

When in Rome

Adapation and assimilation - Whose burden?

This is not a story about Pope Paul II

In a recent article appearing in the Chronicle of Higher Education¹ John Gravois described new legislation (HB1364) signed into law² by the North Dakota state government. This legislation requires that the state's Board of Education create and implement a policy that will resolve English language communication problems in public classrooms. Although unstated, the bill was apparently created to insure that local students at state-run universities are not handicapped academically by the inability of their foreign teachers, especially international teaching assistants (ITAs), to communicate effectively via the English language.

As Mr. Gravois aptly points out in his article this problem can be rightfully understood from a variety of perspectives. Unfortunately, Mr. Gravois rides rough-shod over the core problem by focusing on a Chinese graduate teaching assistant apparently confused about her role as both victim and cause of her own dilemma: a victim, because she and others like her are constantly discriminated against due to their foreignness; and a cause, because it is she who chose to advance her professional career overseas in a country whose primary native tongue and culture are very different from her own. In effect, one can only wonder why Mr. Gravois chose Ms. LIU Min as the central focus of his article. She is hardly an innocent by-stander and certainly not the primary source of the problem.

Mr. Gravois' quote from State Representative Bette Grande, "When we put research as our number one focus, we forgot the student. We got ourselves all turned around", comes closer to the root cause. If we look just a little further however, we stumble on a much larger problem that extends far beyond local university communities -- the importation of foreign workers to do work that domestic work forces are unwilling or reluctant to perform. In short, domestic employers often do not bear the burden of overcoming the cross-cultural barriers that naturally arise from the employment of foreign labour. Rather, they are given a free-ride by pro-business politicians, globe-trotting academicians, and national government officials, who travel overseas and sojourn in sterilized international accommodations buffered from the social problems they create both at home and abroad. Local government and residents are left to clean up the mess.

That all societies become and remain tolerant with regard to the presence of

¹ John Gravois. Teach impediment - When the student cannot understand the instructor, who is to blame? The Chronicle of Higher Education (8 April 2005), vol. 51, issue 31, p. A10 [online document] <<http://chronicle.com/free/v51/i31/31a01001.htm>> ..//Faculty (Hong Kong, 7 April 2005).

² 59th Legislative Assembly of North Dakota. House Bill 1364. Enrollment. [online document] <<http://www.state.nd.us/lr/assembly/59-2005/bill-text/FBGB0300.pdf>> by (Hong Kong, 7 April 2005).

foreign residents is certainly desirable; nevertheless, the introduction of foreigners into local communities can be highly disruptive. Only when employers are made to cover the cost of the education programs, cross-cultural events, and community facilities necessary to deal with these problems, will they hesitate to introduce foreign workers into the economy and thus relieve the overall situation.

Large universities are indeed big businesses with important ties extending far beyond the local communities which they serve. As such, they are also in the best position to provide the institutional interface necessary to overcome the social havoc they create. Young people are easily allured by adventure and overseas opportunity, because it provides them with social recognition in their home community before their departure. What they might expect upon their return can be either very rewarding or severe punishment. Similarly, they have little way of comprehending what truly awaits them before they embark on their sometimes long and arduous journeys. It is for this reason that universities must carefully screen candidates based on their likelihood to adapt and provide adequate training once they have arrived.

Certainly there are two-sides to every communication, but the communicative relationship between university administrators and ITAs is very different from that between ITAs and their students. The ITA wears two hats: that of a classroom leader to local students, and that of student assistant to those who are ultimately responsible for the ITA's presence. Indeed, one's ability to express oneself in one-on-one interviews with a faculty supervisor, who holds the key to one's future and sees in you an important source of cheap labour, is very different from one's ability to stand before even a small audience and hold its attention for numerous, regularly scheduled, prolonged periods in an often poorly acquired second language.³ In summary, it is easy for university administrators and employers to encourage global awareness and international diversity when they are only marginally affected by the social costs of its introduction.

