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SURVIVING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT—Noncredit English as a Second Language (ESL) classes often serve as a starting place for new immigrants aged eighteen or older who want to learn “survival English.” The students attending these classes are widely diverse in terms of motivations, educational and cultural backgrounds, English-language fluency, life experiences, and learning styles. Classes are designed to equip these adult learners with basic English-language abilities in the context of the situations they are likely to encounter daily at work and in the community. This personal essay explores the challenges faced and the strengths revealed by students in these classes as witnessed by an instructor of these courses. Observations suggest that the strong work ethic, spirit of cooperation, and goodwill toward others that are displayed by these most recent immigrants to the Great Plains not only promise their success, but link them to earlier immigrants to the region.

Key Words: adult learners, English as a Second Language (ESL), Great Plains, recent immigrants, “survival English”

Colonies of European people, Slavonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin, spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter’s palette. They brought with them something that this neutral new world needed ever more than the immigrants needed land. (Cather 1923:5)

Unlike the immigrants of a century ago that Cather describes above, the newest immigrants to the Great Plains often come from Latin America, Africa, and Asia rather than Europe. For example, the high levels of immigration from Asian countries in recent decades continued during the 1990s, resulting in an increase from 6.9 million to 10.5 million people who identified themselves as Asian in the 2000 census (Kent et al. 2001). The 1990s also saw a “phenomenal growth” in the Hispanic population, as “the number of people who identified themselves as Hispanic increased from 22 million

to 35 million between 1990 and 2000” (Kent et al. 2001:9). Also significant is the fact that the past decade has been marked by the dispersion of both the Asian and the Hispanic populations from areas of the Southwest and West and from metropolitan areas like Chicago, New York, and Miami to “smaller cities and even rural areas in the Midwest, South, and Northeast” (Kent et al. 2001:11).

As an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor for a local community college, I have witnessed firsthand the influx of the newest immigrants to the Great Plains. When I began teaching noncredit ESL classes to adult learners in the spring of 2001, a typical class size was 3-7 students at my Fremont, NE, site and 12-16 at my downtown Omaha site. Today, the average is 15-20 students at the first site and nearly twice that number at the second. My experience reflects that of the college as a whole: in the past three years it has more than tripled the number of noncredit ESL classes it provides, today offering 31 classes at nine different sites in Omaha and the surrounding area.

The students filling these classrooms come from countries such as Mexico, China, Guatemala, Sudan, Vietnam, and El Salvador, and they’ve lived in the United States from two days to 10 years or more. During the past year my downtown Omaha site served over 150 students from 19 different countries, while at my Fremont site I worked with more than 100 students representing nine different countries. Ranging in age from 18 to 78, some of them have never attended school, while others have university degrees from their native countries. No matter what their first language, educational background, life experiences, or cultural heritage, they all have one objective in common: to increase their fluency in the English language.

While their desire to communicate in English is the same, their reasons for wanting or needing greater fluency are often very different. Some of the students need to get a job and must have enough English to do so, while others want the opportunity to advance in the jobs they already have. Some want to be able to help their children with homework, while others want to be able to converse with their neighbors, make friends, and interact more comfortably within the community. Some of the students never learned to read or write in their native language—research suggests that “[o]f the nearly 20 million immigrants entering the United States each year, as many as 1.7 million adults have less than a fifth-grade education”—but want to do so now (Steck-Vaughn 2003:1). Still others want English instruction so that they can eventually earn a high school equivalency degree (GED) or achieve citizenship.

As an instructor, addressing these needs is challenging for a number of reasons. Though I have eighteen years of teaching experience at the college level, I had no previous experience in teaching ESL. Like many of the other instructors of these classes, my experience in the ESL classroom has all been acquired on the job. In addition, since I am the only instructor at my Fremont site, all the students, no matter what their skills in English, are in the same class. This means that I must try to reach some “middle ground” in the lessons I present, trying not to overwhelm the beginners while not boring the more advanced students. And even though I am no longer the sole instructor at my Omaha site—there are now three of us to offer a beginning-, intermediate-, and advanced-level class—there is an astonishing difference in English-language abilities within each of the three classes. Finally, due to the open enrollment policy of my classrooms, on any given day there might be two to six new students, as well as several “returning” ones, students whose work schedules or family circumstances may have prevented them from attending class for a few months or more.

