Confessions of a Wandering Scholar

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ABSTRACTO

O autor, John McKenny, professor da Escola Superior de Educação e da Escola Superior de Tecnologia de Viseu reflecte sobre a sua carreira e tenta relacionar as suas experiências como "professor ambulante" com a emergência do Inglês como língua franca e com a tendência globalizante no comércio, nas ciências e na comunicação social. O autor pensa que este género de experiência pode ser mutuamente enriquecedor quer para o professor peripatético, quer para o país anfitrião, desde que o Inglês seja visto como uma língua para aprender, negociar ou investigar- noutras palavras, como uma ferramenta heurística. Adverte o lado negativo, contra os professores que convivem com as culturas locais superficialmente, impermeáveis à oportunidade que lhes é proporcionada de crescer e conhecer melhor o mundo; compara-os a caracóis com a casa às costas. Ao longo do ensaio, assume-se como discípulo de Montaigne e louva o conceito de "escolar errante" como agente de transpolinização cultural.

Why do people leave home and set off for other lands in search of fame or fortune? What impels some of us to set out into the unknown on a lifelong quest which sometimes can transform our lives into a latterday odyssey? In this essay I will address these and related questions. I feel that the poet T.S. Eliot hints at an answer in the following lines from the last of his Four Quartets:

> We shall not cease from exploration
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> And the end of all our exploring
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> Will be to arrive where we started
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> And know the place for the first time.

The present piece of writing is intended to be an essay as the term was used by Michel de Montaigne: I wish to assay (to try out) my ideas in the process of writing them. The title alludes to "The Wandering Scholars", a book by a famous twentieth century medievalist, Helen Waddell, who wrote about those monks, many of them Irish, who wandered Europe founding and sustaining monasteries and keeping classical learning alive during the Dark Ages.

A good example of how these wandering monks kept Hellenic scholarship alive was the strange case of a manuscript sent by the Emperor Michael of Constantinople, in the year 827, to Louis the Pious of France. This manuscript was a text by Pseudo-Dionysius, who was then thought to have been Dionysius the Areopagite, an associate of St. Paul (Acts of the Apostles 17.34). King Louis, sensing its importance, donated it to a nearby Abbey where it languished unread for decades until one day appeared a young Irish monk, proficient in Greek. This monk was Johannes Scotus Erigena who made a translation commissioned by Louis's successsor, Charles the Bald. The quality of this translation so impressed the Greek librarian at the Vatican, Anastasius, when a copy was sent there that he asked how someone from such a remote and barbarous country could know Greek so well.

Some aspects of Dionysius's Neoplatonism were considered potentially heretical and pope Nicholas was angry that the translation had been made without his authorization. He ordered Charles to send Erigena to Rome for questioning. But the king preferred to protect this Irish monk who stayed in France for many years becoming perhaps the second most important philosopher of the Middle Ages surpassed only by Thomas Aquinas.

Erigena'a work on free-will and predestination was condemned by two councils of the Church in 855 and 859. But the Irish scholar escaped punishment thanks to his royal protector. William of Malmesbury recounted a story which illustrates the very good relationship Scotus enjoyed with Charles the Bald. One day at table, the king asked Scotus what it was that separated a Scot from a fool. Johannes replied "Only the dinner table."

A closer look at this story of the translation of Pseudo-Dionysius recounted by Bertrand Russell in his "History of Western Philosophy" reminds us today how far we have come technologically, with our PCs, FTPs, scanners, term banks, spelling- and style-checkers, telephones, modems, photocopying machines and faxes. We can imagine how laborious the translation work of Erigena must have been and how it would have been painstakingly transcribed by scribe monks for transportation to Rome and other centres of learning. More important than the question "Is the pen mightier than the chip?" is the

enduring fact that the human know-how which wields the quill, pen, chip or scanner will always be of pivotal importance.

