



I NO SPEAK ENGLISH...

Kathlyn Q. Barrozo
Class of 1991, University of Santo Tomas
B.S. Medical Technology

I have often marveled at how language has served both as a bridge and a barrier to the building of relationships. We find language to be a barrier when we are unable to communicate more effectively in a foreign language. This has been so since biblical times when the Tower of Babel itself became the setting for language to evolve into a definitive barrier that separates people from one another. Pride was the culprit that caused the confusion amidst what was supposed to be a united civilization of humans. If mankind had not dreamed of being greater than its Maker, we would not have suffered such a cruel fate. Now, we speak languages which confound us in their complexity as well as their diversity.

We consider language to be a link that connects us because we have been able to establish a number of languages that are universally used by people all over the planet. For instance, global communications and international business have always had English as the primary language in use. Meanwhile, the Chinese language, with its collection of phonetic symbols and pictures, has also become a universal language of sorts since it is spoken by what is probably the most widely-scattered population in the world.

Because of the dual roles of language, we often find ourselves alternating between one language to another to articulate our thoughts and to get our ideas across. For instance, ESL teachers always have to learn to think in English in order to make their students see their proficiency on the job. Otherwise, they lose whatever teaching credibility they might have if they are unable to express themselves in the language that they educate students on. ESL teachers still retain the nationality they were born into but have to learn to adapt to the nuances of the language that they have to use to interact with their ESL learners.

There have been instances where ESL teachers have had to take on a foreign accent just to prove themselves capable of teaching English. In addition, some online ESL schools have even resorted to asking their teachers to “pretend” that they are Americans in order to be credible teachers of English. Being able to pretend is easy enough. Keeping up with the pretense is another. What happens when the student asks about a national history that’s different from one’s own, then? Most likely, every ESL teacher in that case should do their homework and perform research and information gathering even before they dare to teach. Indeed, language can be both a barrier and a bridge. However, those of us who are engaged in teaching a language are well advised to learn that specific language by heart and achieve a fluency that’ll build bridges instead of erect barriers to communication.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Why do you study English? Is there any other foreign language you wish to learn?
2. Is it easy to learn a foreign language? If not, what are the usual problems in learning another language?
3. How has language diversified in your own community presently? Be as specific as needed.
4. How many languages do you speak at home and in school? Be able to tell the story about how you studied your first foreign language.
5. How were you able to learn to speak your mother tongue? Do you think the same method can be used in learning a second language such as English? Why or why not?