. Like Zikri, I believe I am a moron. Hehe..." Arif answered

Suzanna discovered her students' social position after that little discussion. Vast majority of them came from low-income homes. Most of the students appeared to have low self-esteem. It could be because they were in the last class of form 3. They seemed to have a thought that they were the most incompetent form 3 students. Suzanna also observed that Arif was in perfect health. He was able to communicate with ease. He had a clear mind, and he had a strong desire to do what he enjoys. What seemed to be the issue with Arif then? Suzanna deliberated for a long time.

All right, class, let's get started. Now, as always, please paste the worksheets I've supplied into your exercise book and respond to the questions." Said Suzanna, after she has finished her lesson for that day. Suzanna reminded Arif that he needed to do his work. Ariff simply grinned.

'Should I just punish him like I always do?' Suzanna pondered.

Instead, Suzanna took a seat next to him.

Suzanna tried to approach Ariff softly and said, "Okay sweetie, why don't you start doing it now?"



Arif sat down with his book and pencil on the table.

"Okay. You may now begin."

Arif sat still.

"First and foremost, what do you need to do?"

Arif couldn't help but smile from ear to ear.

"Okay, let's start with the date and day."

Arif began by copying the information given on the board to write the date and day.

"Good. Now, jot down the title," Suzanna instructed, pointing to the title on the handouts.

Only then Arif began writing the title.

"Okay. What's next?"

Again. A grin was displayed by Arif.

"Alright, take your scissors and cut this worksheet into the appropriate shapes before pasting it into your book.

"He got his scissors out and began cutting it.

The sound of "Kringggg.. Kringg..." signals the end of the school period for that day.

“All right, students. That's all I've got for today. “Thank you very much.”

All the students began packing their belongings in preparation for catching their bus and returning home. Arif remained seated in his chair, concentrating on cutting the worksheet that had been provided to him. Suzanna approached him.

“It's fine Arif, you can finish it at your leisure. You might miss your bus if you don't.”

“It's fine teacher, I ride my bike,” Ariff explained.

The class had already been emptied of students, leaving only two souls.

Suzanna took advantage of the situation to have a brief conversation with Arif.

“Arif, I apologize for all the punishments you've received. It was for the sake of your future that I did it. If you want to be successful in life, you can't keep this attitude. All of the tasks are for your own educational benefit.”

“I know that teacher.” Replied Arif

“Then why didn't you fulfil the assignment that was entrusted to you?” Asked Suzanna.

“Actually, I have no idea how to do it.” Arif answered in a hushed tone.

Suzanna was taken aback. Her student failed to complete his assignment not because he was disobedient or ignorant. He didn't do it because he didn't have any idea on how to start and what to do!

‘All he needed was a little direction!’ Suzanna screamed in her brain



Suzanna felt terrible. She never imagined that a form 3 student, after nine years of schooling, would be unable to complete a simple homework assignment! Teacher Suzanna took the evening off and went over each section of Arif's exercise book with him one by one. Started by writing the day, date, and title, then cutting, pasting, reading, comprehending, and filling in the spaces with the answer. She felt relieved when she returned home that day. She had the impression that Ariff despised her lesson.

No. It was not.

Suzanna went to Form 3E class the next day, hoping that Arif had completed the work assigned to him the day before.

“Good morning, students. How are things going for you today? “Did you accomplish the work from yesterday?”

The kids in Form 3E screamed, "YESSSS TEACHER!!!"

Suzanna rushed up to Arif's desk and inquired about his homework.



Arif pulled out his book and handed it to her.

With high hope lamented in his heart, she hastily snatched the book.

“Oh my God, Arif.”

Her eyes began to well up with tears. Yes, Arif completed his assignment from yesterday. But not only yesterday's task, but also the weeks before that! There were about seven assignments given throughout the previous weeks. It was indeed a tremendous amount of work to complete all the assignments. Suzanna was so certain that Arif stayed up late at night to do all the tasks given.

He did an excellent job. All the notes were put into the book, and all the questions were copied and answered, despite the fact that some of the answers were incorrect.

She was ecstatic with Arif's accomplishments.

“Thank you, a lot, Arif. You've done an outstanding job here. Excellent work.” Suzanna said joyfully.

She complimented Arif throughout the class hour.

Praise be to God, Arif has never skipped his schoolwork since that day.

Suzanna learned that as a teacher, it is critical to have empathy for the students. She always sympathizes with students who are having difficulties, but she rarely empathizes with them. To empathize, one must first gain a better understanding of the other person. Empathy is defined as the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and understand their feelings. It is seeing yourself in the shoes of others in order to recognise and feel their anguish. Empathy is a powerful psychological tool that can bring peace and goodwill to a society that is plagued with so much hostility and animosity. It is a necessary first step toward compassion. The importance of empathy is also emphasized in Islam.

At-Taubah 9:128: There has certainly come to you a Messenger from among yourselves. Grievous to him is what you suffer; [he is] concerned over you and to the believers is kind and merciful.

At the Battle of Badr, Abu Jahal, a notable anti-Islamist, was murdered. When his son Ikrimah ibn Abu Jahal learns that his father was killed in combat by Muslims, he is devastated. He then desired to meet Allah's Prophet (pbuh) at Makkah. When the Prophet of God (pbuh) learns that Ikrimah has entered Makkah, he encourages Muslims not to refer to him as the son of Abu Jahal (meaning: father of ignorance) since it will hurt his feelings, even if he converts to Islam. He (pbuh) forbade people from referring to Ikrimah's father as "Abu Jahal" because it would affect him.

This is the mercy of Rasulullah (pbuh). He knew that even though Abu Jahal was an unwavering enemy to Islam, he is still a father to his son, Ikrimah. This behaviour is known as 'empathy', which resonates throughout history books and beyond.

Suzanna learned that there is no such thing as a bad student.

Up till now, she always keeps in mind that everyone aspires to be good and to be the best they can be. Everyone hopes to be successful in life.



She also realized that there is never a 'one-size-fits-all' teaching and learning approach. She made a promise to herself to learn more about the teaching profession and wished to be a

teacher who inspires her students. She has seen many students who are inspired by their teachers accomplished amazing things. Even though they are deemed poor achievers, each student has their own hopes and goals.

She believed that no teacher could guarantee his or her students' success, but a teacher can always be there supporting them to reach their goals.



Suzanna is now no longer working as a teacher. She has chosen to be an educator in a different institution.

As for Arif, he has reached the age of 24 this year. According to a source, he is currently employed as a mechanic in a workshop. Suzanna never contacted him, but she constantly hopes that he is doing well in his life. Insyallah...



Nadzrah Binti Sa'adan

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Miss Marvel Mind Teaching Journey

by Niwashini Nambiar Aravidan

I still remember the advice given by one of my university lecturers. He told us that we are going to navigate and shape up our students' futures through teaching.

“...It’s going to be an amazing journey that will change you as a teacher too ladies and gentleman... be prepared to enjoy this amazing journey...”

It has been 6 years since I have become a teacher and I have learned some important and meaningful lessons throughout my journey.

Lesson 1: Take teaching and learning beyond the classroom.

I still remember my first posting journey. I was teaching the lower secondary group students. There’s a specific Form 1 class that completely changed my style of teaching. I was given to teach 1 Ekonomi and most of the students in that respective class are from a broken family, some are from slums and their challenges were harder than others who were born with a silver spoon. The English language is an alien language for all of them. I tried my level best to create various interesting and fun activities for them till late at night. There was even a moment where I accidentally cut my finger with a knife while preparing some interesting teaching materials. I will be very excited to walk into their class and teach.

However, when I stepped into their class, there’s no one in the classroom most of the time. I had to wait for at least 10- 15 minutes for them to enter my class. Most of the time, I had to search for them all around the school and the moment they saw me, trust me they would turn out to be Usain Bolt and start running as fast as they could to the class. At first, I thought they hated me to be their teacher. I was sad and was thinking of ways on how to win their heart. I even tried to bribe them with some delicious brownies and fruit cakes but it turns out to be another mess. I tried asking some senior teachers how they deal with them and their answers really surprised me.

“...Niwa, ignore. Stop wasting your time, energy and money for them. They don’t care at all. Just stay in the class. If Cikgu Ali saw them merayau-rayau , they will face the consequences...”

Honestly, I was taken aback when I received such advice from a senior teacher and that was not the way it was supposed to be. I cannot ignore my students. They are my kids who need proper guidance from me, their teacher. I am not wasting my time, energy or even money for them. I am struggling to make sure they have a better future in their life. I was really frustrated. Suddenly, I remembered one of my lecturer's teaching styles. It's Madam Ju! She always conducts her lesson outside of the lecture room. Once, we went to KL Sentral to learn how to write a poem. She introduced to us, "Teaching and learning beyond the classroom".

BINGO!!!

I have realized why not try to use the "Teaching and Learning beyond Four Walls" method to my students. I got really excited and started giggling to myself thinking that finally, I kind-of-found a solution for my students and really hoped that it would work and create wonders. The following week, as usual, during the English lesson, most of the students were missing. I found the boys were playing football using a plastic bottle while the girls were cheering them on. I joined the girls and were cheering with them too.

"Come on, Hariz !!! Kick that bottle to Vengades"

Everyone became silent. The boys who were playing football using a plastic bottle stopped playing and were blinking their eyes. I bet their hearts were racing even faster after listening to my voice. I could hear the girls whispering to each other.

"Jom lari.. lari.. cikgu jom ah.."

"Cikgu senyum bila marah ker wei"

Everyone was shocked to see me. They were surprised to see me cheering with them too. I smiled and told them that, from today on, we are going to learn English in the gymnasium instead of the classroom. They were happy. I have realized that they do hate the classroom not me! They are bored staying in the same place and learning. I have conducted countless activities such as "Explorace" to learn tenses, charades to learn verbs and many more. I have realized that by presenting them the real-life applications of theories that they are learning, I was able to help develop their learning experience and develop their soft skills such as teamwork, leadership and compromise in their learning environment. English is no longer an alien language for most of them. They have improved a lot and the number of failures in that class started to decline.

Now, it has been 6 years since I have taught them. Most of them are in higher educational institutions and furthering their studies. Every single year, during teacher's day, some of

them will be sending me messages thanking me for not giving up on them that day. Honestly, it was only possible because I take teaching and learning beyond the classroom.



“My first batch of students in SMK SKUDAI (2015). This picture was taken during a play rehearsal at the school hall. We used the entire space and yes, we had lots of fun. Most importantly, they enjoyed the moments of learning on that respective day.”

Lesson 2: With students, you need to unlearn certain things before making them learn the right things.

As I complete my first year teaching journey, I have learned another significant lesson that students are like a damp clay. As a teacher, you can convert them into anything by directing and supervising them in the right direction. I was transferred to another school within my 9 months of teaching. I was very sad and reluctant to leave my students. I was very attached to them and the moment I broke the news about my transfer to my students, they cried. I remembered one of my students actually came to my house at night by bicycle. I was shocked to see her in front of my house. She was crying and I instructed her to go back home as her grandmother might be worrying about her. I sent my father and mother to accompany her as she cycled back to her house.