The importance of wandering to scholarship was brought home to me recently while attending an international conference on translation. It is by displacing ourselves, rearranging ourselves in strange towns with unusual configurations of longstanding colleagues and new faces, that we sometimes get fresh ideas or novel angles on older ideas. By "wandering" on a small scale we can, through serendipity, create the conditions whereby we see the familiar in a different way. Hence the value of conferences, think tanks, consultancies, working committees and political summits.

The concept of wandering scholar should be fairly familiar to Portuguese students and teachers. Many of the students of the Escola Superior de Educação de Viseu have to be prepared to go to far-flung parts of Portugal to obtain their first teaching post. Indeed some, as Erasmus students, have even done part of their studies at French, Norwegian, English universities or other European institutions of higher learning . Teachers have to be prepared to travel long distances to do postgraduate research.

I would like to humbly apply this term - wandering scholar- to people who like myself, have chosen to live and teach in a land other than the one where they were born. By splitting an infinitive in the previous sentence I made a political statement or a Montaignelike sideswipe, challenging the pedants in the English language teaching industry, who prohibit such splitting, basing their prohibition on strictures from Latin grammar.

For 19 of the last 20 years of my life I have worked as a teacher of English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) in 6 different countries. The year out was to do a Master of Science in Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Needless to say, I have no wish to put myself on a level with the Irish monk, Saint Columba, who founded around 40 monasteries in Wales, Switzerland and Italy in the sixth century nor with Blessed Raymond Lully (c.1235-1315 who wrote the first European novels in Catalan and promoted the study of Arabic and Hebrew throughout Europe) nor with the other great Europeans of the Middle Ages such as those real life colleagues of Don Quixote, the knights errant and knights hospitaller. Nevertheless, if we think of the numerous 20th century practitioners and teachers of sciences or arts, of religion, medicine, painting, architecture, cinematography, dance, music or agronomy who have implanted their ideas in other lands, we can find many to match those great medieval figures and the ambulant luminaries of other centuries.

In our own century, the movement of scholars is often market-driven, with pundits, e.g. in Britain, often lamenting a brain-drain, as the best scientists, academics and artists are lured to better-paying countries (in the case of Britain and Ireland, to places such as The Middle East, Australia, Canada, the USA or Hong-Kong). The mobility promoted by the European Union schemes such as Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Alpha and others, encouraging Europe-wide student and teacher exchanges, is perhaps the most rationalized attempt so far to promote international cross-pollination of ideas and learning.

To return to my own humble circumstances, I would say that I came in search of adventure and experience. I did try to be a monk, spending 8 months as a novice, and later qualified to be a teacher of Religious Studies at the Universtity of Cambridge. But when the chance to be an EFL teacher in Salonika presented itself, I seized it.

At this stage, I was riding on the back of a wave which was sweeping the world: the English language was gradually emerging as the lingua franca of the world of business, mass communications and academe. Consequently many countries were anxious to educate a cadre of people proficient in this tongue. A further wave I could ride on was the almost ubiquitous notion that a native English speaker teacher was sure to be a better EFL teacher than a non-native EFL teacher.

Unfortunately, these two waves sometimes combined to produce the type of English teachers who believed it their mission to bring the English language and hence rational thinking, fairness, democracy and technology to the country they graced with their teaching presence. They really thought they were spreading civilization.

Although as a 16-year-old I had taught the Irish language to children for two years in Sunday afternoon classes, I must confess that any scraps of knowledge about English grammar I possessed I had picked up, willy-nilly, in primary school. I went to Greece downright unqualified to teach English.

I do not for one moment think that teaching English to Portuguese, Omani, Spanish, Swedish, Greek or Japanese people is in any way civilizing or enlightening. English today I see as a means, a tool or heuristic device giving access to knowledge and ways of seeing in the same way that Greek had been in the time of Erigena and Latin was until the Enlightenment and beyond.

English is the official or semi-official language in over 60 countries and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international

competitions, pop music and advertising. More than 60% of the world's scientists write in English. 75% of the world's mail is in English and more than 80% of all the information stored in the world's electronic retrieval systems is in English.

