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Charming the Bridge Over the River

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By Shelley Frost

It was a creative risk, throwing together people from two disparate cultures, forcing them to interact one-on-one in two different native languages, all in one little Manhattan Beach, California, classroom.

The idea for the cross-cultural conversational mixer came to me as I was trying to think of new experiential activities for my class of beginning ESL (English as a Second Language) students, most of whom were adults from Mexico and Central and South America.

My students weren't quite ready to visit the local retirement home to play Pictionary™ (with its added cross-generational dimension; that activity had worked great for my advanced class). But they needed more than the usual dinnertime visit to Denny's to practice ordering burgers and fries.

The best way to learn a language is to practice it with native speakers, I pondered. Where can I get a roomful of willing Americans? A church? A theater? A city council meeting?

Then it hit me. The answer was, in fact — as flashes of insight often are — fewer than 50 feet away. At the same time every evening, while my class of native Spanish-speakers was meeting to learn English, a class of Americans was meeting just across the hall to learn...Spanish.

It was more than a river that divided these two groups of people. Language, culture, preconceived notions — all represented potentially daunting borders. Could I create an exercise that would help everyone bridge the gaps themselves?

I cornered the Spanish class teacher, Tracy, during break. He was intrigued by my idea and decided to help me pull it together.

The next night, I stood in front of my 25 students with a hammish grin.

"Tonight we're going to practice our English someplace new," I said. "Follow me if you want to have some fun."

With arms waving, I started out the door, my class behind me, whispering and laughing.

Across the grass, Spanish Conversation 1 held a roomful of curious American eyes and smiles. My group sat down to the side as I joined Tracy at the front of the room.

"Good evening, everyone!" I said. "We have something special in store for you tonight."

I gestured toward my class, "We have a whole group of people here who want to learn English. And a whole group of people here," waving to Tracy's students, "who want to learn Spanish. Would you agree that the best way to learn any language is to practice speaking it?"

Nods, smiles, yeses.

"Here's what we'll do. I'd like everyone to pair up with a partner from the opposite class. One of my students with one of Tracy's students. After we're all paired up, we'll start some conversations and get to know each other. But here's the catch. For the first 10 minutes, you can speak only Spanish." I paused for effect. "That's everyone — speaking only Spanish, no English. After that, we will spend 10 minutes speaking only English — no Spanish, just English. The 10 minutes after that, you can speak whatever you like — English, Spanish, whatever."

The two different worlds slowly got up and merged, stepping over aisles, jostling bags and jackets, until everyone had a partner. A few hellos and handshakes, a smattering of chuckles. Then the magic started happening.

I picked Spanish to be spoken first because my class represented the visiting culture, on several levels, and I wanted them to be able to be themselves. And to hold the first position of power, as it were.

There was Luis, a meteorologist from Uruguay who in America had to work at both a local drugstore and fast-food restaurant to make the money that he sent home to his wife in South America. There was Ana from El Salvador who hadn't finished the sixth grade; she was now a housekeeper in a nearby home. There was shy, middle-aged Jose from Mexico who worked in a restaurant and liked to play soccer.

All of them were challenged here in this country, frequently and worst of all by a prejudicial undercurrent that assumed most immigrant Hispanics were second-class citizens who had come here to leech our social, health, and welfare programs dry.

Faced with this, along with any other political and familial pressures that had followed them from their homeland, my students were trying to make the most of their situations. Most were striving to become productive residents of their communities, coming to class four nights a week after long workdays to learn one of the most difficult and erratic languages on the planet — English. I knew nearly every one to personally contribute an admirable work ethic, warmth, and humor...not to mention the delicious plates of homemade tamales and cookies they would often give to me at Christmas.

Tonight they had come as visitors to this classroom of mostly white, wealthy, well-educated Americans. These native English speakers seemed friendly and open. But they were inarguably an integral part of the host culture, with all of its potentially condescending misconceptions.

The first 10 minutes, then, the room started filling with Spanish words, some broken, some lyrically fluent.

"Cómo se llama Usted?" faltered Nancy, dressed in a business suit and holding her textbook closed on her lap.

"Me llamo Jose," smiled Jose. "Cómo se llama Usted?"

“Me llama Nancy,” she said.

“Me llamo,” suggested Jose, holding out his hand. “Mucho gusto.”

“Me llamo Nancy. Mucho gusto!” They shook hands and laughed. This part was universal.

But the powerful thing was this: Jose was Nancy’s teacher this evening. He was in the position of educational and interactive superiority as he nodded encouragement and occasional corrections. The same was true for all my students here. I could sense their self-esteem starting to rise; certainly I’d never seen them this confident or relaxed. They were in their linguistic element, and they nobly rose to the task.

The Manhattan Beach locals had their turn next. Everyone spoke only English for 10 minutes in similar, friendly exchange.

“All right, Jose,” smiled Nancy. “How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“I have two brothers,” said Jose, holding up two fingers.

“No sisters?”

“No sisters. Zero. And you?”

During the last 10 minutes, everyone continued their small talk in whatever language they wanted to practice. Some were engaged in more animated conversations than others, but everyone was talking.

We all left with gifts that night. My students had been given the opportunity to coach their American hosts while speaking their native tongue and demonstrating generosity and kindness. The native English-speakers had gotten the chance to interact with a group of unknown immigrants — about whom they may or may not have had negative preconceived ideas — in a uniquely simple and positive context.

What I received — and it has stayed with me through the years — was the joy in thinking that the next time a student of either group walked down the street and encountered someone of the opposite culture, they might remember the experience of this night. They might draw from its insight and goodwill, react with kindness and warmth, and rest in the knowing that — regardless of our differences in birthplace, language, culture, residential status, or socio-economic background — we’re all in this life, and learning, together.