

Tales From the Trenches/ Récits des tranchées

Animals and Vegetables

Zeporah Horodezky

Her new students are settling themselves into the little plastic cubicles, arranging their listening comprehension texts and scrap notepaper, adjusting their headphones. She skirts shakily down the narrow aisles between desks, mustering a half-baked courage to assume the ESL instructor's preposterous position of the language lab.

Each time she enters this room, her task feels more absurd, the teachers' console looming up there in that flabbergasting architecture of a stage—an actual stage! High tech torture chamber. Vicious hot seat of humiliation.

She climbs the four beige carpeted steps to the Master Control Panel and sinks nervously into the lone upholstered chair on rollers, facing for the first time this term the dreaded blank glass screen and its rows of uncompromising gray buttons.

The students, mostly pre-university Asians accustomed to antiseptic efficiency, are looking up at her now, trusting, expectant faces ready to hear through the headphones a competent voice telling them what to do. She manages to turn the system on and successfully absents out any unoccupied cubicles. Miraculously, the student grid on the screen transforms to the desired go-ahead yellow. She even manages to unlock the students' tape too—21 students inserting perfectly good tapes, and she is the only one here who knows that their efforts are in vain, because there isn't a snowball's chance in ESL hell that she will work out the insidious kinks of Fast Auto Transfer or ordinary Auto Transfer or even Manual Transfer. In fact, nobody in the lab but here, Aurorah Taddlebaum, even suspects the fiasco that will inevitably ensue.

The regular teacher who is coming back for the second half of this term is a crabby, highly competent technocrat. Every day has been slotted in with computer labs, audio labs, fancy group configurations for video lessons.

Last term, Aurorah had been bumped into this new department with only a few days' warning. She had madly scrambled to learn whatever she could

This piece was written over 10 years ago as fiction loosely based on actual teaching experience. It is not a reflection of the author's current experience or attitude as an English language instructor.

in a steely sea of machinery for which she has few skills and zilch affinity, but the students, accustomed to technical proficiency, quickly grew impatient. When she began to ruin their weekly movie treat *Anne of Green Gables*, there was hot revolt. Half a dozen of them, mostly young Japanese women with dyed red hair, marched into the departmental head's office with a premeditated list of complaints, and Aurorah's only recourse was to promise to retrain in the labs; she wrote it down at home on her to-do list, just beneath getting a root canal.

The students are quiet now, ready for work. She shyly scans the neutral faces that will soon become puzzled, then frustrated, as they get a whiff of her limitations.

"Please open your books to page five and wait for your tapes to rewind." There is something way too personal about her singular voice, so concentrated, unrehearsed, filtering through the headphones into the ears and brains of these student-strangers.

Her own misadventures as a student in the language lab were over two decades ago in French 100. The professor, a delicate, elegantly boned Franco-Ontarian, was not on a stage but seated behind a glass partition. She had begun to speak tentatively into the mouthpiece, reading from the professor's handout.

"Je ne donne paws ... Tu ne done paws ... Il ne done paws ..."

"Je ne *donne pas*. Tu ne *donne pas*. Il ne *donne pas*" came a thin disembodied voice she'd had no warning of. It was a shock, this corrective echo, like her own mocking conscience; she'd felt mortified and betrayed by her un-talented tongue.

"Je new donne pays ... Tu ne donne pays ... Il ne ..."

"Je ne donne pas! Tu ne donne pas! Il ne donne pas! The professor's voice persisted, harsher now with an edge of meanness.

"Je ne donne piss ... Tu ne donne piss ... Il ne donne piss," she mumbled awkwardly, suspecting deep mistakes.

There was a silent crackle on the other end. She dared to glance up at the professor. He was glaring at her through the glass, his face steamy and red as though she'd just hurled some obscenity at him. He reminded her of a male gorilla she'd seen at a monkey jungle zoo in Florida, set apart from the human crowds by a shield of glass to protect him from germs. When she tried to seek communion with the beast through intense eye contact, he grew fierce and enraged and would have ripped her to shreds if he'd had his way.

She quickly broke eye contact with the French professor, and after the first lab she dropped French class and abandoned the language altogether.

This class is waiting now, all eyes upon her up on stage, while she reviews for the dozenth time the steps of the "Basic Function" on the laminated sheet, face up on the teacher's console, frantically searching for and hoping to

prevent whatever it was she kept doing wrong last term—but it remains a mystery. Suddenly she gleans something new; step #4 looks unfamiliar: *Press the red NORMAL button on the console to the right of the screen.*

So maybe that's it! It was that forsaken *NORMAL* button that has been screwing her up. She presses it with a vengeance. There is a collective clicking and the wonderfully reassuring whirr like a jet plane taking off as the students' tapes actually rewind. Her screen is flooded with perfect blood-red dots that promise her the tapes are blessedly recording as a man's voice comes through. He cheerfully yaks away, "In this lesson, the speaker is going to tell you how to bake a banana cake. Listen carefully."

