

Rhetoric of Leadership

Retoryka przywództwa

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TRANSATLANTICA

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**Translating English to English: An American's Attempt to Teach Writing
Rhetoric in Europe**

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Translating English to English: An American's Attempt to Teach Writing Rhetoric in Europe

A year ago, I was working in corporate America, sitting at a desk in northern New Jersey using my writing skills as a communicative device for technological development. Today, I am sitting at a desk in Lublin, Poland as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Grantee, using my writing skills as a communicative device for lessons on vocabulary, American culture, and writing techniques. I never imagined I would be teaching English in my own country, let alone a foreign one, but the opportunity was once-in-a-lifetime and I could never pass on it.

When I received my assignment, I was both excited and apprehensive. Though my meetings and speeches in the corporate world could be considered lectures, I had not formally taught a class in awhile. Would these skills translate? Would the wording used be the same? Would my students be interested? Even with these questions piling up, this was an opportunity to take the knowledge I have spent years cultivating and pass it on to a new set of students in a new environment. The excitement, of course, outweighed the apprehension and I began on a new educational and rhetorical journey.

My first semester teaching here in Poland was split between practical English classes, which have the goal of teaching students vocabulary and context for better expression and translation, and English writing classes, which have the goal of teaching students academic essay structures for opinion and solution essay types. As a native English speaker who has completed countless composition classes throughout my academic career, the content itself was something I was familiar with and could communicate to my students through each week's lesson. My biggest challenge in teaching these writing classes arose a few weeks into the semester.

My students were given their first in-class writing assignment, an essay asking for their opinion on a given topic, once our basic opinion essay structure lessons had been completed. Presented with their group's topic, each student completed their essay within the 90 minutes of allotted class time. When I sat down to grade

the next day, however, I was slightly confused by the writing style and the spelling throughout the essays in front of me. As their teacher, I had seen their writing before, but this was the first time it was in a required format I had taught them. The structure was correct, but something was off. Something was different. After staring at these essays for a few hours in complete and total confusion, it hits me.

I grew up speaking and writing in American English. Although I know, and knew, there were differences between American English and British English, I never thought they were that different. Yes, vocabulary differs — an ‘apartment’ is a ‘flat’ or an ‘eggplant’ is an ‘aubergine’ — but I did not imagine it would ever be something I would have to think about actively. My students had been learning British English for all of their spelling and all of their writing prior to sitting in my class. As I went through their essays I realized I needed a solution to bridge this gap. Their spelling choices were not wrong; their word choice was not wrong; they were simply British choices. Translating English to English seemed a completely foreign concept, but a necessary one. Throughout the semester, after every essay was completed and the grading process began, I sat with my computer dictionary open for any words spelled in a strange way.

However, the vocabulary used within the essays themselves was not my only challenge in this English to English translation process. Opinion essays are structured as a five paragraph essay, beginning with an introduction and ending with a conclusion. The three body paragraphs serve specific purposes, two paragraphs are used to provide supporting details for the opinion stated in the thesis sentence while the last paragraph is used to argue against a point from those who would have an opposing view or a weak point in the argument provided. A few weeks into the semester, the writing course coordinator asked to see me, citing a discrepancy reported between the writing classes I taught and the writing classes taught by the other instructor. I reviewed my class material and nothing veered from the syllabus or required material, until we arrived at the words we use to describe the last supporting paragraph of an opinion essay.

In British English, the last paragraph is called a ‘refutation,’ but in American English it is called the ‘rebuttal.’ As an American English speaker, I referred to this paragraph, in class and elsewhere, as the ‘rebuttal paragraph.’ The concept is the same; the definition is the same; both words refer to the same thing, but my word choice surprised everyone. In our conversation, after confirmation that both these words mean the same thing, but differ depending on the English one uses, my superior asked if I was deducting points from my students for using the British English version. Smiling, I responded that I would never, as long as they stick to one version of English, be it British or American, and use the appropriate vocabulary and spelling for that version, all would be correct. Even in class, I informed

my students they could call that last supporting paragraph whatever they would like, a ‘refutation,’ a ‘rebuttal,’ a ‘counterargument,’ or even ‘Greg,’ but their transitions and their English level was far above needing to spell out that they were beginning their rebuttal.

On the last day of the semester, for each of my classes, I gave a short speech thanking them for their attention and praising them for their growth. The note that always got the most laughs was when I mentioned that I know they learned from me, their grades showed it, but I also learned from them. The question every essay and every homework assignment raised was “Is this the British spelling or is this just wrong?” It was truly 50/50.

When I applied to teach English through the Fulbright program, I thought I knew what I was getting myself into, but the experience has turned out to be equal parts me teaching my students and my students teaching me. This idea of rhetoric being something that is constantly changing, evolving, and shaping our world depending not only on your language skills, but also the version of language you choose to use has changed the classes I teach and the methods in which I address vocabulary and cultural topics. Not only are these words key to shaping our ideas and our world, but it is also the basis for being able to understand each other – even within the same language.