The burgeoning English-Only language policy or diffusion-of -English policy which is associated with this proliferation of English use, is characterized by triumphant capitalism, its science and technology, and a monolingual view of modernization and internationalization. This globalization, standardization and levelling out of cultural features has been aptly termed Macdonaldization (pace fast food fans) and poses a threat to the health or even to the very existence of lesser-spoken languages and the cultures they express.

One argument put forward by the British Council for improved funding for English language teaching abroad is that it will bring long-term economic benefits to Britain. There seems little doubt that a country will tend to buy British equipment and technology where many of its technocrats, engineers, architects, doctors, and other elements of its intellectual elite, have completed part of their education in the U.K. or in English-medium schools abroad. Such arguments could be adduced by the Instituto Camões in favour of greatly increased investment, by the Portuguese government, in the teaching of Portuguese as a foreign language.

An alternative to this diffusion-of-English paradigm is the ecology-of-language paradigm, a language policy option which builds on linguistic diversity worldwide, promoting multilingualism and foreign language learning while granting linguistic human rights to speakers of all languages. Language teachers who have not wished to feel part of the aforementioned Macdonaldization process have had, as a guiding light, the work of the Council of Europe which encourages improvements in foreign language teaching. Over the years a team of applied linguists have steadily evolved a workable framework for planning, teaching and evaluating relevant foreign language teaching programmes.

Here is Recommendation 18 of the Committee of Ministers (adopted by the Council of Europe in1982):

"Considering that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enlightenment and understanding...the Committee of Ministers .recommends the governments of member states... to ensure, as far as possible, that all sections of their populations have access to effective means of

acquiring a knowledge of the languages of other member states (or of other communities within their own country) as well as the skills... to enable them to satisfy their communicative needs:-

(1) to deal with the business of everyday life in another country,

and to help foreigners staying in their own country to do so

(2) to exchange information and ideas with young people and

adults who speak a different language and to communicate their thoughts and feelings to them

(3) to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of

life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage."

My own students at the Escola Superior de Educação are studying to become teachers of Portuguese and English. Although some of them will specialize in one of the two languages, the fact that many will work in both languages situates their teacher education in the ecology-of- language paradigm. In their careers my students will teach English but will always be concerned about the upkeep of their pupils' mother tongue competence.

I was part of a worldwide movement in language teaching, originating in the 1970's. The British version was called the Communicative Approach. In reaction to the behaviourism inherent in the Audiolingual Method which had prevailed since the 1950's, the Communicative Approach placed more emphasis on the function of language, focusing on what the speaker wished to do with or through language and rather less on the form of expression. "Only connect" could have been the motto. Students were to learn the language by using it to communicate.

Typically, many teacher trainers and their disciples actually "threw the baby out with the bath water" and stopped attending to form or grammar, not even eliciting it inductively from the students as the Audiolingual Method had done. This excess was gradually seen for what it was and a focus on form was reincorporated. In fact, today, grammar books are the bestsellers in the highly lucrative EFL publishing market. The British EFL market now vies with the rock industry as an earner of foreign currency.

Any teacher reading this will recognize the merry-go-round of rival tendencies which go under diverse names in most academic areas. The ebb and flow of objective versus subjective; discrete point versus holistic; rationalist versus empiricist; process versus product; bottom-up versus top-down processing; head versus heart; student-centred versus teacher-centred learning; behaviourist versus cognitivist and so on. These are the trends and fluctuating fortunes of the theories of our trade and when a concept such as autonomous learning comes into vogue then we must pay lip-service to it in meetings, in-service training workshops and articles for publication using the latest jargon to show our mastery of the professional lexicon.

The poet, Robert Frost adumbrates the vicissitudinous nature of the history of ideas in the lines:

> Most of the change we think we see in life
>
> Is due to truths being in and out of fashion.

I have watched theories, "buzzwords" and emphases come and go with wry amusement and concur ever more firmly with the observation in the book of Ecclesiastes: "There is nothing new under the sun."

