

Recollections of Ajarn M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn

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The news of the death of Ajarn M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn has shocked and saddened her many friends all over the world. At once a host of memories spring to mind of that most unstuffy and delightful lady. In her later years, when I knew her, she was somewhat frail in physique but she remained decisively firm of mind. She tempered matters of professional concern with a delightfully quirkish sense of humour and was always ready to justify what in other's eyes seemed small eccentricities.

I first met Ajarn Boonlua at a R E L C Conference in Singapore, where she was the leader of the Thai team. I recall that she read her paper at a plenary session and then ten minutes before the end of her allotted time, looked up, took off her glasses and spoke directly to us. The gist of what she said was this :-

When I had reached this point in writing my paper I thought to myself 'well, that's all I really want to say on the subject but I've another ten minutes yet to fill? So I thought I'd take a little rest and read some more of Professor D J Enright's new book *Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor*. I was reading the chapter in which he comments on the answers some of the Thai students wrote to questions on English Literature when he was teaching at Chulalongkorn University. It was so funny and so true of the way some of our students think, that I decided I wouldn't pad out my own paper but instead I would share some of these wise and witty passages with you...and she proceeded to read, not by any means irrelevantly, a long passage from Enright's book, interrupting herself with uncontrollable fits of laughter at the comic bits.

You will easily guess - this recollection itself is evidence - whose paper remained most clearly in mind that afternoon.

Ajarn Boonlua's sense of humour and the comic was legendary. I remember her starting to relate an incident one day at CIEL, to Ajarn Mayuri and Ajarn Paninee, and going off into such a fit of laughter in the telling of it that the tears ran down her cheeks and she had to stop. Every time she resumed she was again overcome with helpless laughter. What the joke was I don't think any of us ever

discovered. On another occasion, she came to my office, shaking with laughter, and said she has seen or heard something so funny that she simply had to share it with someone and I was the nearest. Again her laughter was more amusing than the joke itself. She would often drop in at the British Council ('because the air conditioning is so nice') and 'smoke' a cigarette. I put the verb in inverted commas because Boonlua's way of smoking was the most expensive imaginable. She would take four or five puffs, blow out the smoke as if it were poison and then stub out the cigarette, repeating this extravagant procedure a few minutes later. I once asked her why she bothered to smoke at all, since it seemed to involve so much waste and expense. She answered in that slow, drawling, vowel-stretching way of hers "Ah Jerry, you Europeans are so greedy. You want to eat all the fish. You haven't yet discovered that the cheek is the best bit, and the best is never expensive".

On another occasion she came in to the British Council for 'a coffee and a cool-off,' as she called it, and told me that she had been lecturing to a group of students on classical Thai Literature. 'I don't know what to do with them' she said sadly, 'They are so innocent and inexperienced and unimaginative. Thai literature is sophisticated, ironic, earthy and courtly, like Chauer's. 'Imagine', she said, beginning to heave with laughter 'imagine an old woman like me having to explain indirectly to all these youngsters what the stories are all about! What's wrong with the youth of today that they are so ignorant! I don't know who was more embarrassed, they or I.'

The last thing anyone could say of Ajarn Boonlua was that she was ignorant. Like the literature she taught she was sophisticated, courtly, ironic and sometimes, earthy. During the 1950's and 1960's, when she virtually *was* TEFL in Thailand, she did her considerable best to help select and encourage the specialist training of many of the Ajarns who succeeded her.

She was never a prisoner of the narrow view or trapped by the latest theory or 'God's truth' approach to TEFL. She could distinguish the wood from the trees very well. During the years when arguments raged about EST, EAP, and ESP M.L. Boonlua realised that something in addition to the conventional ESL literary and grammatical teaching of the University English departments was needed. The committee set up at Chulalongkorn University* to introduce changes was finding it difficult to achieve a concensus. Most of the other Universities (Chiengmai excepted) waited to see what Chula would do before they committed themselves to the expense of a properly set up ESP venture.