With a heavy heart, I reported myself to a new school. I was instructed to replace another English teacher who will be retiring soon in two weeks of time. I was assigned to be a class teacher at 4V2. The existing class teacher of 4V2 told me that the students are pretty challenging. I was scared. I took a deep breath and walked to the class with a bright smile. From far away, I could hear the noises from that class. As I walked fast into the

class, they were shouting at each other and pushing the tables and chairs. I was trying to calm them down and it was a failure. The classroom situation made me miss my 1 Ekonomi student even more. They are so charming and adorable. During each lesson, you will be blessed to get to see how cheerful they are when they are learning something new. All those moments were indeed priceless.

Somehow, I managed to control the class and proceed with my lesson. Every single day, there will be at least one subject teacher meeting me and complaining about my students. Sometimes, I wonder what's really wrong with these students and hate the feeling of being a failure as their class teacher. However, things changed after one amazing incident. It was their English teacher retirement day celebration. The whole class were assigned to conduct a performance for their English Teacher during the retirement celebration. As their current class teacher and English teacher, I need to coordinate with them. I took a deep breath when I received this news.

"This is going to be really tough but.. let's do this Niwa.."

I was clueless and scared. I don't know how to deal with them. As usual, I walked into their class during English Lesson. Then, I told them about the retirement celebrations. All of them looked sad.

"We love Madam Lalitha!" said Xin Yi and the whole class agreed with her.

I smiled and told them, "If that's the case, why not do something memorable and make her special day even more meaningful?".

For the first time ever, they agreed with me and started to participate in classroom discussions.

"Pheww... I am lucky that they actually agreed to this.."

Finally, we have decided to do a mini sketch followed by a choir and give the teacher a memorable gift. I was thanking God because finally after so many arguments and name-calling in between, they came to an agreement. It was a great sigh of relief. I told them that we will be carrying out our rehearsal in the afternoon once school is over.

Little did I know that there's a huge surprise awaiting me...

During the rehearsal, all of them were present. We had our rehearsal at the school field because I do not want to disturb the afternoon session students' teaching and learning process. At first, I thought everything would be fine. However, I was wrong again this

time around. A simple rehearsal session turns out to be a big mess again. They were shouting at each other and some decided to walk out while yelling at them. I tried to calm them down but it only turned out to be even worse as they were pushing each other until one of the students accidentally pushed me. My leg got twisted and I fell into a tiny drain.

“Alamak... Teacher!!!”

Fathihah and Loshini ran towards me and tried to help me out.

For the first time in my teaching history, I actually raised my voice towards them and asked them to keep quiet. All of them became silent. I took my handbag and asked all of them to follow me. I was limping as I sprained my ankle. Fathihah, Loshini, Pei Yu and some of the other students were trying to help me but I said to them that I was fine. In reality, the pain was horrible. Then, I walked into an empty class and asked them to sit down. I have decided to have an honest conversation with them. I speak to them from the bottom of my heart. I wanted to know what their real problem is and why they are very aggressive.

Finally, I have found out that they missed their former English teacher because she is the only one who always praises them and laughs at their jokes. They were upset because she is leaving them. They were upset because they have been always labeled as the notorious ones and being compared with the smart students. I listened to all their rants patiently. At that moment, I realized that they need a cheerleader who always trusts them. I have decided to be one for them. I told them that there is not a smart or less smart student in this world. It's all about the effort that we are investing in our education.

A single graded paper will not determine anyone's intelligence. I told them about myself. I wasn't a smart student and always feel insecure about every single thing in my life. I battled with anxiety issues. I am scared to go in front of the crowd and speak. However, I worked really hard. I fight my anxiety issues and today, I am a teacher standing in front of 32 students trying my level best to make sure they succeed in their life.

“I may not be the best teacher that you have ever met. But, I'll definitely try my level best to be one. I'll make sure, in the next 10 years, when I see you or hear your name, I'll be proud of you cause all of you have achieved something amazing in your life. I love you all and I respect your feelings. Now, let's prove to everyone that you guys are not the notorious one but the smartest and talented students in this school. I am here for you. We are a family and we don't run when any one of your family members is in trouble. Let's do this together.”

They were listening to me quietly and I almost cried when I finished my last sentences as I spoke to them from my heart.

“Okay guys, Jom... let’s start our rehearsal again. Teacher, don’t worry about us.” said Syamil. He was the class monitor.

All the students carried their bags and walked to the school field again. I was watching them from afar and they were practicing. They’ve been staying back almost every afternoon for the rehearsal. I will be sitting down and watching them practice. They would run to me each time they needed any ideas or help. We laughed a lot too, especially when we were practicing for the choir. The most awaited day has arrived and honestly, I was very nervous for the whole day. I was trying my best to keep myself calm. The moment the celebration started, I was sitting down with other teachers and watching the performance. Finally, I saw my 4V2 students’ performance. Trust me, they nailed it. Their remarkable performance made everyone, including the students who were the spectators, cry. They were absolutely the champions.

Once the celebration was over, Madam Lalitha came to me and hugged me. She thanked me for guiding the kids for such an amazing performance. I was glad because everyone loved their performance. I ran to their class and wanted to praise them. The moment I entered their class, they were cheering. They told me that they were so confident and this isn’t possible if only I did not motivate them. All I could do at that moment was just smile widely till my cheek hurts. I really wish I could record this precious moment and keep it in a jar forever. I know, they (the students) will remember this moment more than any other amazing moment when they are old. And of course, things changed a lot after this amazing incident.

Now, it has been 5 years since they have finished their SPM. Some of them are in universities meanwhile some of them are working. Till today, we are still keeping in touch. Thanks to them, I have realized that students are not stubborn. They make us realize our duty as teachers to guide and teach them the right values at the right time. As for my 4V2 students, they learned it during Madam Lalitha’s retirement day celebrations.



“Introducing my amazing 4V2 students. This picture was taken right after Madam Lalitha’s retirement celebrations. All of them were very happy and excited”

Lesson 3: Love your profession, then every day is a vacation.

Every job has its own problem. There was a time where I wanted to quit due to a toxic environment. However, I stayed for my students. I have realized that once you have set your goal in your profession, what you want to achieve and proceed with your own goal, trust me you will definitely succeed in your own way. My goal in this profession is to make sure all my students never miss the opportunity to learn. I want them to learn and succeed in their life. Nothing else! I have realized that I will definitely face many problems and yes I did face many problems including being boycotted by some teachers because they feel I am showing off whenever I post my students' hard work and success on my social media. Each time whenever I face any problem, somehow, I'll manage to overcome it because I love my job and my students.

As a teacher, I always try to understand my students' points of view, what they really want and what they are facing in their life. I know that my students need a teacher that can lead them towards success and during that process, I have realized my own potential as a teacher too. I always try to understand the core of a problem and try to understand my student's strengths in academics. Thank God, I was able to channelize their strength towards academics and the future. I changed my approach to teaching and evaluating my students. I changed based on my students' needs and strengths. I guess that's why I was declared as an Edufluencers.



Last but not least, 6 years as a teacher has taught me many wonderful lessons and I know I will be learning many more as years pass by. As a teacher, acceptance is very important. We need to understand that every student is different and they can reach their full potential if only they are treated with love and acceptance. No students are hopeless and all they need is some different approaches so that we, as teachers, are able to portray their smartness to the world. A successful teacher is someone who is able to accept and understands every student's worth. Well, this is my journey, MISS MARVEL MIND TEACHING JOURNEY...



Niwashini Nambiar Aravindan

Niwashini Nambiar Aravindan is an English Teacher at SMK Mutiara Rini, Johor Bahru. She has been teaching English for 6 years. She has obtained her Bachelor of Education in TESL from University of Putra and Master Degree in TESL from University of Technology Malaysia, Johor. She was selected as TOP-100 Teachers for PAK 21 and EDUFLUENCERS (Malaysia Education Influencer) by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2019. She has conducted various sharing sessions with teachers all over Malaysia to share about the best classroom practices using 21st century skills and tools. She also won various awards and prizes for classroom innovation competitions at National and International level. Recently, she won a Bronze Award in the Virtual Innovation Competition 2021 (VIC21) and Second Runner-up in MELTA E-Classroom Teacher Competition 2021. Currently, she is working on her research paper. Her research interest includes the usage of digital tools in lesson and syllabus design for students.

Learning through Experience

by Norhisyam Bin Jenal

University life is a moment in time that I cherish the most. It is a period where teenagers start to become young adults and living their life away from the stability of living with their families. We feel that we are free from the supervision of our parents and family members, which allow us to decide on our way of life and the circle of friends that we want to be with for the next 3 to 4 years. It is when we are trying new things in life and learn to adapt to the society and environments surrounding us. I believe this moment molded me into the man I am now, years after I finished my study. I always believe that the graduation that I had at the end of my time at the university is not only for the academic achievements but also the learning process of becoming an adult.

I spent my undergraduate years far away from home, where at the age of 17, I travelled halfway across the world to seek knowledge in a foreign country and try to get the best experience out of it so that I could use it in the future. The circumstances forced me to learn to live independently and handled my life as I could not rely on my family. I tended to hide all my problems during my time there, especially when I contacted my family to provide them a peace of mind. There I discovered that university life was bearable with the support of your loved ones, friends, and faculty members. I also found that the best way to get the most out of university life was by balancing academic study and extracurricular activities such as joining clubs and getting involved with student programs. This balance provided a way for me to control my stress level in a fun and challenging manner while improving my resume. One of the programs that I joined was called alternative spring break, where a group of students gathered and travelled across the country together to run a community service for a week. I used this time to get away from the campus and mingled with friends from different backgrounds while doing something good for the community. This experience is an example of a memory that I will never forget for the rest of my life.



A picture of me joining a community service program with the Tibetan community in Minnesota

When I first became a lecturer, I felt worried that I would no longer have the chance and time to be active in any program since I was no longer a student and my work schedule was hectic enough. However, in 2014, I was fortunate to be appointed as one of the advisors for a student competition called Shell Eco-Marathon (SEM) Asia. I took this challenge since this was a way for me to get away from my routine as a lecturer, which generally involved teaching, marking papers, doing research work in the lab, and writing research papers. Therefore, I would say that this was a very impactful event in my life as a lecturer. I played a different role in this competition while learning a lot about the students outside of the class. For those who are not familiar with this competition, SEM is a global competition initiated by Shell to provide a platform for students from all around the world to design and develop energy-efficient vehicles. The competition was not focusing on finding the fastest car on the road; the winners were decided based on the car with the lowest fuel consumption after traveling through a predetermined distance based on the given time limitation. This science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) based competition was divided into different categories joined by university and high school teams from all around the world.

I was first introduced to this competition in 2011 by one of my colleagues who joined the competition organized in Sepang International Circuit (SIC) Malaysia. I wanted to write about this competition because this was the first time that I experienced watching a group of students committing their time and life for almost a year to participate in this adventurous competition. We recruited the team members by conducting interviews, and the panels were fellow team leaders from the past competitions. We promoted the selection process through various mediums such as flyers, posters, and social media. All of these were done out of the personal interest of the previous team members to make sure that we picked the right students to continue the team's mission, which was to complete the competition and go up to the podium that year after years of participation.

