

LETTER FROM TATARSTAN

Vaun Waddell—*Department of English*

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from the journal of Vaun Waddell, who is teaching at the Tatar-American Regional Institute (TARI) in southern Russia for the 2003-2004 academic year.

22 October 2003—My presentation today turned out well. Dilyara Mansourovna, the president of TARI, phoned over the weekend and invited me to a conference at another university, TISBI, where she and I attended a conference together last year. I was to receive a printed invitation last Friday, but the person sent to deliver it didn't find me. The conference includes not only local teachers and administrators but also representatives from some embassies. I am to conduct a master lesson. This means meeting with a dozen students I haven't seen before, but who will understand English, in front of an audience of conferees for a 40-minute demonstration of how it is done. The point is not to teach English language, which is not my specialty anyway, but to model a pedagogical technique that will amaze and delight people from around the world. In 40 minutes. All of them strangers. She would appreciate if my main point could be something about critical thinking, since Critical Thinking is a buzzword in Russia these days though Western applications of it are sort of incomprehensible to most of the people here. The cold war wasn't for nothing; there's got to be something behind all those James Bond movies. Yes it was; there is nothing behind all those James Bond movies. With strangers. In 40 minutes.

My master lesson was set for 11:30. I promised to dismiss my class at 10:30, and she said she would send a driver for me. My first class was at 8:30, first period of the day. The weather has been getting steadily cooler, this afternoon dropping almost to zero centigrade, with the rain falling steadily since last night turning to sleet. Men in charge of heating are at their posts, full of enthusiasm and determined that no Tatar shiver. The classroom was well into the 90s (not centigrade, thank goodness). We opened the window to let in sounds of the market and passing trucks, which made little difference since the students don't understand me even when they can hear me—I have been assigned some first year students for instruction in Western logic and composition on the premise that they are the least likely to have developed brains yet; the slight problem is that their proficiency in English is not adequate for them to profit from lessons not conducted in Russian. Actually I felt much encouraged today because last time I gave them a fill-in-the-blanks grammar and conversation exercise which they were able to handle. They were relieved this morning to find that I had adapted to their developmental level and was no longer asking them to think. They now know that I want

Critical Thinking
is a buzzword in
Russia these days
though Western
applications of
it are sort of
incomprehensible
to most of the
people here.

to be their friend, I know they have no ill feeling for me, and we may yet make progress.

So we sweated it out, literally, for 80 minutes, and then I went to the 10 AM class. They are one of the best groups but this morning were poised to stage a new October Revolution because of the heat. Gulnara, a keen-minded girl, said, "It's boiling." Those who have been in England, the damp isle, will recognize this as the British expression for "It must be soaring into the 70s." But in Room 22 it was well above anything we ever felt in Britain. I assured her that we would meet for only half an hour today, to which she said, "Very well—we will boil for 30 minutes." Room 22 is an interior room with a high ceiling and a window located probably 16 feet from the floor. It can be opened if someone goes down to the security desk, where teachers sign for keys to open their rooms (rooms must never be left unlocked or unattended; students cluster in the corridor between classes while teachers shove their way through the clusters carrying keys to the security desk to turn them in and sign for new ones) and request the "fishing pole," which will reach the window if a tall boy stands on a table and stretches onto one tippy toe with his group mates gathered round propping him upright. I sent Idar for the fishing pole, but he returned empty handed, as do most who go down to the sea with fishing poles, because it was raining and we were not permitted to open the window. I should have thought of that, but I was already drenched, having just cooked across the hall for an hour and a half, and it didn't cross my "heat oppressed brain" (Hamlet, Denmark being another damp isle with a temperature paradox, though Shakespeare never visited Elsinore that we know of) that, as usual, property would take precedence over people. So I told Gulnara that we would just have to be hard boiled and proceeded with the abbreviated lesson. At 25 past the hour, one of the security men stuck his head in and said there was a phone call for me. I finished my sentence, grabbed my things, and ran downstairs. It was someone from TISBI. She said, "We have you for a master lesson at 10:00. Are you coming?" I said they could count on me for 11:30, went down another flight of stairs, and out into the rain.