Certainly communication is a two-way process, and one can easily imagine local students using an ITA's language proficiency, or lack thereof, as an excuse not to fulfill their academic duties. However, it is unlikely that the majority, or even a very large minority of students, would resort to such a ploy. The courses taught by ITA's often contain the basic information required for further scholastic advancement, and shirking the basics is a recipe for failure, not graduation. Language can also be used by students to conceal xenophobic attitudes that are politically incorrect and therefore likely to be ignored by administrators on a major university campus. More likely, however, the problem is far more complex than either of these two simple-minded explanations. This was clearly pointed out by Professor Rubin and others in the Chronicle's recently hosted online

³ HKLNA-Project. 2005. English or Languish. Probing the ramifications of Hong Kong's language policy. Interactive Keynote presentation. Part 1 - Getting to know Hong Kong. Language education policy. [online document] <<http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/earth/current/hklna/ff/shows.html>> (12 April 2005).

colloquy about this issue.⁴

University undergraduates have extraordinary resources to overcome language and cultural barriers, not available to many other members of their society. Nevertheless, as local inhabitants, university undergraduates, are the guardians of the language and culture of their own local communities, and have every right to insist that they be taught and led by those who respect and understand what they, the undergraduates, have sacrificed so much time, energy, and effort to acquire.⁵ Certainly undergraduates should be taught to be good hosts and listen, but that effort should be directed toward helping their guests to become more like them -- not vice versa.

ITAs generally do not enter their host culture as part of a larger culturally homogeneous group; rather, they enter as one foreigner among many whose origins can be as variegated as there are nations, languages, and cultures in the world. These foreign guests represent an important opportunity that undergraduates should not bypass, but on the other hand, not be forced to accommodate, when their guests exhibit reluctance to adapt. Language is only half the problem.

Most ITAs enter the United States with two options: assimilate and remain, or learn English and return. In either case they advance themselves professionally by earning their degree in the US. The first option is by far the most difficult and undertaken by the fewest number. The second option is also very attractive and far easier.⁶ Unfortunately, when they return to their respective countries, many ITAs become the professorial gatekeepers that hold foreigners in their host societies at arms length. This is achieved through the English language. Rather than helping their guests to acquire their host nation's language, and thus better assimilate and understand their host culture, these US-trained gatekeepers speak with their guest in English and teach them about their own culture from an international perspective rarely understood by most local inhabitants. Japanese universities, in particular, place foreign students and visiting faculty in special institutes set aside to handle the foreign presence. At these institutes English-speaking, Japanese faculty and foreign students and guest faculty communicate in English. Though offered the opportunity to learn Japanese, what these guests are more likely to return home with is just enough Japanese to say thank you and good-bye, a Japanese degree earned in the English language, and a highly distorted image of their host culture. A similar arrangement can be found in other parts of East Asia.

Although I have never met Ms Liu, judging from Mr. Gravois' portrayal of her, I am hardly sympathetic.

⁴ John Gravois. 2005. What we have here is a failure to communicate. Chronicle of Higher Education. An online colloquy with Professor Donald L. Rubin as guest (7 April 2005 EST-US) [online document] <<http://chronicle.com/colloquy/2005/04/english/>> (9 April 2005).

⁵ R. A. Stegemann. What's in a name? Moogoonghwa website. [online document] <<http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/>>

⁶ The English that ITAs learn while in the United States is often a mixture of what they bring with them, their host community, and the foreign community with which they associate while present at the university. They rarely arrive well-prepared to lecture in the language of their host culture. Moreover, what they finish with is probably more akin to international English than a *world English* - a variety of English that is one's first language.

Truly, there is far more to cross-cultural communication than simply language, and there is no better way to communicate and understand one's host culture than to learn to wag one's tongue and tail like the locals.

A standard formula for globalization simply does not exist, but if local community is not respected, then we trample the social, biological, and physical environments that make human habitats warm, friendly, inviting, and worth preserving.

Certainly the United States ought to be a society that rewards those who demonstrate a willingness and ability to adapt by providing them with the reinforcement they require to do just that. I have lived in no culture and learned no language that does not have its own version of the adage, "When in Rome, do as the Romans" and the US is, of course, no exception. Globalization is not about making everyone the same; rather, it is about making the same things available to everyone in a manner that respects and nourishes local communities -- the guardians of our social and biological environments.

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Word count: 1692