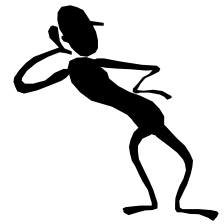


# ELRC NOTES

The Newsletter of the English Language Resource Center



Volume 14, Number 1

Bergen Community College

April 2010

## Becoming Bilingual



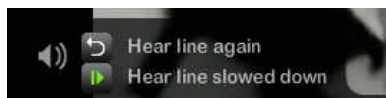
In one of the recent ELRC training sessions, I asked the tutors about their experiences as speakers of two languages. Their

stories reflect the ongoing struggles of our students and offer insights into the process. MP

### Featured Website:



There is so much that is new on the Internet and so many options for students and teachers that it is difficult to know where to begin. One of the workshops at the TESOL convention this year introduced a new website for listening and speaking. It features video clips from news, music, movies, and commercials organized into three levels. Although students have to sign up, it is free. Students can watch and listen to the videos at normal or slow speed or sentence by sentence. They can also click on and hear individual words. This click will bring up a dictionary definition, but it is not very helpful because it is not a learner's dictionary and the definitions use advanced vocabulary. Students may also choose to see or hide the text. The main feature of the site is speech practice. Students can record any sentence and receive a grade based on how close their pronunciation is to the model. <<http://www.englishcentral.com/en/videos>> MP



### From the Beginning

By Mayara Guimaraes

Imagine yourself sitting in a classroom full of people from different parts of the world and the only thing you all have in common is that no one has any idea what the person standing in front of you is talking about..... That is how I felt in my first day of class at Bergen Community College's ALP program.

I came here three years ago and took the English placement test. I remember looking at the test and thinking, "Can't I just tell them that I have never studied English before?" But I couldn't. My perception was that the test would evaluate how bad I was. And I was really bad. So I was placed in the foundations level, and soon my adventure began.

Apart from all the personal and cultural problems I was facing because of my decision to come to the U.S., not being able to communicate with people was the worst emotion I have ever felt. I did not even know how to count my own change, "A coin? What is that?" Being in a place without the ability to speak the language makes you feel like you are a baby again. You are afraid to go out alone. And you also feel helpless because there isn't a single problem that you can solve by yourself.

During my first semester here, I realized that people assume that you speak enough English to understand basic information. They do not fully realize that they while they are talking, and probably giving you important directions, you are complete unaware of what they are talking about. During the orientation day, for example, the International Students Counselors give the students a great amount of important information that some of them just do not understand. I was one of these people.

Learning a new language is a perfect mix of happiness and frustration. You are happy because you are learning to communicate, to be able to create new relationships with people from all over the world and to discover how magical language is. You are also frustrated. During a significant part of the process of learning English all you want to do is talk and write in English, but you can't. You want to be (cont. See **Beginning** page 4)

## The Transition

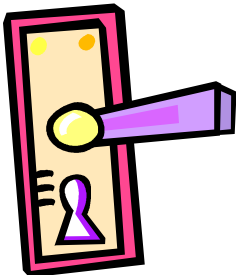
By Gina Maria Rivera

From the first day I decided to go back to school, I felt nervous because I thought that I couldn't make it. My native language is Spanish, and my English was poor. I had learned mostly street English. It was a big challenge to study not only because the classes were in English, but also because I wanted to become part of the English speaking world.

When I started to study, I was surprised how many things I needed to learn in order to speak, write, and read well. It was a big challenge for me because I only knew how to communicate in Spanish. In other words, all my thoughts were in Spanish and when I tried to translate them, I made a mess. All my ideas were disorganized and unclear. I felt that my Spanish and English together had created a new language. It was really hard to start thinking in English. That was what my teacher always said. I thought, "How can I think in English if my thoughts are always in Spanish?" I couldn't figure it out. Moreover, the professor recommended that we use an English-English dictionary, not a Spanish-English dictionary. I thought that by doing this, I would be only wasting my time.

Finally one day, I said to myself, "Let's try to do it the way that the professor says." I would think in English and then write everything down in English. It was hard in the beginning, but it was not impossible. Now I can write everything down in English even though I sometimes make mistakes.

In conclusion, the transition I had to make from Spanish to English continues to give me little problems, but it doesn't mean that I cannot do it. I believe English as a first language is necessary for everyone, not only so you can have a successful professional career, but so you can be part of the bilingual world.