The recruitment criteria did not focus on the results or CGPA of the students but the willingness of the recruit to commit to the laborious competition preparation processes and the technical skills required to develop a car from scratch. Through this process, I could see that the students chosen had different characters and backgrounds; they were from Mechanical Engineering Faculty and Electrical Engineering Faculty. Selecting the students from these faculties was necessary due to the nature of the category chosen by the team, Urban Concept – Hydrogen Fuel Cell, which utilized hydrogen gas as the source of fuel and electric propulsion system as the mechanism to move the car. If the lecturers did the recruitment process, the type of students picked for the team would be based on their academic achievement rather than their technical abilities. This situation would create an imbalanced team structure where we would have more thinkers than doers.

Then, we assigned the selected team members into different departments, with each department led by the team's senior members. The way the team leaders initiated the various processes of the car preparation was spot on where the overall components and processes involved in the car's development were laid out to all the members so that they knew what to expect in the future. Some of the leaders in the team were my students in the class that I taught that semester, and here I could see the different sides of students compared to the ones I saw in the class. One particular student was known as a passive student in my class. During lectures, I tried many ways to get him involved with the learning session, but he had a character that was hard to break. He would only answer my questions with minimal wordings and sometimes with a forceful smile. But, surprisingly, when he was in charge of one of the departments, he became a vocal leader and always assisted the other members under him.

Another thing that I could see during the car's production was the student's ability to learn new knowledge in a short period. Some of the students were not familiar with the basic configurations of a car, for example, the transmission, the steering system, the suspension, and the chassis building. They were still in the early years of the degree program, so they did not have much experience dealing with the design software and manufacturing processes. However, they were very determined to finish the car on time and spent hours of free time learning all the new things on their own. The students would go the extra mile to finish up an exciting and meaningful project. Thus, I learned to prepare course assessments that were interesting and related to their daily life or phenomena rather than having theoretical questions based on textbooks. I can still remember that one of my professors during my undergraduate study provided an assessment question based on an episode from the famous science show, Mythbusters.

Other than that, a group of students was assigned to search for sponsorship for the team. Since the amount of money involved in the development of the car was quite large, the team needed to find sponsors that could cover up some of the costs that the university did not cover. This group played a significant role for the team, and the planning started earlier than the other department. They also dealt with the car body designer to allocate some space on the car to place sponsorship stickers. At this point, I could see how the students got creative in promoting the team. They went through all means to find sponsors through social media and contact business owners and companies that might be interested in the competition. They did not have any worries about getting rejected by anyone while doing this job, and they were very positive about getting sponsors for the team. I always tried to adapt this attitude as a lecturer because it was significant for me when establishing industrial linkages.

When the team members asked me to become the advisor for the team, the first thing that came to my mind was the amount of work and time that I had to commit to the team to help them achieve their goals. I had to reschedule my timetable to have some time to meet with the students and discuss the project's progress. However, right after the first meeting with the students, I soon discovered that I did not have to worry so much about the team. They were able to work by themselves independently with minimal guidance. They were fortunate that the senior team members were always there for them during the car's development. The master student, who was the pioneer member of the team, was experienced enough to lead the team in the technical parts, especially on the fuel cell electric propulsion system, which was the heart of the car. But this did not mean that the amount of work expected would be lesser because the team had to design a new car for that year. To do that, they were allowed to use one of the labs in the faculty, and they could excess the lab with minimal guidance. I saw that all of them worked on the car whenever they did not have any class until midnight. Some even stayed overnight in the lab because they were too tired to go back to their house.

The best part of the competition was the competition week itself. A few days before the competition, the team and I travelled to Manila, the Philippines, and the whole crew was so pumped up to compete. First, however, I must make sure that everyone on the team was safe throughout the week. The distance between the hotel and the competition venue was about 20 minutes walking which was relatively nearby. We assigned the teams into two groups; the technical crew members were responsible for preparing and handling the car during the competition, while the other members needed to manage the accommodation, food, transport, and other miscellaneous jobs. The crew members were limited to a certain amount of people because of the regulation, and they were the only ones that could enter the paddocks of the competition.



The first hurdle that the crew members had to face was the inspection process which was one of the most challenging situations for the students. They were required to prepare the car so that it could pass all the tests and inspections by the committee. Some of the inspection checklist examples were the size, integrity, safety, and overall functionality of the car. The organizer did all of these to ensure that the car was track-worthy and safe to drive during the competition. Even though speed was not the main target of the race, the competition required the race to finish in a specified amount of time to qualify. I could see the students were dealing with various issues on the car to pass the inspection. The car prepared for the competition was finished months before the competition week and had to be shipped to the competition venue. It did not matter how much they prepared the car in the UiTM labs before the shipment; due to the logistics and the long shipment duration, the car would need some adjustments after it arrived at the paddock.

We made some necessary improvements after some discussions before the competition. The students went through a painstaking process of working around the clock solving all the issues that occurred before and after the inspections. They had to apply all their technical skills and knowledge to improve the car, and sometimes the hardest part to solve could be settled by the easiest solution, but we could only do this when everyone worked together. There were times when sparks were flying between the crew members, but everyone knew that this was part and parcel of the competition. At the end of the day, they returned to the hotel and went to dinner together as if nothing happened during the day. The competition went well for our team, where the competing car was able to finish the race and ranked first in the category. It was the sweetest success for the team because it was the first time our team had managed to win the competition. All the hardship and sacrifice that the team members made had come to fruition in the end. Tears of joy came out from some team members when the announcer called us up to receive the trophy on stage. This event was also an extraordinary moment for me because I felt very proud of the team, and to this day, I am always grateful that I was able to be a part of the team.



The team during the prize ceremony

The following day we continued to explore Manila before heading back to Malaysia. The students continued their studies for the semester. However, that competition became the last one for some of them since they would graduate in a year. After almost seven years since the competition, I am still in contact with some of the students from the team and have become close friends. A few of the students also attended my wedding ceremony in 2016. Some of them continue with the engineering-related profession. For those who work in different sectors, I still believe that the competition managed to help them in their life after graduation. For me, I transferred to Pasir Gudang and continued to become a lecturer for diploma students. Involving myself in the competition has allowed me to understand more about my students' behaviors and situations. When preparing for a new semester, I always try my best to design my course to cater to the students' interests and produce a friendly environment that hopefully allows them to feel comfortable and interested. I also always encourage the students in my class to participate in any extracurricular activities by using the competition as an example. I always believe that one of the ways to learn about the students is through out-of-class activities; thus, I like to be involved in various student modules as a facilitator. I hope this story will encourage you to participate in any programs to create your own sweet memories.



Norhisyam Bin Jenal

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Cherry Blossom

by Noor Shahariah Binti Saleh

I stared at the ceiling. My eyes blinked heavily while my mind was resuming its wake-up mode, trying to figure out the time. When the sun rays peeked through the gaped curtain, they touched my face and burned my eyes. How I wished I could just pull back the blanket and continue my sleep. Despite the strong urge of going back to a deep slumber, my inner strength successfully forced my body to stretch, supplying some energy to every inch of the nerves. It was no longer dark in the room. My right hand groped for the phone, but it was nowhere to be found. Frustrated, I lazily rolled myself to the edge of the bed. It seemed ages to gather the strength before I sat with my feet dangling near the floor.

The air conditioner was off. It must be Zahar, my husband, who turned it off and, knowing that I hated to be in a warm room, he switched on the fan. We had our Subuh prayer together, but I failed to recall when I fell back to sleep. I was not sure when my kids went to kindergarten and school. Zahar got them all ready before he sent them along the way to work. It was the thing that I observed he enjoyed recently, after having the kids and I lived away from home. He seemed to celebrate it, taking every task in caring for the kids, including waking the children up, preparing them to school, and fetching them from the transit centre. I was blessed. After the prolonged hardship, we finally got back together.

It took us nine solid years to be in a long-distance marriage, separated by hundreds of miles apart. I commuted every weekend or, if necessary, twice a week to return to our Negeri Sembilan home. Zahar worked in the capital city while I worked in the southernmost state of peninsular Malaysia. So here in this home that we met once or twice a week. People said that it was the cost that I had to pay for being an educator. Once you are one yourself, you need to sacrifice your happiness on the altar of serving the people. They also pitied my husband and children for being 'trapped' in this situation. Well, at least I did what I loved so much, or perhaps that was what I believed and still is.

I cleaned myself and put on the loose, off-shoulder dress. Then, I pulled the curtains and slid open the doors. Then, I headed downstairs. The boxes were mounted almost everywhere they fitted the place. Zahar hated this, I knew, but he was left with solely two choices; one, to give me some time to unpack and reorganise all the stuff, or two, he could do some help with all this mess. I guessed he already made his choice. He would never touch my boxes unless I told him. But above all, being an educator in this situation helped me a lot. I would say my experience in the teaching industry contributed to my sorting and labelling skills. That is

what most teachers do best. However, being very skilful at these kinds of tasks makes us so fussy even at small things. That is why Zahar always surrenders.

I stood in front of the boxes, reckoning which one should I unbox first. There were ten boxes, and some of them contained more small boxes. It is like a treasure hunt where you try to answer one question that leads to another. I finally decided to start with the box labelled "stationery and books".

The first box was just a breeze. It took only two minutes or so to put all the books on the shelves. When I was busy picking up the wrappers, my phone suddenly rang. I searched for it, and my eyes perused all the corners. As I moved backwards, finding the phone on the boxes, my right foot stumbled at the edge of one box. In just a split second, my body flung to the back. Fortunately, I managed to hold the pole next to the stairs while my toe locked on the box. Swiftly, I bent down, and my hand reached the tip of the toe. I mumbled and cursed in agony while my eyes stared at the box. It was an enormous box as compared to all.

"Let me empty you, you rascal!" I dragged the box angrily to clear space, but I was uncertain why I was so mad at it.

I took a pair of scissors and cut the tape. There were files, old books, and another little black box that I never knew of. I lifted the black box out and scrutinised it. It was pretty heavy, but I failed to recall its content. There was a red ribbon wrapping around the box. I felt nervous yet excited at the same time. Slowly I untied the ribbon and slipped off the cover. The box flashed back the good old memories of my early teaching years. I kept collections of gifts from the students, including a cup engraved with my name and 'Thank you, Miss Sha, for being the best teacher for us' on it. I reached out to each of the items, primarily cards and keychains, one by one. Every time I held on one, my head projected these kids' faces and recalled their voices wishing me all those wishes. There was one picture. I stopped this time. This one particular group of students I knew. I closed my eyes and smiled.

"Oh, god! Save me!" I wept quietly.

The pace was quickened. It was doubtful that I would make it to the 8. a.m. class. I looked up to the building on the hill. So many other people were heading in the same direction. I sometimes squeezed my body between people or dodged to the left and right to avoid them. No one barely said anything, making vast, fast strides to get to their classes too.

