The Importance of International Students Learning Informal English

Amber Hall

"Working Thesis: By learning Informal English such as slang, euphemisms, and the meaning of some profanity, international exchange students will gain fluency in English and have overall a more fulfilling experience in their study abroad program."

This was my Working Thesis for my capstone project in graduate school nearly ten months ago. Since that time, I've graduated from my program and earned my MA in English, earned a certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language/Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, sent one exchange student home (interviewed), gained two new exchange students, assisted another placed exchange student in English papers, constantly assist one of my students in his studies for the SAT, and began my own studies in the German language. As I look back at this thesis and the completed project, I can successfully say that I've only chipped a tiny piece of the giant language iceberg in front of me. Where do I even begin?

As I put the finishing touches on my capstone project and hoped for a passing grade of 99 percent or higher, I learned a few things. For one, I was not totally right. I stated in the final slides of the PowerPoint version of my paper that it was a 50/50 coin toss. Some students do indeed learn our slang and participate with their American peers just fine. The rest truly do need help. Will that help be attained in their country? Probably not. These kids need to live the language. Language isn't a dead thing, it is a living thing. Language constantly morphs into a being that is suitable to modern times. It's a language evolution! Because it is a living and breathing thing, it cannot be discovered in books (not always at least) but in delving full force into the depths of its complexities. This will happen in the exchange students' high school

hallways and lunch tables as I've described in the paper. Host parents can and absolutely should work with their students to help them start to understand the meaning behind some of our odd little sayings. The students' friends need to be patient and help to teach their unique teen speak. English is a very colorful language and should be enjoyed in its entirety, not just the academic portion.

The two students that's I've gained this year are polar opposites. One is a sassy tongue German boy and the other is a shy Vietnamese boy. These two guys have taught me what I've thought to be true all along- Europe learns differently than Asia. My German is never (ever ever) at a loss of some sarcastic come back and can spout some of the most ear burning profanity anyone's ever heard. He's even taught me a few vulgar slang, English mind you, not German. My Vietnamese boy on the other hand came to me thinking poop was a terrible word to say. He quickly learned all English profanity thanks to the German boy and used the words at every chance he could get. I had to teach when/where/why/how to use the words properly. He is my perfect example of a student who does not know the informal language, picked up on it from his environment, used it improperly, and had to be corrected. I finally decided to put my thesis to work and teach him how to properly cuss. Euphemisms was the next chapter. I continue to use these as much as possible. I wait for the confused look then ask if he understood what I meant. The answer is typically "no" but with some context clues and a little prodding from me, he discovers the meaning. I've never noticed him using euphemisms on his own, but he is becoming more aware when I use them. I did receive a nice surprise when I read a draft of a practice essay for his SAT. His academic English is amazing. Some of his vocabulary I could tell was right from the SAT vocabulary list. However, the boy struggles to carry on a conversation with his friends. The thing is, this boy is clearly here for academics; his family has made that very clear. Will he

succeed in college next year? Yes. Will he have tons of friends, go to parties, and shoot the breeze with his friends at games? Not sure. I hope so. I will not be there to quiz him on euphemisms or correct his cursing. I just hope he finds a good friend to take the wheel.

My last quest was to obtain a certificate in TEFL/TESOL, which I did in September 2016. This program focused on teaching English basics and beyond to speakers of other languages primarily for the purpose of academics or jobs. They never mentioned informal English. This program is charged with educating teachers, which it does nicely. In this program I did learn just why speakers of other languages struggle so much with English. English is hard! I more or less almost failed the grammar section, and I made flash cards and everything! We expect these students to just speak English. Well, it doesn't happen that way. Basics are a must. Informal is also a must, but later. In my current quest (not finished yet) I'm the one struggling with learning a language. German is so similar to English, the grammar is different, but the words are similar. I was cruising along until I got to the bonus section of slang. I failed. I failed miserably. Give me the academic German any day! Was it because I was comparing it to similar sayings in English? Was it because a ten word German sentence translated into a three word English sentence? Was it because my English tongue is not trained to make the unique German sounds? I don't know, I just know that I failed. If I was a teen in Germany right now, I'd be at that exchange student lunch table, probably eating by myself.

This final project has opened my eyes even more to language. I've always enjoyed language and have recently enjoyed the informal studies whether it be for this project or with my own students. I find myself looking for teaching opportunities with my boys and the other students I've placed. I enjoy telling them the origins of some of our slang and why it's important to learn some of it. I've also enjoyed learning slang from their languages, even if I can't say it properly. I've hosted

eight students now and I look at each one as a new class of kids going through my little school of thought. I've used them for interviews for this paper and learned a little something from each student. I've used my TEFL/TESOL education to help them more on an academic level and I've used this capstone to help them on an informal level. My resources were very helpful as they contained information from the actual experts. My presentation during Student Research Day forced me to explain my findings to people who either agreed or disagreed with me. Some looked at me like I had discovered a new planet. Others looked out of the window behind me as I explained my research. Whether my audience agreed with me or not, I presented my idea with full enthusiasm. Informal English is exciting and fun! I plan to continue this research and maybe one day create a handbook for host parents. This handbook would help them to understand what their student is or will go through with language barriers and hopefully convince them that a damn here and there isn't bad. Until then, I will continue to educate my newcomers and everyone around me willing to listen. I will spread informal English in an academic way for as long as I can.