The class is plugged in, quizzically absorbed for the time being while she peruses the text they are following with the tape. She panics. Is this class Upper Intermediate or Lower Advanced? Has she picked the wrong books from the shelves? She gropes over her notes, tears through the pile of legal-sized folders, unearthing four months too late everything she'd misplaced from last term, but she can't find the damn class list with the damn level on it. How could she actually forget the level she was teaching?

A little squiggly shape lights up at cubicle #10 on the student grid. It's a call for assistance! A timid-looking teenage girl is staring up at her with a strained face. The gig is up. This term it will only have taken her about 10 minutes to make a total ass of herself. She presses the intercom.

"*What seems to be your problem?*" she unintentionally barks into the mouthpiece. Twenty-one bewildered faces lurch up at her, rudely shocked out of the banana cake-baking space. Horrified, she realizes she has accidentally activated the ALL CALL button. "Sorry," she mutters with a frog in her throat. "My mistake. Please continue with your lesson," and after a few deft attempts she gives up trying to connect privately with #10; mercifully, the girl has returned to the listening exercise, maybe managing to work it out for herself, or at least has innocuously given up any hope for Aurorah's attention.

"Excuse me teachah," a young man from #14 calls out. "This book lealy old. No page thlee." He points to his text, holding it up above his head, as if he expects she can read it from her seat.

Aurorah sighs gratefully for a few minutes reprieve while she attends to something idiot-proof. She descends from on high and selects another text from her cart, rushing it over to cubicle #14 as if it were an emergency bandage. Now something clears for her and she remembers. Thank God! They are Upper Intermediates. Not that it makes any difference for the months that loom ahead. It had all blurred into one nightmare for her anyway in the Department of ESL: English as a Sadistic Language ... English as Sublimated Loathing ... English as Suspicious Lunacy.

She heads back up to the console and resumes her seat, wondering how she's ended up here. Heavy-heartedly, she adjusts that teacher's omniscient headset, recalling an article she'd recently been shocked by in a politically upscale journal. The essay referred to English as a "MURDEROUS LANGUAGE." It had reported that there were 1.4 billion English-speakers today, doubling every decade. Among the 6,000 other living languages, it predicted half would die out within the next century, with another 40% on the linguists' endangered species list hanging on pathetically by their sickly syllables.

And here she is now, Ms. Aurorah Taddlebaum, granddaughter of Yiddish-speaking Russian immigrants, one of Canada's language police. She gets paid to eavesdrop through the intercom, to pulverize pronunciation; when the students hand in their answer sheets to her, she will remove the cop cap and don an invisible white sanitary mask to slice up their tender written bits with her fine pointy red pen, the intricacies of a word surgeon searching for run-ons, misplaced modifiers, split infinitives, digging them out like diseased organs.

The clock over the book shelves says 11:15. After the lab, the class will be heading back to the classroom for a lesson on prepositions. She grabs a piece of scrap paper and begins to scribble some words, ignoring the flashing number for assistance at cubicle #16.

- *during the past year, some senior assholes bumped into my home department and I got bumped out.*
- *I really got screwed around and ended up here.*
- *at first, I was just pissed off.*
- *but now I'm scared out of my mind.*

She crumples the paper and shoves it into her briefcase on the off-chance that someone might discover it in the school garbage and recognize her tiny cryptic handwriting. The way her luck has been going at work lately, it wouldn't surprise her.

Cubicle #16 is still flashing, and the chubby-cheeked Japanese man signalling her looks flustered and hot. She tries and fails to reach him on the microphone. She flashes a strained smile at him, pretty close to a grimace, she imagines, and holds up a finger, indicating that something is about to shift.

She presses the ALL CALL button and blurts into the microphone, once more startling them from their baking lesson.

"Okay everyone, time's up. Please return your textbooks to the cart and go back to class."

How passively they stare at her. Twenty-one sets of eyes set upon her with carefully cultivated blanks. Row upon row of little lettuce heads and summer squash butts waiting for their watering. How savagely, though, they

will turn on her when she begins to scrimp on structure lessons, passes out the wrong books, violates videos, messes with Anne of Green Gables.

The Author

Zeporah Horodezky has degrees in English literature and psychology, an MFA in creative writing, and BC teacher's certification. For 22 years she has taught multi-levels of English ranging from literacy to university. She has also been an actor-scriptwriter, editor, and aspiring drummer. Her stories have appeared in literary journals such as *Descant* and *Quarry*. Zeporah is a world traveler with a deep interest in Buddhist teachings. Currently she is training to become a Feldenkrais practitioner.