The noncredit classes that I provide, as advertised in the college’s brochures and on the website, are “intended for pre-literacy, low-level, non-English-speaking students who need to begin with the very basics of English language development.” More specifically, my pedagogical task is to provide the students with “survival English,” with the skills that will allow them to fill out job applications and talk with their supervisors, to make doctor appointments and describe their symptoms, to converse with their children’s teachers and ascertain their progress, to successfully do business at the bank, the post office, and the grocery store. I attempt to equip the students with these skills through repeated practice in reading, writing, listening, and speaking and by presenting them with “real-life” scenarios. I try to make the lessons both hands-on and pertinent, and I encourage my students’ questions and concerns about the expressions and circumstances they encounter on a daily basis. Recognizing that my classes may be the first—if not the only—exposure they have to the English language and American culture, I work hard to make those classes welcoming and respectful, to present lessons that are challenging yet not intimidating, to meet my students where they’re at and facilitate their progress. I want my students’ experience in my classroom to be as positive, helpful, and empowering as possible, and time has taught me that I must be patient, flexible, and open-minded in order to meet this challenge.

Of course, the challenges my students face are no less daunting. Many of them must juggle job and/or family responsibilities just to be able to

attend class, while others must overcome objections to their further education by spouses or other family members. Many come to my three-hour-long classes after working an 8- to 10-hour shift, and so must not only battle fatigue but must somehow find time to continue to study at home. This, too, presents difficulties since most speak very little, if any, English at home; my classroom provides one of the few places where they can practice speaking English.

According to the stories they share with me, though, the greatest challenge my students face is fear. I've had a number of them tell me that they were hesitant to come to class initially for fear they'd be laughed at or considered ignorant. Even though they might understand much of the English they hear, they are fearful of speaking, and even though most admit to me that they've seldom, if ever, been mocked for their attempts, the fear of speaking remains.

Just as significant as the challenges they face in attending and participating in class are those they encounter outside the classroom. As noted earlier, some meet resistance to their continuing education in the form of their own family members. One of my advanced students, Josephina, told me how she had started taking ESL classes when she first came to the United States seven years ago, but soon quit because her husband told her there was no reason to learn since she had him to communicate for her. Her experience is not unique; many of the students I work with depend on their spouses or children to provide the translations that day-to-day interactions require. Recently, she said that the oldest of her three sons, a middle-school student, begged her not to attend his school's end-of-the-year awards ceremony: "He say I don't speak English good enough." Josephina tried to make light of her son's request, admitted that he was right, but then added something that surprised me: "That's why I come to this class; I don't know if I can do it, but you say I can—you have the belief in me!"

Another challenge, albeit one they are often hesitant to discuss, is confronting prejudice within their communities. This reality was brought home to me during a unit on "the home" that we worked on recently in my beginning-level class. We started the unit by practicing how to identify the rooms in a house and the furniture one might find in them, then widened the scope to talk about neighborhoods and what might constitute a good one. I told my students that for some a good neighborhood might mean being near a school or a park, while for others it might mean being near a bus line or having plenty of children for their own children to play with. I asked individual students if they liked their neighborhoods and most smiled,

nodded a yes, and eagerly explained why: There were others in those neighborhoods who also spoke Spanish; there was a Vietnamese food store nearby; there was a good elementary school just down the block; and the list went on. When I asked Martha about her neighborhood, though, the others giggled in response to her adamant no.

Martha, a widowed mother of five daughters from Sudan, was clearly upset by the story she shared: “This man, he puts his ashes on my dog. And last week, by my door, he write ‘fuck Africa’ on the wall, big letters.” No one had ever used that word in my class before, and though I was taken aback by it, I was more shocked by the tenant’s behavior. I responded by assuring Martha that I’d love to have her as a neighbor, but left class feeling powerless to prepare her for this and other incidents of prejudice she’s sure to encounter.

Given these circumstances, my attempts to teach—and my students’ attempts to learn—might seem like exercises in futility. To be sure, some days my efforts seem all for naught, the failures obvious and haunting: the students—and there are many—who attend class once or twice but never again; the lesson that, quite clearly, was incomprehensible to the students; the learning disability that a student demonstrated but that I was unqualified to address. However, on most days I leave the class feeling excited and invigorated due to several other qualities these students bring to the classroom: a strong work ethic, a sincere willingness to help each other, and a wonderful sense of humor.