The driver was waiting; we drove through jammed streets, by now brown lakes as the rain had not abated. We arrived at Dilyara Mansourovna's apartment house to pick her up. As she came out the door the driver backed the car away from her, turned around, and drove slowly toward the gate, she walking parallel with the car in the rain. I finally understood when she tossed her garbage bag into the dumpster by the gate and got into the car. She was in good spirits and relaxed, unflapped by my mention of the time mixup. We drove to TISBI, exchanged our outer coats for aluminum discs with numbers stamped on them, and went upstairs where we were awaited in the hall, ushered to a classroom, and assured

**They were poised
to stage a new
October Revolution
because of the heat.**

Six or seven
students filed in
sheepishly and sat
in the first couple
of rows; some
young English
teachers took seats
in the row behind
them; and four or
five rows of more
mature people
completed
the company.

that in a few moments we could begin. It was almost 11 o'clock. Dilyara Mansourovna was part of my audience, there to offer moral support and translate if necessary. Six or seven students filed in sheepishly and sat in the first couple of rows; some young English teachers took seats in the row behind them; and four or five rows of more mature people completed the company. A TV in the corner was blaring BBC news. Somebody commented, "You don't like the BBC, do you?" I did not rise to the bait. As the seats filled up, someone turned the sound down to a normal level. I inquired about the students and learned that they were in their first year; the fourth-year students had come at 10 o'clock but were now engaged elsewhere. Uh-oh. This lesson would not go smoothly if I asked much of the students.

My plan was to analyze some proverbs, modeling the first couple of them and then asking increasingly more questions of the students until we had one of them at the board doing it alone with only prompts from the group. This presupposes that the students understand elemental English, and I had been reassured several times that they would. Trouble was, these students before me were not the ones who did. My last six weeks teaching first-year students has taught me some things; I estimated that it would take four or five hours to get these youngsters to perform. I had 40 minutes, including introduction and follow-up questions. By the way, where did TISBI get this building? The room was comfortable and about the size of classrooms we are accustomed to at home. The rooms I have been working in are either sardine sized for my groups of 12-15 or lecture halls for a hundred. And I did mention the TV, didn't I? Where I teach I have seen, for about 35 rooms, one small whiteboard, one small chalkboard, and one larger chalkboard. Since the rooms are locked and these items are portable, there is never any way of knowing whether one will be accessible. I use a fat black marker and sheets of paper a lot. My proverb analysis required to be presented visually, so I was grateful at TISBI to find a good sized chalkboard and chalk. Erasers are unknown in this country—a damp rag serves well enough except that the board must be allowed to dry before you can begin writing again. In my August rush to prepare for departure, I neglected to pack an eraser and a box of Crayola dustless chalk, a major oversight. I learned in past years that dustless chalk makes a great gift, one stick at a time.

So I was being introduced when somebody took the radical action of turning off the TV, which relieved me greatly. Now I had only to wow a roomful of strangers, some of them potentially hostile, by having students internalize principles they had never before considered and apply them in a language they don't yet understand. How did it turn out well? I had the freshmen read the proverbs aloud—this they could do with only a little coaching. I put my two samples on the board, asking questions and

already getting some prompts from the group—I had given a handout to everyone on the hunch that the crustiest teachers would rather see the texts than try to remember them. Also I had loaded the bottom half of the page and the back with outlines of analytical methods and critical thinking paradigms, supposing that if the live presentation were a bust, they could at least look at the printed notes for something applicable to their classrooms. I also asked them at the beginning of my lesson to read the handout later so they could pay attention to the demonstration now, a surefire way to get them to give most of their attention to the handout. Nevertheless, the analytical prompts were coming mostly from the teachers, not the students. Luckily, the teachers were doing the worst things they could do—usurping the lesson from the students or not paying attention at all. They were not observing the lesson; they were participating in it or studying the handout (heh, heh, heh). The thing they didn't know was that the handouts I gave the students and the young teachers just behind them had some of the answers written on them rather than all that formulaic pedagogical stuff (heh, heh, heh).

Luckily, the teachers were doing the worst things they could do—usurping the lesson from the students or not paying attention at all.

After my two proverbs I asked for a volunteer, and one of the young teachers flinched, meaning that she would try. She did fine with a little coaching from the group and from me, just as I hoped the fourth-year students would do. We were moving along briskly. The next volunteer was beyond crusty; she was hard baked to the center, the dean of the college. How interesting, the tension between her disdain for adopting a student's role and her compulsion to perform. The proverb was, "The universe is made of stories, not atoms." A young student would have juxtaposed stories with atoms to discover that Muriel Rukeyser, the author, meant that to her people are more important than things, or at least history than physics. In seconds the dean worked out three levels of logic to reconcile the metaphysical to the material, proving that stories are atoms, so there is no discrepancy. A brilliant mind. A dialectical materialist. Encrusted. I stood agape at how fast and far her mind traveled, also that she missed the whole blinkin' point. I verbalized the former, not the latter, adding that to less accomplished minds the proverb probably meant only that Muriel Rukeyser valued people more than things. But perhaps I err. Muriel Rukeyser may also be a dialectical materialist; I would not know. And one of the eight elements of critical thinking is Point of View.