One illustration of the truth of this quotation from the Old Testament should suffice: Montaigne recommended in his Essays (c. 1590) a version of the direct method (i.e. that a language should be taught through the medium of the selfsame language) and that a language should be learnt by studying other subjects through it. Both these approaches to language teaching are believed by many to have been invented this century.

Communicative language teaching also lent itself to the production, on a large scale, of thousands of EFL teachers. The typical career path for a graduate looking for a way "to see the world" was to take a 4-week Royal Society of Arts Preparatory Certficate in Teaching EFL and go off to a "place in the sun." More than 20,000 aspirant teachers took the International House version of this 4-week course in London since it was founded in 1962 and many more than that again found their way into EFL classrooms throughout the world.

In my two decades as an English teacher I have noticed the contrast between the inevitable amateurishness or inexperience of the hordes of EFL teachers entering the profession each year, and making up for this, the great enthusiasm displayed by most of them. To simplify, it could be said that they teach the language to their students and their students teach them about the host country's

culture. After several years the majority return home to get a "proper" job and the ranks of EFL are filled by the new blood of recent graduates.

It is often obseved that the best way to learn something is to teach it and I think that most TEFL teachers return home with a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the manifold subtleties and richness of their mother tongue.

It was with a sense of foreboding and excitement that I took a bus from London to Athens in the autumn 1978 to take up my first employment as an English teacher in Thessaloniki, Greece. I was to experience strong culture shock for the first time: the street signs were written in the Greek alphabet, the Levantine architecture challenged my eyes while the smell of souvlaki, ouzo, dark tobacco and Greek coffee pervaded the air. The sounds of bouzouki music and the click-clicking of worry beads were never far away.

For many years the waxing and waning of this feeling of strangeness and exoticism would be with me in each new place, strong in the beginning and building up to frightening proportions (perhaps almost to madness) and then gradually diminishing until it would seem that it had gone, only to resuscitate unexpectedly on rounding a corner, smelling a herb or a spice or chancing on the familiar from a strange angle. A few swear words tossed across the street between bantering friends might be enough to renew that feeling of thrownness or exile and make one feel metoikos again (a Greek term for a settler in a strange land).

Having taught in so many countries I have had that first-time feeling many times. My first lesson in Greece, my first lesson in Spain and even more specific losses of virginity such as "my first lesson in Lisbon," "my first lesson in Viseu" not to mention my first lesson in the Greek, Spanish, Swedish, Arabic or Portuguese language. There is a very special thrill inherent in teaching for the first time in a new country or being presented with a language for the first time. One may know the country before as a tourist or traveller and, in the case of language acquisition, one may have already picked up some phrases and bits of grammar but there is always something azygous about each such experience.

Part of the training for trainee EFL teachers is to give them a first lesson in an unknown language using the Direct Method and reflecting on the experience afterwards. The idea is to make sure that fledgling teachers are aware of their students' feeling of strangeness when faced with a new language and always try to empathize with them.I have had first lessons in Japanese, Swedish and Chinese. as part of my

teacher training. Being taught the first steps in a language is like going back to the beginning of our lives or standing at the entrance to the maze.

I had joined the ranks of the pilgrims, explorers, adventurers, rolling stones,wayfarers, wanderers, travellers, ambulant yogis, the exiles, the banished, the friars, mendicants, hedge-school masters, visiting scholars, single movers, knights errant, hospitallers, crusaders, tinkers, gypsies, explorers, discoverers, rovers, pirates, highwaymen, troubadours, tunantes, hobos, vagabonds, ramblers, nomads, Bedouin, Kalahari bushmen, ambulant pedlars, buskers, hitch-hikers, Dharma bums, beatniks, seasonal workers, journeymen, roadrunners, travelling salesmen, globetrotters, cosmopolitans.

I could (in a small way) number myself among such as the Wandering Jew, Ulysses searching for home, St. Brendan (the Irish monk who allegedly discovered America in the 8th century), St. Columba, Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Yuri Gagarin and Neil Armstrong.