As noted above, many of my students come to class after completing long shifts at work, yet they often want to linger, to keep working on their lessons even after our class is finished. A number of them consistently ask for exercises or worksheets to work on at home, and many fill notebook after notebook with new vocabulary words and usage rules that they continue to study on their own. Several also drive a significant distance just to attend class: at my Fremont site there are students who commute from Blair, Wahoo, and Nickerson, all of which require a round trip of one hour or more.

Not only do my students display a strong work ethic, but they also exhibit a genuine desire to work together in their joint enterprise of learning English. Examples abound: they follow my introductions and quick handshakes with first-time students with greetings of their own, along with instructions about how to sign in and where to sit, all in their native languages. They readily share recommendations for food stores and restaurants, exchange information about job opportunities, and, during break, help each other complete worksheets and fill out Avon orders. The help they

offer each other is cross-generational and cross-cultural, as demonstrated by Lucha, from Colombia, who will not pair up with anyone other than Methak, from Iraq, for small-group work; by 18-year-old Alberto, who will not give up until he is sure that his 56-year-old kinsman from Mexico, Raphael, has mastered the English alphabet; by Jacques, one of Sudan's "Lost Boys," who regularly quizzes his Spanish-speaking classmates during break in an attempt to understand their language.

This ready acceptance of each other and willingness to work together was revealed one day as I finished a lesson with my advanced-level students. We'd shared stories about what we like to do in our spare time and how we like to spend the weekend. Chinh, a Vietnamese student with five grown children, said that he liked to watch Chinese videos on the weekend. "But Chinh, I didn't know you spoke Chinese!" I ventured. He and Tuan, his friend from China, chuckled as Chinh explained: "Chinese videos with Vietnamese subtitles!"

Finally, these students consistently display the kind of good humor that promotes an engaging and productive classroom environment. They laugh together at their attempts to pronounce the words they find most difficult and exchange stories about times their attempts to communicate failed. One day recently, for example, Manuel described, in halting Spanish, his surprise at the priest who heard his confession the Saturday before. Manuel told the class how he had tried to explain that he didn't speak English very well, yet the priest encouraged him to proceed despite the language barrier and Manuel's misgivings: "I might tell him that I kill somebody, that I sniff the drugs, but he—no understand. He bless me anyway!" This "confession" of Manuel's led to a conversation about the kinds of barriers they might encounter and the strategies they might use in overcoming them.

Of course, these failed attempts sometimes have potentially serious consequences. One morning, shortly after I began working with my beginning students, the custodian arrived at the door with a message for Que, a Vietnamese student who consistently struggled with what were, to me, basic concepts. Que's wife's boss had called to ask that he come pick her up from work because she was sick. I tried to explain this to Que, and when it became clear that he didn't understand, the custodian tried as well, his volume increasing along with Que's confusion. I scanned the faces in the classroom, expecting to see one of the other Vietnamese students who regularly attended, but there were none. Just as I was wondering what to do next, another Vietnamese student, an advanced one, arrived. I quickly explained

the situation to Thuphong, who in turn explained it to Que, who promptly left to go after his wife. As I left class that morning I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if Thuphong hadn't come to the rescue—and what I could do to help Que so the same thing wouldn't happen in the future.

A few weeks later, I was doing some one-on-one work with Que when a handful of other students arrived and congregated in the hallway outside. They knew each other and chatted animatedly as they waited for their class to begin. Que punched some letters into his electronic dictionary, smiled at me, and announced, "They are noisy!" I almost laughed out loud, congratulated Que on his sentence, and knew that he was making progress.

In her essay about the European immigrants she came to know during her formative years in Red Cloud, Cather makes clear her deep respect and admiration for their hard work and rich traditions. Similarly, I find much to applaud in the newest immigrants to the region; they seem in many ways to reflect those qualities that Cather so admired. She also writes that "I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again, something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination" (1923:6). Like those who came before them, the most recent immigrants to the Great Plains display the "sturdy traits of character" that will certainly lead to their success.

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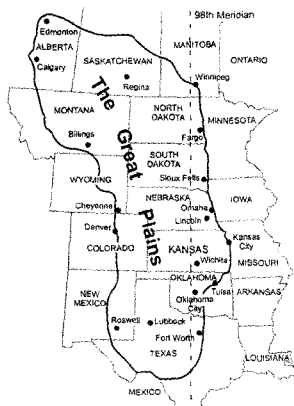


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