When the then Central Institute for English Language under Ajarn Mayuri planned a conference on ESP at Chiengmai Ajarn Boonlua was quite certain that its chances of achieving anything useful depended on convincing the Rectors and

* And out of which sprang the Language Institute itself.

senior administrators rather than the language teachers. It was her forthright attack on the waverers and nonthinkingly obstinate within this group, delivered with an authority which only she could command, that won the majority over. To see Ajarn Boonlua, already an elderly lady, appraise the mood of the conference, roll back the years and swing it her way, was to feel the will and dominance she still commanded when the occasion called for them.

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M.L. Boonlua was a pragmatist. Over her professional lifetime she observed great changes in TEFL. It was a period when almost before one set of new ideas had become widespread there flowed in fresh ones from the fields of Linguistics, Psychology, Education and Methodology. Globally, more people than ever before wanted or needed to learn English. Naturally, these students had different reasons for learning and made different requirements on the language they wished to learn; their ages, abilities, backgrounds and mother tongues varied; an ability to pay for small classes taught by highly skilled teachers sometimes contrasted with classes of up to 80 children, three to a desk and a textbook, taught by a struggling and ill-equipped teacher. Simply to keep up with the new developments was a full time task. To evaluate which of the many conflicting ideas and claims were the most appropriate for a given situation was almost impossible. It is, after all, a sobering reflection that one's recommendations and advice may commit a Ministry to the large expenditure of scarce funds, influence the training of thousands of language teachers and affect—for good or ill—the way in which hundreds of thousands of students are taught a useful foreign language.

Ajarn Boonlua was always aware of these larger issues. In discussing them she would raise such questions as these:—

For how many of the Thai children who sat in English classes was English really useful?

How many of them would ever have an opportunity to hear it used naturally by native speakers and to respond in it away from the tourist areas of Chiangmai, Pattaya, Phuket and Bangkok?

Some teachers were mathematically bound to be below the general average (a smaller number, very much so) and the same limitation applied to the language learning abilities of their pupils. What could one do for them?

What textbooks were best in the particular circumstances of EFL in Thailand?

How could Teacher Training and In-Service Training be made encouragingly relevant to the classroom conditions the teachers would face?

These questions preoccupied her along with other basic realities. She grasped very clearly the fact that whatever English syllabus was authorised or imposed

officially, there is always a force at work which, to a greater or lesser extent, modifies it in practice towards that which teachers believe they *can* teach or like to teach. Imperceptibly, too, the examination tend to accommodate teachers and students in this respect—whatever may be claimed to the contrary.

Ajarn Boonlua was the wife of a medical doctor and frequently asked my wife, also a doctor, to check the translations of medical papers or articles she had translated into English. One can make a rough analogy between Medicine and TEFL that illustrates the position to which I believe M.L. Boonlua allied herself. Just as TEFL is an educational field, rather than an educational subject or discipline, and relies on the contributions of Psychology, Applied Linguistics, Educational Technology etc. so medicine, too, relies on other disciplines such as Biochemistry, Psychiatry, Pharmacology etc. Miracle drugs and fantastic developments in surgical operations are announced annually, just as in TEFL this or that approach or method, supported by this or that hardware and software, promise previously unattainable success. For those fortunate enough to afford it and to travel to the appropriate hospitals these new developments can sometimes help or cure. They are, though, for the minority.

Away from the metropolitan teaching and research centres, as far away as the small towns and villages let us say, health for the majority depends on a few simple medical aids, the body's self-curative powers and what can be called the tender, loving care of the nursing available. So, in its different forms with TEFL, the teacher's tender loving care—aided by the student's self-teaching capacity—will have to overcome the difficulties of a foreign language remote in sound and grammar from Thai. It is on a basis such as this that Ministries and teacher trainers have to build. It is on a basis such as this that, when funds are scarce, Ministries must decide whom to ignore and whom to help. I sometimes found Ajarn Boonlua's contributions to our discussions rather depressing. They often began—I can hear her now!—"It's no good thinking you can do...." "It's a mistake to waste time and money on..." In the wider view she was not being discouraging, or even negative. Wisdom, that concentrate of varied and intensive thought and experience had replaced academic knowledge and up-to-dateness. She was really considering the problem rather than parading her reading.

These are some arrogant verses in English that say :

But there's wisdom in women, of more than they have known.

And thoughts go blowing through them, are wiser than their own.

Boonlua's wisdom and thoughts were her own and we are all the poorer for their loss.