

WELCOME, Lucky Citizen

by Deirdre Neilen

Xiaolu Yang appears at my office door, prompt as always. He knocks but does not enter until he hears me call out twice, “Come in.” He is taller than the average Chinese man, very thin, and he wears pants and a coat that are both too short and too big on him. The clothing looks like the leftovers from a Goodwill center: stripes and checks in yellow green polyester, fake leather patches on his elbows. Xiaolu’s peculiar walk—one step forward, two steps back—reminds me how precarious his tenure is in the land of the free.

We smile and bow and shake hands and greet one another in an elaborate ceremony that would not be out of place at a diplomatic function at the UN. We both wish to please, each of us anxious to relieve the other’s nervousness, a little desperate in our desire to keep conversation fluid for the next hour.

Somehow, and not with my approval, I have become my university’s ESL teacher. This is ridiculous since I have no training in English as a Second Language, but as our dean is fond of reminding us, “We are proud of our ability to do so much with so little.” That is academic shorthand for *The med school gets all the dollars, and the humanities department, which is buried in the college of health professions can eat dirt.*

I don’t fight my ESL assignment anymore. I like my job, and I like my students, most of whom are undergraduates studying for degrees in health care. They don’t have much interest in modern literature, which is my specialty, so it’s fun to surprise them during a semester with moments when they realize thinking and feeling are also part of living. And they, in turn, remind me teaching works best when it traffics in a language that is wedded to common experience.

As the junior person in my department, I’m required to

be the most flexible member of the faculty, creating courses in academic achievement, professional writing for health workers, and even diversity to meet the state’s ever-burgeoning (and often contradictory) mandates for change, for tradition, for inclusion, for retention, for accountability, for anything to get the legislature off its back. We even have study-skills seminars for the med students; no one, it seems, is totally prepared for academic rigor or stress anymore.

So I wasn’t surprised when the dean of the graduate school asked my dean to find someone to work with their international students—women and men from China, Egypt, Turkey, Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, India—who were having what he called “adjustment problems.” The dean, originally a neuro-anatomist, figured an English professor could do the trick. “Call it ESL,” he said. “Just fix it so they can be understood in the labs.”

Thus, I am teaching “conversational English” to students only slightly more bewildered than I am. Once a week, they come to my office, and we spend an hour talking together. I am a wreck before this “class.” I cannot assign a topic, because I am never sure who will be there; their professors may not release them if they’re needed in the labs. Each week a different combination of us sits in a circle, and I ask questions and encourage them to ask me what they are afraid to ask anyone else.

I see them sometimes as lab rats of the highest caliber—brought here to work for American professors at very low wages; in return for their labor, they are given a shot at achieving a Ph.D., a degree highly prized in their home countries.

Their command of English is often rudimentary, yet they must immediately negotiate rent and insurance and banking and bus routes in an unfamiliar city and an often alien culture. But their sponsoring professors take little interest in their “adjustment.” They want results, the faster the better. They



give few invitations to dinner or lunch; they provide no extra time for language classes or personal errands. My class must occur during a lunch hour, which the professors often rescind if an experiment is going well. Although using the telephone terrifies them, unlike their American counterparts, they would never skip a class without telling me why. The phone rings; I pick it up, hear silence, and know immediately it is one of them.

“Hello? Hello?” I say slowly. “Who is this?” A garbled, whispered choking follows. For the Asian students, my name, with its Rs and Ls, is a nightmare.

Xiaolu Yang is an exceptional student, even by the Asian students’ standards. So intent is he upon understanding “my new land,” as he calls it, that he has requested extra time each

week for us to practice pronunciation and improve his comprehension. Within two weeks of meeting, he called me to make the request.

“Doctah Nei-ren, I have go very faster in my speaking and hearing. You help me?”

I don’t know why I said yes. I really do not have the time for this. But for two months, we have been meeting for an hour before the regular conversation group and again for tea on Friday afternoons.

After our exchange of pleasantries, he holds out his biochemistry textbook and indicates the pages he wishes me to read. I ask him the marked questions, and he tells me whether or not he understands what I’ve said. I, of course, have no idea what I’m saying . . .

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