Some people I have come across are addicted to danger. They need it to feel alive - indeed a Danish friend of mine, after many years as a financial controller in multi-national companies- gave everything up to to practise the sport of paragliding. He told me that once experienced, the feeling of fear, danger and excitement which paragliding gives must be felt again and again. Interestingly in Portugal the mass-media presents radical sports to youth as healthy alternatives to the sordidness and menace of drugs.

Similarly, perhaps, some people get addicted to novelty. Some years ago, in Viseu Film Society, I went to see the film "El Sol del Membrillo" directed by an outstanding auteur, Victor Erice, in Viseu Cinema Society. The speed with which the cinema emptied (I ended up watching with 4 people including the projectionist) showed how much we have come to need ever-changing novelty. In the age of the soundbite we have a shorter attention span as betokened by the video clip, the television spot and the soundbite. The film showed the laborious process of an artist painting a quince tree.

Could it be said that all the rolling stones are, in some way, addicted to novelty? Am I a cultural zapper? Does the restlessness of the gypsy and drifter come from a need to always encounter the new, from a fear of fossilization or falling into a world of familiarity and security? It is not probably not a coincidence that one of the biggest icons of our time is a rock band called "The Rolling Stones" and that another, Bob Dylan, has evolved a lifestyle which is a never-ending concert tour.

A critic could condemn the bad faith, the "mauvais fois" of the English-Only imperialist agents, intent only on Macdonaldizing culture, the disingenuousness of discoverers like Christopher Columbus, Vasco

da Gama and their followers who saw themselves as carriers of the good news of Christ and the contemporary missionaries in the Third World who work in health and education while proselytizing on behalf of a religious faith. Nevertheless, all these people, although working with some hidden agenda or ulterior motive, still contribute to the greater good.

I am here reminded of homo economicus in the classical economic theory of Adam Smith and David Ricardo and how each person working from greed and egoism can still produce economic growth thanks to regulation by the invisible hand of the market. Thomas Hobbes in his treatise on political science, "Leviathan", suggests that most people act through fear of what their fellow men can do to them and enter into a pact of association which is the genesis of human society. People acting from unworthy motives therefore can produce a higher good such as progress or a cohesive society.

Against this global backdrop I wended my way first to Salonika or Thessaloniki, the capital of Macedonia and second city of Greece. Some wags said it was the fourth Greek city because, in terms of Greek population, Chicago was second and Melbourne third. I had already fallen in love with Greece as a student while visiting Corfu, Paxos and Athens. I went now with the intention of "going native". I wanted to integrate myself in Greek society, learn the language and settle there. I grappled first with the alphabet and then the language.

Greece of the blue blue skies, rebetica music, good looking people with lustrous hair and candid brown eyes, history on every corner, the cradle of democracy and the birthplace of universities with the delicious if lukewarm food. For a while I loved it but soon I was to find the local society byzantine. Was this my first deep experience of culture shock?

It was hard to make friends, to penetrate this intricate labyrinth. The Greeks had invented the word xenophobia and now it seemed to me, the neophyte explorer, that they were practising it.

It was with some trepidation that I entered my first EFL classroom in Salonika on an autumn evening. The school owner took me to the classroom of his most experienced teacher, a Bob Jones from Liverpool. Through Bob Jones I had an entrée into Salonika émigré society. Upon discovering that I could not easily assimilate to Greek society, I decided that I could do worse than spend my time with Brits, Aussies, Swedes, Dutch and other nationalities-often these gatherings were sessions of self-pity and complaining about the dastardly Greek bureaucracy or the orientalism of the Greek. It was mostly various shades of culture shock being aired.

This is one of the occupational hazards of EFL teaching: getting trapped in an expatriate circuit. Others are: alcoholism (expatriates tend to drink hankeringly and excessively); losing full command of one's mother tongue (e.g. ending up speaking a mishmash of dated English with tics aquired from other languages); becoming a travel bore; or ending up deracinated.

