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# isay WILL THE REAL ENGLISH MASTER STAND UP?

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LAST December, I was at the Sydney Opera house to witness my 17-year-old daughter, Amali, born and raised in Australia, receiving the prize for topping the English class in her final year at one of the top state schools in Sydney.

In a grade of some 250 students (mostly Caucasian), the top three students were all of Asian descent: My daughter of Sri Lankan descent, another with Burmese parents, while the third had an Indian father and a Filipino mother.

I told Amali after the presentation that if she applied to teach English (after completing a degree) in East Asia, she is very likely to be rejected when they see her picture, because she will be deemed not to be a "native speaker" of English.

In Australia, such discrimination would be seen as "racism" while I would argue it's more a result of a "colonised" Asian mindset.

Arundhati Roy – the winner of the Booker Prize in 1997, the top literary award in the English-speaking world – said in a recent interview, when she was asked why she chose to write in English having been born and bred in India: "I don't feel that I am the slave of language but that the language is the slave of me, and it's my art to make it say what I think or make it do what I want".

Since winning the prize and a multi-million dollar publishing deal, Arundhati has become a superstar in the global economic justice movement speaking to audiences in her distinct Indian accent from America across Europe to Asia and Australia, and receiving standing ovations.

In 2004, she even received the Sydney Peace Prize from the Governor of the state of New South Wales.



AS GOOD AS IT GETS: Asian writers like Catherine Lim (clockwise, far left), Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Devika Bai, Tash Aw and V S Naipaul have shown that they too can be doyens of the language.

Last year, it was reported that a deal, struck by the Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra during a visit to India to bring South Asian English teachers to help Thai schools improve English teaching standards, was coming unstuck because Thai parents wanted their children to be taught by "native speakers".

Meanwhile, it was revealed in the British parliament around the same time that nearly 16 million adults in Britain are unable to read and write properly in English.

Recently, I picked up a book at a Bangkok airport bookshop titled, *Road Rash: Western Tourists and Expatriates at Play in Asia's Global Village* written by a Canadian who has taught English in Asia for many years.

In it he says: "Many of these English teachers are exiled from affluent countries by debt and student loans. Others have been downsized from corporate jobs, trapped by temporary employment agencies, or locked into dead-end mini-

mum wage jobs ... the mass migration of English teachers points to an interesting dynamic in the global village; affluent and wealthy countries are now exporting their unemployable, over-educated, surplus population into less-developed nations as labourers."

Thus, English teaching in Asia has become a lifeline for these unemployed "native speakers".

With globalisation of trade creating a huge demand for English language skills in Asia, this is one of the few growth areas in Asia for new graduates from Asian tertiary education institutes.

Yet, graduates with humanities and mass communication degrees are entering into the job market in the thousands, and finding it difficult to get jobs.

Singapore, Malaysia, India and the Philippines are good examples, and it is these graduates who could fill the demand for English teachers in Asia, if the Asian mindset could be "de-colonised".

Two years ago, I was in a rural town

in southern Sri Lanka called Embilipitiya, where a Buddhist monk, Dr Omalphe Sobitha Thera, has set up an English language International School at the temple to educate rural children whose parents speak nary a word of English.

When I asked the learned monk, who is also a member of parliament of the Nationalist Heritage Party, if he wasn't undermining the role of the national language – Sinhalese – in public education, his reply was: "We teach them Sinhalese, and we teach all other subjects including Buddhism in English. In this globalised economic environment, we need to give the rural children wings to fly and that is the English language. It need not be put on a pedestal and worshipped. We need to use it like a rug, a ferry, not as a God."

We need to realise that English is no more the language of the Anglo-Saxons. As the global language of commerce, it belongs to all of us. We don't need to speak it like the Americans or the British – but we need to be able to speak English with proper grammar and with correct spacing of words and phrases where the message could be communicated well, as Arundhati Roy does so well.

These communication skills could be taught by well-qualified Indians, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, Malaysians and Singaporeans, perhaps much better than some of those "native speakers". Don't blame Westerners for this, it's just a matter of de-colonising our own mindsets.

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