It was the first day of the semester at this branch of the university. Here, five of us were from the same batch, positioned as part-time lecturers. We rented the same house and had surveyed the classes before as the preparation for the first day so that we would not get lost. As a fresh graduate, I could not afford any transport for myself. Luckily, my housemate and colleague, Siti, had one, so carpooling was the only solution for the time being. She had the class at the building on the hill too. But, silly me that I got to the wrong venue where she dropped me earlier. I thought I was supposed to have a class in the building down the hill.

I almost could not catch up on my breath. I stopped a while to adjust the handle of my handbag. The laptop bag was pretty heavy that my right arm became numb. The attendance file almost slipped off my hand.

"No!" I screamed so loud and caught the file.

People around were all looking at me, but I just did not care. No one offered help anyway, minding their lateness. The new shoes refused to cooperate with me too. I knew it started to take a toll on my ankles now. They began to blister, and the pain was a great torment. Without a doubt, God punished me for spending too much on this job, and that was the price I had to pay for beauty.

Finally, I reached the building. There were five levels in total, but luckily my class was on level three. The bad news was there was no lift in the building. Having no choice, I dragged my feet to climb each stair. At this point in time, I could no longer feel them.

I was about 15 minutes late. When I got to the class, most of the students were ready with their bags, about to leave. I was relieved that I could make it before they were gone. They pitied me, I knew. I could see it in their eyes. Who did not anyway? Looking at a young lecturer sweating and looking pale with the faded lipstick. The green baju kurung was all wet, especially behind her back and under her armpits, and her Yuna-styled shawl was no longer on point; these kids would be reluctant to leave.

I gathered all my will to start the class. It was a silence at the beginning - as expected for every first class. But students gradually felt comfortable, and they gave responses to all the questions and instructions from me. It was then the ice-breaking session. I introduced myself and asked the students to do the same from the front row to the back. We were about to finish the session for another five more students when suddenly,

"Hi, Madam. Err... Miss. Can we come in?"

I turned my head to the door. Four female students were waiting for the permission to be granted.

“Ah, yes. Please come in,” I said hesitantly. “Are you sure you are in the right class? We are about to finish.”

Typically, I was very good at making sarcastic remarks, but I was confused then. “This is Miss Sha’s class, right? Group A?” The same girl, the leader of the group perhaps, trying to confirm.

“Yes, yes. You are right. Never mind. Please have a seat.” I instructed them. And so, the class continued and was dismissed after twenty minutes. As I packed all my belongings, the girls came near me. The leader, Nana, went forward and apologised for being late.

“I forgive you,” I paused. “But because this is the first class. Hopefully, you will be punctual next time.”

My own words almost choked me. It seemed like giving a hard slap on my face for being late too.

The girls nodded and left. My eyes followed them from a distance. There was something about this one girl named Melyn. She stood behind the others, like a shadow, trying to hide from being seen. Even though she was far behind, I felt her presence. The way she looked at me since she first entered the class gave me goosebumps. I could sense the contempt and anger, and she always turned away every time I looked at her, avoiding eye contact.



From left: Nana, Umi and Melyn.

The following class was meticulously planned. I learned from my lesson. The schedule and venues of each class were memorised, and I even printed the timetable in small size papers. I slipped one behind the staff card case and another copy in my purse. Siti and I went out earlier to hinder traffic congestion at the university's main entrance. I was assured that the second week would be better.

The laptop and the projector were all set. Half of the students were there when I entered the class earlier, which made my heart glow. That would be one of the small things that all educators would secretly relish. Things like this make us feel appreciated, and definitely, we reminisce about them in future.

When the clock struck 8, I started to call the students' names one by one. Each character was echoed with an indicator of presence.

"Melyn," I called. No one responded.

"Nana." I waited. For a moment, there was absolute silence.

I was about to continue calling the other students, but the class representative's voice broke the quiet surrounding. "Farah and Umi are not here too, Miss Sha."

"Are they coming?" I bit my lips while sounding agitated.

"I am not sure." The class representative started to get the jitters. He probably regretted his voluntary action.

I said no more as discussing punctuality further would only be a red herring. Besides, the offenders were not there. So, I made my final check on the remaining present students and just began the lesson.

Everyone almost forgot about the Fabulous Four and concentrated on the lecture, but a sudden knock directed all eyes to the door. There came the missing girls. Like in the first class, Nana led the group. She looked mortified for the look that everyone gave them. She expressed her apology on behalf of the girls with complete remorse. I beheld each of the faces. The last person to enter was Melyn. She looked down on the floor with her watery eyes. She did not dare lift her head when passing by me, but there was no chance to hide the cloudy face. There was something like a massive secret that they kept among themselves, mainly when they exchanged looks. My heart was eager to know, but my brain refrained from asking further questions.

I pointed at the empty seats in the first row. The seats were right in front of my desk and they fit four of them. I signalled them to sit. Nana squeezed in first and got into the seat near the window, followed by Farah and Umi. Melyn was the last person to earn her place. She sat the furthest among all. I waited patiently and continued the lesson.

Melyn was busy sketching when I taught the class. I always observed her from the corner of my eyes, like the style my mother always used. She scrutinised something without people noticing her looking; we called it the I-was-not-looking spying trick. I strolled down the aisle that divided the two groups of sitting arrangement. The students paid attention to me, especially when I enjoyed picking random students to answer my questions. However, Melyn was just ignorant; she seemed to not care. So, I called her name and asked for an opinion related to the example I gave.

To my surprise, Melyn just kept quiet with a forced smile. It was a long pause before I initiated her, simplifying the instruction. I gave her some room to think of the answer, but it was no use. She just gazed at the blank paper on her table, playing with her pen. After a while, she shrugged and shook her head to tell me she did not have the answer. I stood there trying to hide my discontentment, but the other students appeared calm as if it was customary to them. They might already be used to her behaviour, so I cajoled myself. The only thing I should do was to give her a chance. Deep down inside, I wished I would have the strength and patience to endure this situation.

People say that you have to be careful of what you wish for. God granted my prayers when He made me stronger and more perseverant every day. Little did I know that I have signed up for more challenges in handling teenagers. Melyn hardly spoke in group discussions. Even if she did, she would only talk to one person, most commonly Nana, who passed the information to others. If I was monitoring her, she would go mute.



Some of the girls from the class

There was a time, I shuffled the groups for the activities. The students were given different group members. Everyone moved to form the newly assigned groups except for one person, Elin. She just sat there at the corner. I instructed her to join the others, but she just stared on the floor. I almost shouted her name when suddenly a student, Basit, volunteered to change his place with Nana so that she could be in the same group as Melyn. Before I uttered my disagreement, Melyn stood up and joined the group. The whole class seemed to understand something which I did not. They allied and continued to complete the task given as if nothing happened.

My patience finally reached its pinnacle. As always, Melyn never wanted to have direct interaction with me. That very day, she was left with no choice but to sit right in front of my desk as all other seats were occupied. Slowly, she took the chair and literally turned it, facing her friend to avoid me the whole time. I could not stand being ignored. It was the final call, and I needed to talk this through. The last thing I would do is scold a girl in front of other students. Do not get me wrong. I was not trying to defend her, but she said nothing hurtful, and I witnessed her kindness to her friends. It made me believe that she was a lovely person regardless of her silence in class.

I ended the class early, and I ordered Melyn to stay. It must be settled once and for all. So, Melyn came forward and stood next to my desk. Her friends were still there where they sat during class. I knew they were eavesdropping, but I couldn't care less.

"I think you can guess why you are here now," I carefully constructed the sentences, simultaneously controlling my voice so that the passers-by outside class would not hear. I tried to rationalise everything and made it a discussion rather than an accusation.

She slowly nodded.

"I have been dealing with your attitude since the first week. I notice that you are not comfortable in my class. Anything that we do in class seems to fail to interest you. May I know what is going on? If you have any disagreement or dissatisfaction with me, I hope we can confront it today."

It was completely still in the room. I wished something or someone could cheer the moment.

"Actually... I..." Melyn halted. She turned to her friends. They gave her a sympathetic look.

"I not speak good English. My English.. broken," she struggled to finish her sentence.

And so, everything was revealed. Never in my life that I felt the time ticked so slowly.

I spent most of the time pondering what I heard from the confession. My heart sank. It was so obvious all this while, but all I did was to let it be. I should have done something earlier if I knew from the beginning. The truth I learned was that Melyn was not as fortunate as other students in the class. She was far from acquiring basic English language skills. Coming from a rural area, she has never had the opportunity to practice using the language in her daily life before. The school was a nightmare for her. She was constantly demeaned by other privileged students, including the teachers themselves. She was called 'dumb' as she hardly understood what else to perform well in English subjects. The cold callings were implanted in her mind, and she believed she was indeed a dummy. So, being in my class was another contributor to her suffering.

That explained the late attendance to class. Melyn was so traumatised to attend the English class that she often cried before the session. She always decided to escape my class, but the other girls coaxed her not to. That was their routine for the past few weeks. Fortunately, Melyn was blessed with good friends. Not just the members of the Fabulous Four but the whole class understood her situation. The students were all enlightened by Nana and others. To help Melyn cope with the challenging situation, her classmates always allowed her to make adjustments in class. Everyone knew and worked things out, except me!

The following classes were never the same. The instructions were less complicated, and the vocabulary was refined to cater to the students' levels. I provided time to Melyn to fine-tune the lesson activities in class. I tried to show my students that learning is not just about being in the class but outside too. I made it strictly 'English' during my course, even with broken language. We had the 'no interruption' rule whereby each individual waited for someone to finish speaking before moving to someone else. No one should laugh at anyone for making mistakes, but we laughed with each other because of the nature of humour. I opened all lessons for discussions so that they could have rich experiences in using the language.



The boys participated in the classroom exercise

Melyn gradually participated in classroom activities. She no longer isolated herself and began to enjoy the class. Every time we had eye contact, her smile glowed on her face, and I learned that Melyn was a lively girl. She was among the earliest to show up in class. At times, we walked to the cafeteria while discussing any issues related to the lesson. We never conferred the problems anymore as she was the living proof that everything got better. The students, too, developed a stronger bond and valued the time they spent together.

Weeks passed until one day, I received a letter that I longed for – an offer letter from a university for a permanent position as an academician. That was what I dreamed of since I was in school. Of course, I cried with joy, but at the same time, there was a hole in my heart that felt solemn. The following week should be the last week of the semester, but I needed to leave earlier to prepare for the new workplace. So, the students would have the examination without me.

At the end of the class, I reminded the students to complete the exercise I gave them. As usual, Syarul, the most talkative boy, made jokes that led the class filled with laughter. I, too, could not help myself from giggling. Then, remembering that I needed to announce my leaving to all students, my smile washed out. I inhaled, trying to suck all the strengths of the universe. The students sensed my silence and did the same. All eyes were on me, waiting for what I would say next.

"I have an important announcement for you," I engulfed all the pain. "I am afraid that I can't see you next week."

"Yes! Next week's class is cancelled, isn't it, Miss?" The class representative grinned. I smiled feebly. "I am not going to be around, but another lecturer is coming to help you out with your final exam."

Everyone was confused and yearned for further explanation. That was the part that I wished I could just skip and leave.

