

SO TO SPEAK

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Global English

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The course of my life changed forever on Halloween in 1999. I was teaching adult immigrants English at a well-respected English as a Second Language (ESL) school in the burbs of Toronto. My class of 15 students from 13 different countries was the lowest level at the school and consisted of students who were right off the plane, illiterate in their own language, or both. Halloween was approaching; as a departure from a week of routine lessons, I thought I'd immerse my students in some western culture and teach them critical vocabulary for clothing and body parts at the same time by having them create a life-sized, broom-riding witch.

I thought I was being so clever. That thought usually precedes a rude awakening for me, and that Halloween afternoon was no exception. The trick was on me.

From a pile of scrap material, old shoes, fishing line, tape, colored paper and a modicum of direction (you can't say modicum to ESL students), the students transformed our ordinary classroom into a haunted forest. Their witch was suspended midflight with invisible fishing line. The tip of her broomstick was higher than the tail, and she appeared to be taking off. A length of crumpled brown butcher's paper became a gnarled tree-trunk when it reached from floor to ceiling in the back corner of the room. The limbs of the tree stretched like a canopy out over my desk and into the classroom. Beside my desk, a dead highwayman hung by his neck from the phantom tree. Just enough breeze was created when the classroom door swung open to animate the flying witch and activate the colony of bats fluttering overhead. We closed the curtains, lit the candles in our jack-o-lanterns, invited the other classes to come to our room, and we served them candy. My students *got* Halloween.

I learned two things that day that changed the course of my life forever. The first was that they didn't need English – not my English anyway. *Multicultural communities are highly functional and communicate perfectly without proper English.* This was a kick in the head for me because proper English is what I was being paid to teach.

The second thing I only had an inkling of but was verified over time; *the skills we were teaching in school, including the alphabet, spelling and grammar, did not lead to fluency.* I had the opportunity to teach every level from beginner to advanced classes at that particular school, and in the eight years I taught there, *not one* student graduated fluent in English. Most students learned to read and something about writing, but our success rate for teaching people to *speak* English was zero.

The second revelation had me quit my cushy ESL job and walk away from my pension to discover, then write a book about, how speaking English really works. The book is called *English is Stupid*. It is based on the difference between written and spoken English, and it is the textbook for *Speaking Canadian English*, a course I have been teaching at Sheridan College for the past five years. The book led me to CAPS and a career in professional speaking. The first edition sold out to teachers, students and schools in 16 countries around the world in its first year of publication.

English is Stupid led to the recent publication of a workbook for Chapter One on the *English Phonetic Alphabet*. More ideas from *English is Stupid* are slated for publication in 2012 including *Grass is Black*, the first sound dictionary where students can look up the spelling of a word from how it sounds. Can you imagine? It's awesome. It's been an uphill battle, but this part of my work is finally going well.

The other revelation – that *broken English* works so well – has been much more of a conundrum (you can't say conundrum to ESL students). The linguistic makeup of my Halloween class is a microcosm of most of the world. The number of people in the world who use English in a diverse setting is approaching 2 billion. About a third of all the people on planet Earth use some form of English to communicate some of the time, but it is not the English we learn in school; it is not the English you are reading now.

This part of my career is still a struggle. Schools don't want to know that their programs are ineffective; dictionary companies don't want to know their books are obsolete;

professional speakers don't want to know that more than 80% of the English speaking world can't understand a thing they are saying. Globally, people whose first language is English are like an exclusive little club that is getting smaller every day. The best news I have for professional speakers is that their problem is easy to fix if they remember two things.

There are more than a million words in the English language, and non-native English speakers use 2,000 of them. Become familiar with this family of words, and stick to them as much as possible. *Modicum* and *conundrum* are not on the list. Simplify your language, not your ideas.

Non-native English users are literal and native speakers are abstract. Avoid expressions. *Blue moon* doesn't mean rare in the global village – it is only a color and an orb in the night sky. *Course of my life*, *off the plane* and *uphill battle* have no place in global conversation. It's tricky to get used to at first, but with awareness, you'll *get the hang of it*.

Christopher Columbus lived in a world that was flat. The Wright brothers lived in a world that was earthbound. Tim Berners-Lee pioneered the World Wide Web in a world that couldn't fathom its impact. Their accomplishments became part of our normal. How much money you can make is a product of how quickly you can harness change. The change for you to grasp is that the English we use in North America is passé, and the English the world is speaking isn't broken – it's global.

For more details on *Three Secrets You Need to Know about Spoken English*, enter Judy Thompson on youtube.com for her TEDx video.