

Unsolved Mysteries: Alligators, Energy, and English Grammar Instruction

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I wanted time to introduce myself to the teacher I would be working with before class, but I didn't arrive at the Adult Learning Center as early as I had hoped. Fortunately, I was quickly directed towards my classroom, Room 7. As I walked down the hall, friendly chatter was coming from small groups who dissolved into their respective classrooms as the beginning of the class period drew near. People were wearing sneakers, sweatshirts, jeans, khakis, and blouses. It felt like pretty much like any school I had ever been to, but some things were different, and I noticed.

There was a mild fragrance of incense. Brightly colored hijabs caught my eye and lingered in my peripheral vision as I passed. Most of the chatter I heard wasn't in English. The ages of the students I passed in the hallways ran the gamut from early twenties to early sixties. I spotted the "7" over a door.

When I opened it, I was greeted by a wave of hellos from the students who were already at their seats. I responded in kind and introduced myself to the teacher, Mark, who smiled and shook my hand. I took a seat next to a young looking student from Angola who introduced himself and asked for my name and where I was from. It then dawned on me how much I needed to learn about them: their names, their English skill level, and how to navigate a relationship where I was teaching people older and more experienced than me.

One day Mark asked the class for a few sentences using the word "mystery". One student offered, "It is a mystery that people eat bats." In a previous class someone explained that in his country people ate bats, which was strange to the rest of the class. A shy student said, "It is a mystery why alligators eat humans." Another student added, "It is a mystery why lions eat humans."

Another day, I taught students about the word "energy." I asked someone to tell me what energy was. My question, as it turned out, was unfair. I explained that as a physics student, I had studied energy for four years, and still, I could not tell them what energy *was*. I told them

that scientists who had studied energy for a lifetime did not know what it was. It was a mystery.

The students then began listing off various forms of energy: electricity, heat, light, food. . . . A student who had worked on an offshore rig in Angola mentioned that various fossil fuels contained energy. Another student asked about whether the energy people got from eating corn was related to the energy that came from an electrical outlet. This led to a conversation about how plants get their energy from the sun and the fact that essentially all energy on earth originally came from the sun.

One day the students wrote small essays in the past tense. A man from Angola wrote a story of how warriors came and murdered many people shortly after his second daughter was born. His son was an excellent basketball player who he hoped was going to come to United States soon. There was a small, but noticeable grammatical error in his last sentence describing how he was separated from his wife. I decided not to correct the mistake in this sentence. Sometimes more is at stake than good grammar.

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