"I will no longer be here. You see, this week is my last week serving at this university. If you need my help to explain anything, you can just call me. I will try my very best to provide for you. So do not worry too much about the final exam. You still have time, and I believe everything that I leave will be sufficient for you to practice." It was clear in my mind the faces of each of my students in the class. They digested each of my words and probably waited for the part where I usually said "gotcha!". But nothing of such came out from me.

"At least you will no longer have someone to excruciate you," my brittle laugh was not celebrated this time. It took the students a while to comprehend that I meant what I said. The class finished not quite like always when the students did not ask any questions and quietly left.

The last class was sorrowful, especially when the students made a surprise farewell party for me. They bought me so many gifts. Knowing that they hardly survived every month made me touched by all the effort they have shown. Before leaving the class, they gathered around me and gave me warm wishes. The Fabulous Four just stood back, waiting for the others to go.

Melyn and her friend approached me while I was leaving the class. Tears welled up in their eyes. These girls were gloomy, and no funny stories they shared that day. They all walked along with me as usual but soundlessly this time.

"How could you, Miss Sha. Why didn't you tell us earlier?" Nana asked while Melyn had already started sobbing. I sighed.

"I just knew too. I am so sorry. It is not my intention to just leave you without saying goodbye, but I have other responsibilities to fulfil," I explained carefully. I looked at each of the girls.

"It will not be the same without you," Melyn muttered.

"Believe me, you do not need me. You can stand strong on your own. Remember what you went through before? You have improved a lot. You already have the confidence to speak and participate in class. Keep it up and take every chance you have to enhance yourself further. You can always call and text me anytime."

I stopped walking and turned to the girls, "You are all like cherry blossoms, you know that?" They all shook their heads.

"The life span for a cherry blossom tree is short, just about 20 years. The same goes to the flowers. They do not last long. It symbolises renewal as even it takes a short time to blossom, the tree will always produce new flowers.

Why do I say you resemble cherry blossom? It is because all of you are strong. You hit your rock bottom, but you get back up. Especially you, Melyn. You dare to improve and confront your fear. You love each other so dearly that you are always together through thick and thin. You all are beautiful and precious that only those who know you can see." I hugged those girls and left.

It was not merely about Melyn, the girls, or the class. It was also about me going through the voyage of maturity in my teaching and life. They have taught me the importance of being fair and listening before making a judgement. It was an important lesson that people deserve a second chance to change and better themselves. Most importantly, life is a battlefield that we should not give up easily. We all need to instil the spirit of cherry blossom in our veins. Thank you, Melyn, the Fabulous Four, and Group A for the memories and the most incredible life lessons. You are always in my heart. You were my first baby, and forever will be.



On my left is Nana, Basit is beside her and Syarul is the one in a brown t-shirt with a yellow collar.



The girls stopped me to take few photos

"Mommy, mommy..."

A little voice stirred me. I looked down, searching for the owner and saw my youngest daughter.

"When did you come home?" I asked. Time flew so fast that I did not realise that everyone was home.

"What are you doing? What are these, Mom?" My son took out the pictures. He smiled, looking at those funny faces.

"Just some gifts from my students," I shook my head.

"They must be special. You keep all these things, still." He added.

"Yes, indeed." I simply replied.

"Tell us about it, Mom. It must be interesting!" My second daughter appeared. Her eyes wide with intrigue.

"I will. But go take your shower first. We will have our dinner soon, and only then I tell you the story,"

All of my children spoke almost simultaneously, disagreeing with me. They were interested in listening to the story and could not wait any longer. They knew their mother. She is so expressive when it comes to story-telling. It was a relief as Zahar came when the kids were getting obstreperous. Just by one instruction, the kids were forced to leave the living room and went to shower.

I stood there motionless, looking at the gifts. They were to be kept forever with me. It was a miracle when these young lives taught me a lot. The characters in the photos managed to impart the lessons of life, patience, passion, and love to me. I would never forget the time when I first baby-stepped into the teaching world. The journey of sharing and instilling the appreciation of knowledge will never stop. The search for cherry blossoms in me continues.



Melyn (left) and Nana (right) came to my house at Bandar Sri Sendayan during 2016 Hari Raya.



During Melyn's wedding. She looked so stunning.



Noor Shahariah Binti Saleh

Noor Shahariah Binti Saleh holds a Bachelor Degree in TESL and a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics (English) and is currently employed at the Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Seremban, Negeri Sembilan. Previously, she taught for nine years in Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). Not only that she finds her true passion in writing and looks forward to sharing knowledge and experiences with others, she also loves gardening and nature as much.

The Me in Metamorphosis

by Nadia Binti Anuar

Miss was marking assignments in her warm beige-coloured office when she heard a loud firm knock on her door. She sighed, admonishing herself for locking the door earlier. Knowing who was on the other side, she swiftly stood up and opened the brown door. Farrah smiled, put her hands up that were carrying several plastic bags and said in a sing-song voice, "I brought lunch and chocolates!". Miss chuckled and shook her head. "How did you know I was craving for chocolates?" Miss asked.

Farrah put down her bags and started organising the lunch she brought on the office table. "You sounded stressed when I called you earlier. Plus, I know it's marking week", Farrah replied and smirked at Miss. Miss sat back down on her cushy office chair, smiling at how Farrah knows her too well. Seeing Farrah organising the food on the table, Miss quickly moved the assignments that she was marking aside.

After a satisfying lunch and much-needed break, Miss felt more relaxed. She was sipping her tea when Farrah nervously asked "Miss, have you thought about what I asked?". Miss hummed in reply and grabbed a bar of chocolate that she had been eyeing. She broke a piece from the chocolate bar and slowly chewed, taking her time to answer. She grinned at how fidgety Farrah was while waiting for her answer. Farrah's left hand kept twisting the hem of her white blouse and was nervously shaking her right leg. White had always been Farrah's favourite colour, judging by the number of times Miss saw Farrah wearing this blouse.

"I am not sure yet. Tell me your plans first." Miss answered Farrah after a beat of silence. Farrah nodded and started explaining enthusiastically. Looking at her excited smile, Miss began reminiscing about the moment that brought them both so close.



A few years ago

Miss's right leg was feeling numb from having to nudge the brake pedal every few seconds. She had been stuck in the traffic jam for more than 30 minutes and she knew her students would already be waiting for her. She sighed loudly, wishing that she had left home earlier. She was so excited about her students' presentations today that she took more time than usual to pick today's outfit. By the time she chose her favourite maroon baju kurung that she knew she would look good in, she realised that she was late. She was also slightly regretting her decision to wear her beige kitten heels. She could feel the skin of her toes slowly peeling off from trying to break in the new shoes.

By the time Miss reached her small dusty cubicle reserved for part-timers, she was on the receiving end of judgemental glances from her colleagues. By now, she has gotten used to their stubborn refusal to acknowledge her as a colleague. Not allowing that to dampen her giddiness, Miss picked up her assessment files and laptop and walked briskly out of the cold grey office. Upon reaching the doors of the lecture hall, she took a deep breath before entering and recited a small prayer to God, hoping that all will go well for her students today.

"Good morning everyone. I am so sorry for being late. I was stuck in a terrible traffic jam," Miss immediately said after pushing the glass doors open. A chorus of "It's okay, miss" reverberated throughout the hall for a moment. "Is everyone ready for the presentation?" Miss asked. She had been teaching her final-year students presentation skills and today is the culmination of all the practices. She spent countless hours looking into their presentation outlines and providing feedback. She grinned when she saw that her students were avoiding eye contact with her. She had always found this scene amusing.



"Yes, Miss," answered a soft female voice after a while. She turned to her left and saw Farrah was looking at her. Miss nodded in approval and smiled when she saw how sweet Farrah looked in her beige baju kurung.

Farrah was eighteen years old, barely out of high school. She had a tall stature and was even taller than Miss herself. She initially had tanned skin that was typically associated with people who had to work hard under the sun but has slowly become fairer after a couple of semesters. When Farrah got excited about a topic that Miss was teaching, there would be a glint in her almond-shaped eyes. Her button nose framed her small face beautifully. Despite her delicate facial features, Farrah had a fierce personality and was no pushover. She would not let any

of her classmates get away with laziness and always strived to do her best. A handful of her classmates even complained to Miss about her bluntness.

Miss spoke to her head of department about this and was informed that unlike her classmates, Farrah is the way she is because of all the financial difficulties that she had to go through to step foot into college. She worked from young, saving bit by bit to be able to afford tertiary education. "Would you like to start first, Farrah?" Miss asked and moved to plug the old computer cables attached to the walls into her laptop. "Sure...?" Farrah answered hesitantly and slowly picked up her black thumb drive. Upon hearing the odd tone of Farrah's reply, Miss immediately glanced up from her laptop and stared at Farrah who was walking towards her. By the time Farrah reached Miss's table, Miss knew something was wrong. Farrah's eyes were swollen as if she did not get a good sleep the night before. Her usually twinkling eyes were also dimmed and she was not smiling.

"Are you alright?" Miss whispered, looking into Farrah's eyes. "I am fine," Farrah replied and gave Miss a half-hearted smile.

Miss instinctively wanted to probe Farrah further to make sure that everything was okay with her, but Miss forced herself to keep mum as there was a hall of students watching their interaction. She handed the laptop to Farrah so that Farrah could transfer her slides and walked slowly to the last row of the hall. Miss opened her files after sitting down and started to focus on her students' presentation, starting with Farrah.

"Thank you, everyone. Each of you did an amazing job with your presentation!" Miss excitedly hollered after the last student has finished presenting. The students started to clap, cheering enthusiastic "woohs" and "yes". A few cheeky boys even stood up and began high-fiving each other. Miss beamed as she could see the flood of relief in the students' faces, knowing that presenting in English in front of an audience is not an easy task. "Thank you so much for your effort and I hope all of you will have a good semester break," Miss concluded, and her students stood up and exited the hall one by one.

Miss walked to her table and unplugged her laptop from the cables. When she was done, she sat down and organised her files. She planned to finish finalising the students' presentation scores in the lecture hall as her colleagues had not left for lunch yet. She dreaded having to hear them discuss where to have lunch as they had never invited her to join. She picked up her calculator and opened her files.

She stopped flipping her papers when she heard someone faintly calling her name. She looked up and saw Farrah standing in front of her. Farrah was looking down on the floor and was fingering the hem of the right sleeve of her baju kurung.

“How long have you been standing there?” Miss asked with a tone of surprise.

Earlier, during a short break between the students’ presentations, she attempted to catch Farrah’s eye, but Farrah seemed to be intent on avoiding her gaze. Seeing Farrah’s teary eyes now, Miss stood up immediately.

“Why are you crying?” Miss hurriedly asked.

Farrah started sobbing when she heard Miss’s question. Miss immediately turned around to switch off the hall’s light and locked the lecture hall’s doors just in case any mischievous students decided to pop in. Miss walked back and stood in front of Farrah. She reiterated her question again, asking for the reason for her tears. Farrah mumbled her answer, but Miss could not make out the words. Knowing that Farrah needed time, Miss started to pat Farrah on her shoulder softly with her right arm. Farrah rushed forward and put her arms around Miss’s waist, taking her by surprise.