Nobody wanted to try to top that one, so we began the debriefing with 15 minutes to go, which allowed some teachers to ask what they really wanted to know and me to explain what I really wanted to say. I closed the session and was dragged off to a departmental office for tea and chocolates, where half a dozen insiders asked what they really wanted to know, including one young one who recently spent a

year at University of Canterbury but in that time couldn't write a paper acceptable to professors there.

The first question at the tea was whether anyone was incapable of learning additional languages. This is their specialty, not mine, so I could only highlight the obvious—that everyone who is not brain damaged learns at least his native language; that developmental theories seem to explain something about periods of our lives when we learn languages more or less readily; and that, like in music and high jumping, individuals appear to show various aptitudes. We eventually moved through my purpose for being in Tatarstan this year, which is instruction in academic writing, to the Canterbury question. I suspect that I will see that young scholar again, Dina; but I'm not certain I can help her. I am not sure everyone is adequately and peculiarly gifted to learn additional languages (and by extension, to learn alien methods of thought), neither do I know the requirements of British universities. I do know that the little British academic writing I have seen has a strange look to it. And I'm not entirely sure that the crystalline logic of American academic writing is a universal verity. I do know that Brits do not think like Americans. Now why was it our ancestors left there? I suspect that reasons in some cases went beyond a burning faith in the gathering. Seventh generation Utahns who are unaware that any of their forebears were ever Mormons are one of the little indicators.

One of my young colleagues, Dmitri Bobkov, was telling me the other day about a lecture he heard discussing four cultural modes of reasoning. Western thought works from point to point, not always very creative, mind you, but effective for getting us from here to there. Middle Eastern, or Arabic, reasoning works in parallel strands, meaning that for every text there is at least one equal and opposite subtext, highly allusive, intrinsically artistic, always analogical. Eastern thought is a spiral, having an objective but not approaching it directly, including many points of interest along the way. Russian thought, well, it is chaotic in our estimation, not reducible to a simple geometric analogy, not predictable, and not always having a particular aim. My observation is that Russian thought is very powerful in some ways, for example it and Russian society are highly nutritive to genius, providing freedom of inquiry without preconditions, resulting in Sacharov, Dostoevsky, any number of artists and performers. But it is inimical to individual productivity, which is an insoluble problem for Russia in the global economy.

There are three stages, I think, to learning foreign systems of thought. We start with the solipsistic supposition that everybody else thinks just like we do. Foreign policy fashioned during this stage leads to isolationism, since other nations will not long tolerate its naiveté. When events make the first stage untenable, revealing undeniable evidence that

Russian thought
is chaotic, not
reducible to a
simple geometric
analogy, not
predictable, and
not always having a
particular aim.

others' thoughts are different from ours, we conclude that they are not thinking at all. Foreign policy arising from the second stage leads to war since it is insulting, and wars typically are matters of honor. Survivors of war have the opportunity to recognize that the other guy is thinking, but not at all in the familiar manner. This third stage may give rise to discussion and study, which could lead to amity, even love. Even love need not lead to embrace. Why are the most liberal ones among us the most terrified of otherness?

**Why are the
most liberal ones
among us the
most terrified of
otherness?**

Dilyara Mansourovna came late to the tea and soon said it was time to go, so out into the rain we went and to the car. On the way to TARI, I had the opportunity to ask if we could find a speech therapist for Eliza, a third-year student who is studying to become an interpreter, her dream, she says, and has developed over the past few years a severe stutter. Eliza is as bright as they come and oozes good character. Dilyara Mansourovna assured me that we could find a “logo-ped,” but that they usually work with children. Either we will see a miracle worked or a young woman revising her dream.

Dilyara Mansourovna seemed pleased with the conference attempt. Two observations: she is my primary audience anyway, and by not tripping and falling on the way into the room I was more than halfway home since I was there as much to be displayed as “the American professor” as to teach a class.

On my e-mail later this afternoon was an invitation from TISBI to address the general session of a UNESCO conference they are hosting late in November, an invitation more interesting for the fact that the proposal deadline was last week. Russia has been working with certain European nations to coordinate diplomas and develop a credit system for schools so students can transfer about, studying in more than one country without extending the years it takes to graduate. The conference will be one stage in developing this project. I have a couple of ideas on the topic, but it is far from my expertise. A second reason I am leery of accepting is that I don't want to be exploited by TISBI. (I am content being exploited by TARI.) A third reason, which is not very significant to me, is that not all Europeans are enamored of America at the moment. And a last reason for pause: since Europeans think (sort of) in the Western style and Russians think in, surprise, surprise, the Russian style, can a series of conferences and contracts square the circle for their young people? I will ask Dilyara Mansourovna's advice. ☺