Thence to sunny Spain. My first job there was with Señor Adamo, a handsome Turkish gentleman with 2 glamorous secretaries and a short, down-at-heel, besuited lackey with the shifty appearance of a bookie's runner who always appeared clutching a floppy plastic portfolio to his chest. I worked for several months for Mr. Adamo's outfit, the Gold Lion Center, giving private lessons to executives, doctors and rich housewives in the suburbs of Madrid.

Suddenly the Center itself disappeared; the offices lay empty. Meanwhile I discovered that the little bookie's runner had gone around picking up cheques one month in advance from all my students. Señor Adamo and his secretaries had vanished. I discovered that he had run a small empire with teachers of Russian, Chinese, Arabic as well as more common European languages. I began to meet other teachers who were owed much more salary and who had dependents to feed and were therefore in a worse financial plight than myself.

I had lost much less than many others and this was a salubrious lesson- I had come to learn that there were many cowboy schools and it was important to work only for reputable schools. In post-Franco Spain there was a scarcity of English teachers, trained or otherwise, and so there was a proliferation of questionable schools and private tutors offering their services to would-be students of English. In my time I met butchers, bakers and bricklayers from the Britsh Isles who tried their hand at EFL teaching, often with little or no understanding of English phonology, grammar, lexis or discourse. Their only qualification was hailing from an English-speaking country. Some Spanish students must have had less than satisfactory learning experiences because when I began to work at the British Council I saw prospective students sleeping in the street in sleeping bags from Friday or Saturday in order to be well-positioned in the queue for new class registrations on the Monday morning.

Obviously things are clearcut in this situation: the British Council like the Alliance Française, Goethe Institut, Instituto Camões, Instituto Cervantes and the American Language Institute are all state-sponsored centres of excellence in language teaching. But to believe that a native speaker of a language is necessarily a better teacher of that language seems at best questionable to me. Non-native teachers have learnt the target language usually at great personal cost in terms of time and effort whereas the native speaker acquired their mother tongue almost as effortlessly and painlessly as suckling at their

mothers' breast. Non-native teachers are, therefore, aware of the problems and pitfalls facing learners and can point out strategies for, and shortcuts to, mastery of the target language. If we wish to learn the piano or guitar or how to do algebra then we turn to a teacher who has **learned** to play the piano or the guitar or do maths to a high degree of proficency.

Another discovery I made in Spain was that being a 1-to-1 teacher, if it continues over a period, was rather like being a father confessor or a psychoanalyst. Students often took advantage of the intimacy of the situation to talk about personal (e.g. marital or familial) problems. Indeed some students needed a psychoanalyst in more ways than one: I began to meet students who had an instrumental motivation to learn English- indeed their promotion prospects sometimes depended on it- but unknown to themselves, they had a mental block and a deep-seated resentment against this alien tongue. Such students at times even displayed acute anglophobia and no amount of conventional teaching could have helped them to learn English.

In Madrid, I studied for, and passed, the Royal Society of Arts Diploma in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language, a one-year course with a strong theoretical and practical input (with observations of by internal and external examiners). This is a course taken only by those who intend to teach for a number of years or go into school administration. I gradually learned that we cannot teach a language: we can only help people to learn or at least not get in the way of learning. I have learned a lot about human psychology and the variety of learning styles and cognitive maps used by language students. I have often marvelled at the sheer determination and diligence of learners who sometimes seem to learn in spite of the teacher.

When I moved to Lisbon, one of the pleasantest tasks I was to encounter in my earlier career was to carry out a needs analysis at the Cervejaria Trindade. I had to sit in this cavernous beerkeller and observe the waiters at work each night for a week. The idea was that I should see what kinds of interactions the waiters had with foreigners and, on the basis of this field work, design a course of high surrender-value English to help them in their work. This needs analysis happened to involve drinking pints of beer accompanied by delicious seafood snacks. This was to be one of the most rewarding courses I ever taught, not only because of the initial well-lubricated needs analysis but also because of the enthusiasm of the waiters (many of whom had left school at the age of 11 or 12) and their well-trained memories, sharpened by years of storing countless diners' orders. I was sad knowing that the 50 hours they studied with me might be the last language tuition they would have.