Miss could feel her thin shoulder pads of her favourite baju kurung getting damp from Farrah’s tears and she was beginning to feel worried that something really bad had really happened. Miss started to imagine many possible horrible situations because she could not understand what could possibly push a strong girl like Farrah to come to her crying. “I hope no one in her family has passed away,” Miss uttered to herself silently. Miss untiringly patted Farrah’s back and waited for her tears to subside, knowing that Farrah needed to cry comfortably to someone first.

After the sobbing subsided, Miss leaned back and tried to get a good look at Farrah’s face in the dark. “Do you feel better now?” Miss queried gently. Miss grabbed her stationeries box and took out some tissues. Miss quickly handed the tissues to Farrah so that she could wipe her tears.

“A little bit,” Farrah replied with a hoarse voice.

“Do you want me to buy you any drinks or food? Wait, I think I have some chocolates in my office drawer,” Miss said.

“Not really, Miss. I don’t feel like eating anything right now,” Farrah replied.

“Are you sure? Chocolates always make me feel better,” Miss joked, attempting to lighten the mood and make Farrah smile even just for a little bit.

Farrah giggled and answered, "I am sure, Miss. Maybe later." Hearing Farrah's giggles, Miss released a deep breath that she didn't realise she was holding in, relieved that Farrah was feeling better.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Miss prompted Farrah.

"I wanted to tell you earlier, Miss. But you got here late, and I know during class wasn't the right time," Farrah replied slowly.

"I am sorry. I didn't know you wanted to talk to me before class.", Miss said with a guilty look on her face.

"You can tell me now if you want to," Miss continued. She saw Farrah hesitating, so she waited, giving Farrah time to gather her thoughts.

"Do you think I am ugly, Miss?" Farrah asked in the darkness of the room.

Miss's eyes widened in shock, taken aback by the ridiculousness of the question.

"Of course not! Where is this coming from, Farrah?" Miss asked quickly.

"I know that I am not beautiful, Miss. I don't have fair skin like the other girls, and I don't wear make-up. I am not fashionable like the rest. Am I ugly?" Farrah muttered while staring vacantly into the blue-coloured walls.

Pausing for a while, Farrah took a deep breath and continued, "I sent some pictures of me hanging out with my friends to my boyfriend yesterday. I didn't expect him to start picking on my flaws." Farrah stopped and looked up to the ceiling to hide her tears. "He said my face was pimply and had big crates like the moon. He even said that I looked like an old makcik and that my friends in the picture looked way prettier than me. He even said his grandma looked better than me! I didn't know how to respond, Miss."

Although some may scoff at the pettiness of this issue and dismiss it as a lovers' quarrel, Miss knew first-hand how damaging hate comments like these are in erasing someone's confidence. Miss herself had suffered from low esteem and had been bullied by people whom she thought were her friends due to her chubby figure.

"It's not that I don't want to buy fancy outfits. It's not that I don't want to put on make-up, I just can't afford them!" Farrah uttered frustratingly. "I have so many other things to pay for: my rent, my college fees, my grandma's expenses. I don't understand why Adam cannot see

that since he is a student too, Miss.” Farrah took a deep breath and asked, “What should I do, Miss?”.

“What do you feel like doing?” Miss asked slowly, wanting to hear Farrah’s opinions first.

“I don’t know!” Farrah whispered frustratingly. Farrah fidgeted and let out a loud sigh. She continued, “I do know what to do, but I am not sure if it is the right thing to do, Miss.”

Miss smiled knowingly, understanding the cause for her hesitancy.

“You don’t need me to tell you what to do, Farrah. You yourself know what the right thing is to do. This boy, Adam, right?” Miss gently asked, making sure that she got the boy’s name right.

Farrah nodded furiously. Miss continued, “You are beautiful and matured beyond your years, Farrah. The life difficulties you experience have forced you to grow up faster than your friends. Adam cannot understand your priorities. For him now, physical appearance is a priority. You, on the other hand, have been saving every cent to make sure you would not burden your grandma and aunties back in your hometown. Your priorities are different from Adam’s.” Miss answered tenderly.

Miss saw Farrah’s eyes begin to mist with tears and continued, “You should be proud that you know how to sort your priorities. I can’t tell you for sure if Adam is the right or the wrong guy for you as I don’t know him that well, but what I know is that a man who truly loves a woman will never make his loved one feel insecure in a relationship.”

Farrah crumbled the tissue in her hands, acknowledging what Miss had said. Farrah kept quiet, slowly processing what Miss had said. “I understand, Miss. But I don’t want to be alone,” Farrah replied. Farrah’s tears slowly dropped down to her left cheek. Miss grabbed Farrah’s right hand and held it firmly between hers to further assure Farrah. Miss continued, “You have more to learn and see. This is part of growing up, but know that I am here for you.” Miss stopped for a moment and cleared her scratchy throat because she could feel herself getting emotional too. Her eyes started to burn from her own tears. She remembered how no one was there for her and she was grateful for the opportunity to reassure someone else instead.

“Farrah, a woman’s worth is not dependent on a man’s opinion. Outer beauty is subjective, but a woman’s inner beauty comes from within. Her confidence, maturity, and knowledge will attract the right guy. Right now, you are on the journey to become that girl. I know you have a lot of potential, so why are you wasting it away on a guy who is blind to see what I can?” Miss said.

"It was just easier to assume he was right because I felt like nobody else cared for me," Farrah replied, abashed.

Taking a different approach, Miss asked, "Remember the pledge you told me in the first semester? You personally told me that you want to graduate with a PhD, become a lecturer, and make your grandma proud, right? To achieve this, you have to put yourself first. It's alright to have pimply skin, as long your heart is clear and pure. It's alright to not wear make-up, as long as you have a colourful personality that would spread positivity. Be the girl who is confident and lives up to her potential so that she will not regret anything in life. Do you think you can be her?" Farrah wiped her tears with both of her palms and promised, "I will be that girl, Miss. Trust me."

Now...

A loud giggle snapped Miss out of her flashback. She shook her head a little and focused her gaze back on Farrah. Farrah smirked cheekily and asked, "Miss, did you hear what I say?". Miss squinted and tried to sound confident when she answered Farrah that she was listening. Farrah laughed out loud, clearly not believing Miss.

Seeing her laughing so freely, Miss smiled at how happy and carefree Farrah is now. Farrah had truly evolved to a beautiful butterfly. The sting from a boy's words may linger occasionally, but Farrah is strong enough now to shrug them off. "Are you sure about this? There is no turning back." Miss asked Farrah again, making sure that Farrah is completely sure.

Farrah confidently nodded in reply. "It's not going to be easy. PhD is going to be very different from what you are used to, especially in an unfamiliar place like Scotland. I don't want you to give up half-way", Miss stressed. "I am prepared for this. Trust me", Farrah promised.

Miss smiled slightly when she heard Farrah's reply. Remembering the promise Farrah made years ago in a darkened classroom, Miss knows that Farrah will do all she can to earn her doctorate.





Miss made up her mind and swiftly signed and stamped her name on the forms that had been sitting on her desk for a few days, formally acknowledging herself as Farrah's scholarship guarantor. After checking the forms again, Miss compiled and handed them back to Farrah.

Farrah took the forms and sat back down. After making sure everything was in order, she looked up to Miss with misty eyes and said "Thank you miss for being there for me then and now. I cannot afford to pay you back for your endless faith in me. But, I promise that I will make you proud, Miss."

"That is all I need", Miss replied and smiled.

Nadia Binti Anuar



Nadia Binti Anuar is fulfilling her dream as an English lecturer in Universiti Teknologi MARA. She completed her Masters in Applied Language Studies in 2020 which has sparked her interest in the world of research. She is also currently a PhD candidate, researching ways to assist university students become competent oral speakers. In her free time, she dabbles in learning Mandarin and swimming. Her favourite quote is "aspire to inspire".

Just another English Teacher

by Mazelina Binti Mahmood

Cher! Cher!

What's next? What's next?

Ok girls and boys, that's it for today, I'll see you again next week, alright. Go home safely, regards to your parents ok!

Aaaaarrghhhhhh! Ok Cher, see you next week!

This is what I have been doing every Thursday without fail since 2015. Phew! As if I don't have enough work already and as if I don't have enough classes to teach. I didn't know why but I was intrigued to accept this offer from one institution to teach a set of Form 4 class. The school was quite far from my place but I was clueless, I obliged not because of the money paid to tutor them but just because I needed distractions in my life. I have been teaching Form 4 and Form 5 classes for years now, so another Form 4 class in the evening should be ok, I thought. I had been doing the same routine over and over again, so I supposed this one little distraction would do me good, at least for a few months before marking the SPM paper at the end of the year.

Never had I imagined that this little distraction would become one of the biggest and sweetest memories in my teaching life. Well of course I have more good memories being a teacher, but this one is a bit peculiar and it marked my heart quite a fair bit that I can never forget this particular little lady.

I remembered being briefed on the programme before I started the class. So, this set of Form 4 students were pre-selected based on a diagnostic test and interview was carried out by the institution officers. I was like.... Wow, they must be good in English then, and I was smiling away thinking that this should be an easy job for me. Kachang puteh! Looking at the scores of the tests and interview, I was positive that I would be smiling throughout the programme. Yeah, I thought so, until I met the students.

It was 3.30 pm and the sun outside was still scorching hot, it was definitely not the most conducive time to learn English, but hey, the class was here to stay. One by one students came in, greeted me with their sweetest smile using the best English vocabulary they could find. I was more than honoured and I was actually quite happy that I took this job.

“Teacher, I .. I ... I ...” While waiting for the rest of the class, a girl came to me and whispered, “teacher, I scared, I no good English”. I was a bit taken aback but I kept my cool and politely asked “What’s your name?” She replied; “Liyana, teacher.” I said, “Relax Liyana it’s okay, that’s why you are here, to learn. It is going to be an enjoyable class, I promise.” I said these words just to pacify her but honestly, I knew I would be racking my brains thinking of what to teach!

So, I started my class with the usual greetings, asking about the students’ day and some small talk. I thought before I briefed them on the whole programme, I would do a simple ice-breaking activity just to get to know each other quickly. I then asked everyone to take turns to just tell me their names, what do I call them and basically, I was just getting my first impressions of the kids. And so, everyone stood up, one by one, introducing themselves, and when it came to this girl, I was really surprised, how could anyone be so nervous? It was only a few words, a minute maybe, and it's done!

Liyana stood up as it was her turn to introduce herself. You can see that she was so nervous as she stammered, she sweated, she fidgeted and she could barely stand still. She looked as if she could cry any time, I thought, and I was actually afraid that she might faint and that we had to call the ambulance to get help for her. She was that nervous!

How difficult would an introduction be? It could be nothing to other students, they were all having fun telling this and that, teasing each other even, but to her, it was like the world collapsed on her. I only asked her to introduce herself briefly. She was struggling with her language, English seemed to be so hard for her that she kept mumbling, talking and laughing to herself and crying at the same time. I knew she was embarrassed; I knew she was scared, but I salute her bravery, her willingness to try and her determination to complete the task. She did it anyway, with much pain and struggle. I was so proud of her.

