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ESL

After many years of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at J. Sargeant Reynolds and Virginia Commonwealth University, I am now helping Mary Beth Landrum in her ESL class at Falling Creek Middle School. Some of the techniques used in teaching are different for the different age groups. The main difference, beyond the obvious one of age, is in the amount of education the students have. Many of the adults were refugees from countries where they had had an excellent education in their native language and often had been successful in their work. On the other hand, the children, whether Asian, European, South American, or Middle Eastern, generally have a background of little or no education and an unsettled social background. Both adults and youth, however, are in strange cultural situations and are faced with a language with which they have little or no experience. The youth adopt the teenage culture around them very quickly, I'm sure to the distress of their families. I think I can safely say that there are very few things about teaching in this situation that aren't intriguing.



I like words and enjoy sharing sounds in English that do not exist in the students' languages: for example, the lack of final s and z sounds in Vietnamese, the voiced "p" sound in Arabic, and the "th" sounds in Spanish. I also enjoy sharing the culture I've grown up with at the same time that I learn the cultural differences among the many countries of the students. As in most teaching, the teacher of ESL learns at least as much as and sometimes more than her students do.

Over the years I have collected many interesting stories of individual students and of groups of students. For instance, once I had a class of men from Jordan who were here to learn how to drill water wells, a specialty at J. Sargeant Reynolds. The classes used interpreters, making it unnecessary for the students to learn English unless they especially wanted to. This one class opted to study English during their three months here. They were unique in that they were the most homogeneous class I ever had, and they were easily the most consistently fun-loving group I have ever known. They were delighted with the drill I used to help them *hear* the difference between the voiced b, which they had, and the unvoiced p, which they did not. (Ask an Arab if he would like a *pig* sandwich. If he accepts, you can be sure he heard "big" instead of "pig.") I gave each student a packet of matches. He would hold a lighted match near his mouth and say "b." Correctly, nothing happened. Then each would hold a lighted match and try to say the English "p," which is unvoiced and described as "plosive," releasing a puff of air which extinguishes the match if the p is properly said. It's a fact that, if you do not have a sound in your language, you cannot *hear* it when it is used by others. (How much success did you have making the German ch the first few times you said it?) After much hilarious practice, involving occasional scorched fingers, my Jordanians started hearing the difference between p and b, and most of the time they could extinguish the flame. After a couple of weeks of rapid progress in English, attendance suddenly dropped off to about half. Each class meeting revealed a different half of the class. I finally discovered that they had wanted to learn English so that they could better handle conversations with the young women students at Reynolds. Since the class met at night, they divided themselves in half, with half to socialize with the girls and half to continue learning English; the halves alternated. They were sure they had achieved the better of the social and educational aspects of their stay in Richmond.

Their enjoyment of life's small pleasures continued well beyond my class into their return to their homeland. Soon after they finished their well-drilling class here, I began getting letters from Jordan, each containing a picture of a young Jordanian and each explaining that his friend had told him about me. Each wanted me to send him my picture, and each begged my help in getting him a job in this country so that he could live here and meet me. It was clear to me that my fun-loving students (or was it just one student?) had told them about the *young* woman who had taught their class here. And I'm sure that the culprits eagerly awaited the consternation of the recipient of a picture of a white-haired older woman.

While our relations with Iran were still cordial, during the reign of the Shah, I had a number of Irani students. One young man was particularly handsome, a tall Adonis who had every young woman who saw him interested in talking to him. He and a beautiful, very petite Chinese girl in the same class became good friends and were always to be seen with each other outside class. One day I came to class a few minutes early and found Hassan and Isabel (the American name she insisted was prettier than her Chinese name) quarreling loudly and bitterly. In reply to my question about their problem, Hassan sputtered that "Isabel called me a foreigner!" obviously an unforgivable insult. Isabel's explanation was wonderful. She envied anyone who had an alphabet, being sure that even the Farsi alphabet, as strange as it looks to Americans, was an advantage to a Chinese

student who had only ideograms in her background. All people with an alphabet were foreigners to her. The pair sat apart for that class but had healed their differences by the next class.

A young Russian woman in a class of Middle Easterners was the source of two interesting occasions. Very young and attractive, she was the focus of a good deal of interest from the Arabs who constituted the rest of the class. Being in the class with a woman was a new experience for them. They talked to her every chance they got until one day she was explaining why she had come to Richmond. It was during the time of Jewish migration from the Soviet Union; her husband was a violinist with the Richmond Sinfonia. Suddenly, one of the Arabs, not knowing the English word for Jew asked her if she was "Yuden." "Yes," she answered. There was a brief silence while the young men looked at each other. Then, without any further comment, they resumed their cordial conversation with her. I've often wondered how much they learned from that friendship and whether they returned to the Middle East with a new outlook about Jewish-Muslim relations.

One further comment about the Russian woman. She had a young baby about whom she frequently talked. The Arabs were interested in tales about the child and also about her tales of the discrimination she and her husband experienced before they came here. She clearly was glad to have escaped from the Soviet Union. One day she arrived late, saying that she had had to take her baby to the doctor. Her baby was all right, but she was indignant that she had had to *pay* for the medicine the doctor prescribed and for the visit to the doctor. I guess she had *some* happy memories of Russia.



The stories I have of my students over the years are endless, but I'll stop with two more. One is about the games the middle school youngsters have taught me. Their outdoor games are vigorous and involve easily manufactured props. One involves a keep-away object manufactured from a piece of cloth knotted into a kind of ball. Two sides divide and try to capture it, first from a neutral zone and then from each other. It causes much merriment and vigorous tagging of the person who captured the ball. The other is a sort of "limbo" exercise. A long rope is made of sturdy rubber bands. Two people hold the ends and manipulate it either high or low, with the players running under or jumping over it. I'm not too sure about the intricacies of the rules, but the ingenuity of the runners is entertaining, displaying dexterity and considerable grace.

The culture of the Vietnamese I have found fascinating. Several times I have had the opportunity of enjoying some of their native cuisine. It is delicious, somewhat resembling some Chinese dishes but maintaining a distinction of its own. The people are charming. I've had a number of Vietnamese married couples in classes. Invariably, if her husband is present, the woman has little to say, even when called on. One older couple in particular was interesting. He had been a colonel in the Vietnamese army, but his lack of English made him virtually unemployable here. Like many older people he found a new language extremely difficult. It's true that some people have a natural language facility – and some don't. One night when Nguyen was working as a security guard at the Virginia Museum, his quiet little wife attended class without him. She was a revelation. Quietly, she had been absorbing all the English lessons, apparently effortlessly. She was a natural linguist but would not do anything to cause her husband embarrassment about his lack of language ability. She was the star of that class. But the next week, when he returned, she lapsed into her former wordlessness. I had to respect her deference toward her husband, but I always regretted that she had to sacrifice her own ability in his favor.

I've had a great variety of students from a great variety of countries. Most have been charming, even the difficult ones like one or two of the American-teenage-accultured boys we have in the Middle School are interesting. About the time I think I can make a general statement about any one culture or any one country, I find that there is much more to learn and discover. I feel enormously lucky.