A pleasant aspect of being an EFL or ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teacher is getting an inside view of many disciplines. Working with cardiologists, dentists, psychiatrists, biochemists developing peptides, politicians, film directors, footballers, instructions writers for mobile phones, sales managers and the myriad other specialisms that ESP teachers come into contact with, could mean either a lot of trivia cluttering the teacher's brain or a capacity to make creative interdisciplinary links.

Another thing that I discovered upon moving to Spain and later Portugal was one of the first laws concerning multilingualism: most people retain one or two languages active and the others become dormant. In my case it seemed more like Spanish in, Greek out, or Portuguese in, Spanish out - like recording over an audio-recording, as if the brain has only a certain size worktop. I have known polyglots who jump from language to language and are able to compartmentalize their mind to deal with a number of languages simultaneously. This ability was exemplified par excellence by Cardinal Guiseppe Mezofanti (1774-1849), the Vatican librarian, who allegedly spoke 50 languages fluently, understood a further 20 and could translate 114. Such gifts are probably rarer than we think and it is highly unusual to maintain proficiency in more than one or two languages at a time.

Seven years later, after living in Greece, Spain and Portugal, I was brought to my first English language classroom in a military academy in Muscat, in the Sultanate of Oman, to be introduced to the star teacher and who should it be but Bob Jones from Liverpool. Over the years the number of such coincidences have multiplied and I have reached the conclusion that the world of EFL is a small and fairly incestuous one.

So what happens to old EFL teachers: do they just fade away or do they retire genteely to nursing homes in seaside resorts? Advertisements for EFL jobs often specify an upper age limit of 35 or even less so that anyone, wishing to remain in the profession until retirement needs to look for a securer position as a school owner or director or as an academic, teacher trainer or materials writer. There would be some jobs that EFL teachers could turn their hands to on returning home e.g. public relations, journalism, telesales, translation or they could even try to emulate the patron saints of the profession, James Joyce and Anthony Burgess, who managed to write literary masterpieces after coming from the ranks of EFL.

As I mentioned earlier, I might have chosen a country because of a song, the light in a girl's eyes or the memory of a sunset on a beach. Such frivolous or arbitrary motivation need not necessarily hinder a teacher, displaying such dilletantism, from making a contribution to the educational system he or she chooses to work in.

After two decades, I am at a waystage on my journey. Were someone to ask me whether, if I had my life to live again, I would journey abroad, I would be tempted to sing a few lines of the song "My Way" immortalized by the recently deceased singing star, Frank Sinatra. Indeed "Je ne regrette rien" by Edith Piaf would do at a pinch.

I would say that teaching in many countries is tantamount to attending an intensive course at the University of Life. I feel a certain philosophical calm, an acceptance of diversity and ambiguity and an ataractic tolerance of all that is human which I owe in large part to my peripatetic life. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that some EFL teachers could tour the world and be as impervious to the cultural riches presented to them as Don Quixote was to the realities he encountered on his travels. Some expatriates put me in mind of snails carrying their houses on their backs. They go home, their Weltanschauung unchanged.

So far, my way in life, as in this essay, has been a serendipitous one (if I might be allowed to re-use that rich vocable) but my experiences resonate with Cicero's findings in his treatise, On Old Age, written 40 BC, where he comments:

" Far from complaining about life, which cultivated men have often done, I do not regret having lived because I lived in such a way that I was not born in vain. Thus I can leave my life as if I was leaving an inn and not leaving my home. Nature, in this life, grants to each one of us a shelter where we can pass the night but not where we can stay."

I hope, after my series of shelters in various lands, I reach home again and will be able to say with Tully "I was not born in vain." Strangely, I think my homeplace will be full of marvellous things and provide me with a plethora of first-time experiences. In the words of T.S.Eliot, with which I set out in this essay, I will get back and "know the place for the first time."