Lesson then resumed as planned but I couldn’t seem to get that one-minute drama out of my head. It kept repeating in my head and it bothered me so much that I was already thinking of the next class and what to do with her. Obviously, her level was a bit lower than the rest of the class, but I somehow was enthralled about why and how she got into this programme in the first place. So many questions and so many assumptions, so many monologues, it felt like Karakatoa erupted in my head!

As I was driving home from school, I was again thinking of Liyana, an ordinary school girl in her uniform that somehow captured my attention. I could vividly remember a frail, thin, tall and a bit tanned girl in her white baju kurung uniform with that innocent face. The look on her face when she approached me was driving me insane. That look, the easily broken, damaged or destroyed look that I caught on her eyes kept haunting me and something inside was telling me that I should help this little girl. I hate this feeling, being a teacher, I always overthink, I keep dwelling on the same thing over and over and I hate myself for thinking too hard!

Like it or not, it was time for the next lesson. I couldn't help thinking of what to do in the class. Being in this programme, modules are given and you just have to follow it, done deal! It was not that easy for me, my overthinking head didn't agree to just do things according to the module. So there you go, I designed a few speaking activities for today, and I wonder if Liyana can perform. Or would she collapse and break down? I was indeed intrigued.

This time, I asked the class to properly introduce themselves, a longer version than the last one so I could get to know them better. The usual details included their families, hobbies, likes and dislikes. I decided to put a bit of a twist to the mundane speaking activity so I made the students tell me one dark secret nobody knew about them which they are willing to share in this class. To my surprise, these teenagers had a lot of dark secrets! Ow my!

When it came to Liyana's turn, I was all ears. My eyes were glued at hers, waiting for her to stand up and talk. As expected, she was so nervous. As I listened to the other students, I kept looking at her, I secretly stole a few looks at what she was doing. I realized that her hands were trembling and her lips seemed to mumble away. Once a while, I caught her asking her friends this and that, I assumed she was asking for help in vocabulary or translations. As I called out her name, she stood up clumsily, jumping to the shock that it was her turn already, only to fall hard on the floor as she lost her balance trying to look good at the same time hiding something behind her. Everybody laughed at her and she was so humiliated to even stand up again. I called her name many times and I told her to relax, breathe in and out and then try to speak. I told the class that it was rude to laugh at their friend but they said they were used to laughing at Liyana's clumsiness. Still, I gave them a warning and proceeded to Liyana's introductions.

With a shaky voice, she said "Teacher, I tak pandai but I can try" and I replied, "It's ok Yana, just say whatever you like, this is a learning ground and everybody makes mistakes. If you don't know, don't worry, I will help you." I managed to calm her with those words and there she went, "My name is Liyana, I am 16 years old..." and she sailed through. Although she struggled with her words, I realized that she managed to do simple sentences but yes, her vocabulary was very limited. As she came to her last point, I was again brought to

disbelief, this was what she said as her dark secret nobody knew. “my darkest secret is that, I wish I could kill my younger brother because he is so annoying and so noisy and so lazy and so disturbing!” and I intruded “Hey, don’t you love your brother?” she said “Of course, teacher! But I just wish!” and she laughed wickedly and raised her eyebrows. Ah, she looked so sweet when she smiled, she looked so relaxed as she laughed. At that moment, I just couldn’t stop myself anymore. Yana made me want to share my darkest secret too! I then told the class,

“I have a dark secret too, do you want to know?”

“Yesssssssss teacher!”

“ah! You people loved gossiping don’t you?” and I could hear them laughing away.

“My darkest secret is, I once had this burning desire to study hard and be successful and to buy a big car, guess why?” I gave them a smirk.

“Why teacher? Everybody wants to buy a nice car”

“No, I just want to buy a car, so that I could run over my Kak Long! I hated her so much that I plotted this revenge long ago!” and I could literally hear them laughing so hard and telling me how bad I was and some even said that they have the same dream and secrets too. Yana was among those who shouted so loud telling, “I told you, I told you ha.. ha.. hah” We seem to be bonding and I felt closer to Yana and the rest of the students as we shared our secrets and promised nothing went out of this room as the class ended.



Every week, teaching and learning appeared to be more fun than ever. Laughing at the kids, laughing with them, gave me a booster to be more motivated and to be more creative in designing speaking activities for them. As time passed, we had many speaking activities and Yana gradually overcame her inferiority complex and blended well with the other students as she kept trying and determined to complete all the tasks. Groupwork made them attached and united and learning together became more fun. Yana was no longer ashamed of making mistakes, she could even laugh at her mistakes now. I was more than happy that nobody missed this extra class no matter how tired they were during the day.

There were actually many Yana in the class, most of them were not excellent in English but all of them were so hardworking, committed and interested in learning. I was amazed at their willingness to learn and the sacrifices they made to be present in my class every week without fail. I was more than amazed when it came to preparing for competitions. We had to prepare for public speaking, poetry recital and choral speaking. Among those, choral speaking was the most challenging as it is a teamwork and everybody needed to focus and commit to their roles to make it happen. I loved the fact that learning now was being extended beyond the classroom where English is learned and practiced outside of the usual classroom settings.

But yeah, it was not as ideal as I thought it would be. First and foremost, nobody had any experience in choral speaking and better still, nobody had ever participated in any stage competitions before. Great! You can imagine how hard it was to gather them, make them write the scripts, memorize them, practice each and every role, changing this and that, and keep practicing until they could read without any paper in their hands. I gave Yana a few roles as one of her strengths is her loud voice. She had to go solo with some short and sweet repeated strings of words to lengthy sentences too. She was one of those late bloomers, she couldn't memorize the script as fast as the others and even her pronunciations were not accurate. Her friends were very patient and together, they kept practicing until Yana got them all correct. It was such a pleasant view for me, watching them grow attached to each other and care for each other too.

On the competition day, Yana came to tell me that she wanted out, she couldn't handle her anxiety and she didn't want to bring her friends down. I made her sit close to me, I kept telling her that she would do good and there was nothing to worry about as winning was not everything, I just wanted her to have fun, and I told the rest the same thing, just have fun. Before they marched on to the stage, I told Yana, "keep your eyes on the conductor and you will be fine, we are in school not in any competitions". The competitions went well, all of them did their best and to my disbelief, they were the champions on that day! They were ecstatic couldn't believe themselves and I was in tears watching them smiling away their championship. Sigh! I watched too many dramas, I guess!,



Burning with motivation, they were now preparing themselves for a greater battle; The Drama Competitions. This time around, I let them take charge of their own learning, appointing their directors and actors, writing their own scripts, making their own props and mixing their own music. After almost 50 hours of being together in English lessons and competition, they were matured now, they knew each other so well and they worked wonderfully well with each other too. Overseeing them through practices, I was more than overwhelmed. This time around, Yana actually volunteered herself to take on the role of a gossip monger, which is quite a big role to play. I was amazed at how much confidence she developed over time and how good she is in English. I was shocked, when staged, how Yana and her partner were able to make me and others laugh. Yana and her partner were so funny, they were all so immersed in their characters and the make-up helped them to get into their characters too. The audience were all laughing hysterically and I knew all the students were having fun on stage. When announced as the champion again, everybody was astounded, they never thought they would make it that far.



We do not create experience but we have to go through experience to learn
Albert Camous

Sitting among the audience, I received many good comments from the other teachers, the organizers and our co-tutor too. Even the VIPS extended their congratulations to me and the kids and gave me numerous positive comments. I was speechless as this set of students never failed to amaze me every time! It seemed like only yesterday we started class, and everybody was struggling with English, especially Yana.

Ah, Yana! She came and hugged me and thanked me profoundly as she was so happy. She told me how thrilled she was and how unbelievable it was to win all these competitions when they started with zero! I told Yana to always believe in herself and that she is so special as a person and I always believe that she could achieve more than just winning the competitions, she can win in her life!

I never knew that my word impacted her so much that it motivated her to strive in her SPM. She came from zero to a hero! When the result was announced, Yana told me "Teacher, I'm sorry, I couldn't give you an A"

"It's ok Yana, congratulations, you did your best!"

"But I didn't score an A teacher." She said almost breaking.

I told her, "from a consistent D to B+, Yana I am one of the proudest teachers on earth!"

She wasn't really satisfied, she felt that she failed me after all the lessons and love I gave her.

Yana, if only you knew, watching you from day one till the SPM result was announced, was one of the best experiences in my teaching life. You reminded me of why I wanted to become a teacher and why I wanted to teach English. You motivated me to teach more Yana out there with my heart and my soul. You took me on a journey no teacher could ever teach me. You made me understand the word passion and the meaning behind it, you made me more humble than ever! And if you must know Yana, you made me more human.

Thank you YPJOUR English language Enhancement Programme, for giving me this beautiful diversion from my routine, and making my life more colourful than ever! I have never regretted saying yes and I will say yes a thousand times more to this kind of programme that made me a better teacher.

I am just another English teacher, but I believe I have touched many hearts along the way and I am so proud of that!

Finally, thank you Yana, for growing up to be such a fine woman. I wish you all the best in life!



Mazelina Binti Mahmood



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The Reluctant Teacher

by Mardiana Binti Idris

**I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am.
Paulo Freire**

Teacher : Mardiana, what is your ambition?

Me : A doctor

Teacher : Why?

Me : I can treat people.

It was never my ambition to become a teacher. When questioned by my class teacher, my answers alternated between 'a doctor', 'a lawyer' and 'an interior designer'; never 'a teacher'. At secondary level, I was nearly 90 per cent certain that I wanted to become a doctor. A medical doctor. When my mom got to know about this ambition of mine, her remarked was "Kalau jadi doktor, nanti kena oncall selalu. Nanti dah ada anak, siapa nak jaga anak? Siapa nak temankan suami kamu?" I was 15 years old when she said this, I was definitely not thinking about getting married or having kids. My focus was on my Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP). My batch was the last batch of the examination. After that, the Ministry of Education Malaysia changed SRP to Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR). Unlike PMR, if you do not pass your SRP, you would not be able to continue to Form Four. In fact, a few of my schoolmates did get married after they sat for their SRP. I was not ready for marriage so, I studied hard. I scored quite well for my SRP and managed to get to the science stream in Form Four. At this point, my mom's tune was different. Her remarks were normally along these lines, "Jadi doktor ni bagus, selamatkan orang. Tapi, mak lagi suka Diana jadi cikgu. Jadi cikgu banyak pahala. Ilmu yang kita ajar tu dapat bantu kita di kubur nanti, Insya Allah". I kept quiet most of the time, but sometimes when my mouth was quicker than my cautious mind, I retorted with "Doktor pun banyak pahala juga kan?"

Armed with my Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) results, I applied to Unit Pengambilan Universiti (UPU), a centralised platform that manages the application process for public universities and other institutions in Malaysia. Back then, UPU only allowed five choices of courses in universities or institutions. Obviously, my first four choices were related to Science but since I love my mom and English, I put Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) as my last choice. When I was called for the interview, I was reluctant to go but when I saw how pleased my mom was when I received the letter, I attended the interview. I guess the interview went well as I was offered a place in a twinning programme between

Maktab Perguruan Ilmu Khas (MPIK) and United Kingdom in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). I wasn't ecstatic. In fact, I called one of the local universities, in which I applied for Science Foundation, and bluntly asked the reasons why they rejected me. To my surprise, the officer told me that I was qualified for the course but because I went for the scholarship interview, my name was already stamped by the Ministry of Education. As I put down the phone, I had to console myself and try to 'embrace' the idea of me as an English teacher.

Lesson 1

You may think you have the best plan, but Allah SWT is the best planner.

When I started my matriculation programme, I was still not into the idea of becoming a teacher. In my final attempt to drop out from the programme, I tested my mom with, "Diana ni sorang je anak perempuan mak. Tak risau ke hantar Diana sampai luar negara?". Her witty reply was, "Eh, takpe. Boleh mak dan ayah melawat dan jalan-jalan di UK". Since my attempt was futile, I decided, reluctantly, to stick to the programme and it led to my first teaching experience at Bukit Bintang Girls' School (standing proud at its crumbled base is Pavillion, KL now). The minute I entered the compound, I could hear my heart pounding. What if I'm bad at teaching? What if the schoolteachers hate me? What if the students complain? There were so many what if questions in my head. To make my paranoia worse, I was required to teach one class on Physical Education (PE). Despite my experience as a school athlete, teaching PE was totally a different ball game altogether.

In the first session of PE, I taught them how to play netball. We had so much fun so I thought, what could go wrong, right? Well, I had my first glimpse of 'lawsuit' during my second session with them. As I planned to teach them how to play softball that afternoon, I asked them to get the equipment out from the store and instructed them not to start until I said so as I had to fill in the logbook. Suddenly, I heard a loud thud and a cry. I turned my head and saw a student with a deep red bruise on her cheek. She was crying and her friend looked guilty. One of them said, "Cikgu, dia terpukul bola tu kat muka dia. Nak buat apa ni Cikgu?" I quickly took the crying girl to the staff room as I did not know what to do. Luckily a senior teacher saw the incident and quickly took the girl to the sick bay. I waited anxiously for an earful from the senior teacher when she returned. As soon as she entered the room, I quickly apologized for not being vigilant and promised her that it would not happen again. Fortunately, I did not get any scolding from her, but she reminded me to be more careful when teaching them on the field. After she left me alone, I reflected on what just happened. I was convinced that this incident might be a sign - a sign that I was not fit to be a teacher.

Lesson 2

Teaching is a series of continuous reflections

I flew to the UK for the first time on September 9, 1999. Despite loving all my short visits to various schools in the UK, I was still convinced that teaching was not my forte. When I returned to Malaysia, I was assigned to Methodist Boys School for my teaching practicum. When I was given the school, these questions lingered: How do I manage the boys? Will the boys listen to me? What if I fail to control them in class? When I met the principal for the first time, he described the students and the school culture. Before I left his office, he gave me a timetable for three Form Four English classes. Then, a senior assistant led me to the staff room where I met my mentor. The first thing she said to me was, “Be firm or the boys will bully you”. At this point, I got more nervous.

The next day, I entered my first Form Four class. Remembering my mentor’s advice, I put on a stern face. I outlined my rules and boundaries to the boys. As I was telling these to them, I noticed a boy who was sitting in front of me. He was expressionless. I thought, maybe he missed his English teacher who was more experienced at teaching. Throughout my first week, I picked up this ‘I do not like you’ vibe from him. He completed all my work, but he looked as if he was displeased with my presence in class. I was quite disturbed at first, but I kept saying to myself that I should not be bothered as it was only one boy while the rest of the class seemed to enjoy my teaching. We had games, we had choral speaking practices near the field, and we had role plays, among other fun activities. One cheeky boy in the class had the audacity to wink at me when I was teaching in class. I gave him a long, hard stare and finally, he admitted defeat. Despite all the shenanigans by the boys, I truly enjoyed the practicum. On my last day there, after saying goodbye to all the students and teachers, I returned to my temporary desk in the staff room to pack my things. While I was sorting out my stuff, I saw someone walking towards me from the corner of my eyes. It was that one boy with the ‘vibe’. He greeted me and put a beautifully wrapped gift on my table. I was stunned. Then, he started thanking me for teaching him and told me how much he enjoyed my lessons. The gift was his appreciation to me and he said he would miss me. I could only mutter ‘thank you’ while processing what had just happened. At that moment, I realised that I could not trust my own assumption or judgement towards my students based solely on their expressions. That was a turning point for me. I realised that I had fallen in love with teaching as it was fun and rewarding; not because of the gift but the lesson I received from my students.

Lesson 3

Never judge a student by his expression

After graduation, I was posted to SMK Convent Ipoh – my hometown. I was asked to see the Senior Assistant first. She said these to me, “Saya boleh bagi satu kelas English sahaja dulu untuk cikgu. Kami kurang cikgu Sains dan Matematik. Cikgu dulu dari aliran sains kan? Cikgu nak ajar subjek yang mana? Cikgu ajar kelas petang ye, Tingkatan 1 dan 2”. Since I love Science more than Mathematics, I chose to teach Science in Form One and Form Two classes. As for English, I was given the last class (the classes were streamed back then). For Science, I thought the lesson in English and the students did not seem to mind. This was in 2001, two years before the implementation of the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI). You could say I was ‘forward-thinking’ and luckily none of my students complained when I taught Science in English. I truly had a blast teaching Science to Form 1 and Form 2 students, particularly in the lab as I had a very efficient lab assistant.

What about the last English class that I have taught? Well, let me share how this last English class of Form Two made me fell in love deeper into teaching. The class had about 30-35 students. Cheeky and noisy but they completed all my work. At the end of the year, it was the school’s tradition to hold an inter-class English debate. It was also compulsory for every class to participate, and I was shocked when my class made this remark, “We just enter teacher, we know we will not win. We are the last class.” Knowing that they had given up even before trying, I tried motivating them. I promised that I would help them with one condition - they must also pull their weight. I practised with the class’s debate team before afternoon session started almost every day. On the day of the competition, I wished them well and went to the science lab for my science class. Imagine my surprise when I was about to leave the lab after my class, the leader of the debate team came running and crying towards me. My instinct was, “Oh my, they lost. What do I say now?” As she came inches towards me, she threw her arms around me and hugged me. She said, “Teacher, we won! We won against the third class, and I got the best debater! Thank you, teacher”. I could instantly feel her joy and pride in telling me that.

Lesson 4

Every student can reach his or her potential with adequate motivation and effort

I guess the principal must have heard about the last class’s victory, so the following year, I was required to teach English to three Form 3 classes. One of the classes was placed near the staff room as it had this reputation of being noisy and playful. To be honest, I did not mind teaching the class as I soon realised that I enjoyed teaching ‘challenging’ students. After a while, I noticed that two of the students in that class could not read. They were 15 years old

students. They were about to sit for their PMR in a few months and they could not read. I panicked as I believed I did not have enough time to teach them how to read and to prepare them for the exam. After one of the teaching periods ended, I asked them to meet me in the staff room. When they were in the staff room, I asked them quietly why they could not read in class. One of the girl's replies broke my heart, "Cikgu, saya memang tak boleh baca". After further probing, they still insisted they could not read. So, I approached other teachers who taught them. They told me the same thing – the girls could not read. I tried many techniques and strategies with them but due to my lack of experience, the progress was extremely slow. The girls were later taught personally by one of the experienced teachers there. After they received their PMR results, they came and thanked me. When asked about their plans, they sounded confident when they said, "Kami nak ambil sijil kemahiran. Kami pandai masak cikgu." After listening to their plans for the future, I wished them well and while they were walking away from my table, I silently pray for their success for I know, they did try their best when they were in class.

Lesson 5

Every student deserves to be successful in what they know best

After I got married to a Johorean in 2004, I applied for a transfer to Johor Bahru. The school I was assigned to was SMK Tasek Utara. Here, I was requested to teach Malaysian University English Test (MUET) to sixth formers. Since the subject was new to me, I had to learn how to teach the subject to young adults. After a few years, teaching MUET was quite a breeze and I gained confidence. However, nothing prepared me for what happened in one of the classes. It went like this. In the middle of the year, I was given one MUET class to teach as the teacher had to teach other forms due to shortage of English teachers. Before she handed over her class, she told me about a boy who refused to speak in class and during speaking practice. She informed me that she tried many techniques, but the boy refused to speak. At that point, all I could think of was, "How could he not speak?" He was going to sit for MUET and one of the components of that test was a speaking test. I remembered the first speaking practice with his group. First, I distributed question papers to all four of them, exactly as in the MUET Speaking test whereby candidates are seated together as a group. Then, they read the question for a minute. Since they didn't ask me any question after that one minute was over, I assumed that they understood the task. Then, they prepared their responses for two minutes. After two minutes, each student had to present their responses. Candidate A presented. It went well. Then, it was Candidate B's turn. He struggled but he managed to provide a response. When it was the boy's turn, he kept quiet and stared at his paper.

I asked, "Would you like to say something?"

No reply.

“What do you think of the question?”.

No reply.

“Do you agree with the topic?”

No reply.

Since there was no reply, I proceeded to Candidate D. While Candidate D was presenting, I could see that he was still staring at his paper. Then, I heard sniffles. Suddenly, I saw tears rolling down his cheek. After Candidate D had finished his presentation, I quickly asked him, “Are you OK?” The minute I said that, he ran out of the classroom crying. I was stunned. I didn’t go after him because I wanted him to cry his eyes out. Besides, I did not know how to console a crying boy. He didn’t return back. He came to see me in the staff room after school. Hoping that he would open up to why he cried in the class, I talked to him in Bahasa Melayu. He admitted that his English was not good and he was scared that his friends would laugh at him. He looked sad and I figured that his self-esteem must have been low at that point. So, I offered him my advice. I told him that I would help him, but he must be willing to help himself. He agreed with my suggestion of him trying to speak the language with me and in class. I told him that I would wait for him to finish his sentence even if the grammar was incorrect. I could see that he was trying his best after that. He managed to further his studies after MUET. In fact, we kept in touch through social media and I smiled with pride whenever he updated his status in English.

Lesson 6

Every student progresses differently in class and in life so, be patient

I have been teaching for 20 years now and despite all the issues and challenges faced by the education fraternity, I have yet to feel that sense of ‘burning out’ or giving up. Every student, every colleague and every institution I have been blessed to have working experience with, provided ample reasons for me to believe that teaching is indeed my calling. Obviously, I am not a medical doctor now. Yet, this career path has led me to become a ‘doctor of student development’, in which I get to dispense my own prescribed dose of love, care, motivation, guidance and challenges to my beloved students. To my past, present and future students, thank you for making me fall in love with teaching, again and again.



(A collage of my beloved students)



Mardiana Binti Idris

Mardiana Binti Idris holds a PhD in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and she has been teaching English and Malaysian University English Test (MUET) for 20 years. Her publications include research articles in Scopus and Web of Science (WOS) journals, creative writings, and workbooks for primary level. Besides teaching, researching learning and collaborating, she loves travelling and exploring new places. Currently, she is an academic lecturer at Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Temenggong Ibrahim.

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