## Think Like an American!!!

By Esra Ileri



I first started to learn English when I was 9 years old. I was going to a private elementary school. Our teacher used to tell us, "Think like an American!" How was it possible for a Turkish elementary school student to think like an American elementary school student? I never understood the meaning behind it until I started high school six years later. My English teacher back in elementary school was trying to tell us to read, listen, write and try to learn about American culture. Today I strongly believe that these are the key elements of speaking another language. Without experiencing the culture, I don't think you should consider yourself a speaker of that language.

It has been more than 20 years now since I have been speaking and learning English. I consider myself as a lucky person because for the last 8 years I have been living in the United States. I can observe the changes I have been going through in my language skills. For example, as a Turkish native, even today I speak Turkish at home. But when I am talking in Turkish, I usually remember the word in English and my brain translates it into Turkish in few seconds. It used to be vice versa. I used to feel very uncomfortable with my accent. But in order to improve my language skills, I knew I shouldn't feel ashamed. The people in this country taught me that it was okay. They appreciate effort and willingness. It doesn't matter where you're from, what your gender is, or how old you are!

Of course it is not always very easy to try to explain yourself in another language sometimes because of the culture. Since I grew up in another culture, and I was 23 years old when I first came to this country, in the beginning I had a very hard time adjusting. For example, American humor wasn't easy to understand. I believe it had nothing to do with knowing the language or not because I knew English, but I wasn't very familiar with the culture. I came to the realization again what my English teacher was trying to tell us. In order to be able to think like an American, I think you should live in that country at least for a while. You should expose yourself to the culture. By that I mean the music, the food, the idioms, and the daily life.

Now I am very fortunate because I am working as a professional tutor in the ELRC. Every day is a learning experience for me. I am very lucky because I have native speaker superiors who are always very helpful to me and answer my questions, and I am surrounded by students from all around the world. Every day I can see what they are (Cont. See **Think** p. 4)

## Helping Our Students on the Journey

By Zohreh Koupaei

True learning means that we can apply our knowledge when we need it. Learning a language requires the application of various different skills: grammar, conversation, reading, and writing. International students have many difficulties in learning and mastering these skills.

Since the English language is the second official language in many countries, it is, therefore, a required subject from the first year of elementary school. For most students, grammar is the easiest part of learning a language. They just need to know the rules and memorize them. However, it can be difficult when students do not have some of the English grammar structures in their native languages. For example, Arabic does not have the past perfect tense, and Persian places the verb at the end of a sentence. From my experience as an ESL tutor, most international students at BCC know the basic grammar rules relatively well, but when they try to apply the rules in their conversation, they find it hard. Since I am also bilingual, I understand this problem. To solve it, I try to explain the rules in simple language and then I ask my tutees to write some examples from their daily life. It helps the students understand the grammar rules and apply them.

Conversation helps students master the language. However, this skill is not emphasized when English is taught in most countries since there is no need to use it. Even in the United States; it is hard for students to find a native speaker to talk to and practice English. When they have an appointment, I give them an opportunity to speak, to find their grammar and pronunciation mistakes, and to ask for corrections. Most of my tutees are very smart and intelligent, but they are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. Consequently, they do not participate in conversation voluntarily. In my conversation group, I receive many complements for giving them an opportunity and encouraging them to talk. One of my students started talking for the first time in my group without being embarrassed or shy.

Another application of learning a language is

writing. For many bilingual students, writing is totally different in format, style, and organization from the way they use it in their culture, and in some countries, writing isn't emphasized. There are some international students who don't have an academic background in their native language, so when they come to college and start taking writing classes, they don't know what to do. When students need to know how to organize their ideas through an essay, I give them the example of a divided plate. I explain to them that in order to organize their ideas, they should separate them in the way that they serve food on a plate. They should describe their ideas in separate paragraphs so the readers can understand their points instead of mixing them like a bowl of soup. Another and perhaps the biggest problem that almost all international students have in writing is translating. This problem is inevitable unless they have contacts with English speakers or read a lot.

The foundation of reading and understanding is vocabulary. Without a good knowledge of vocabulary, understanding even one sentence is impossible. Learning vocabulary is a self-study process. Other people cannot do this for the student. Once tutees comprehend the text, they can easily answer questions about it. There are some students who want the tutors to teach them the concept of the text without knowing the meaning of the vocabulary. I always want students to find out the meaning of the vocabulary in a dictionary and try to understand the words by themselves before asking for any help. Then if they still have difficulty, they could seek assistance. I, therefore, believe that learning this segment of the English language requires the students' efforts and 90% of improvement in this issue depends on the students themselves.

Considering all the points mentioned above, learning English requires patience, knowledge, effort, persistence, practice, and interest. Without these tools, students should not expect to learn English in a short period of time.



### Needed: Peer Tutors for Fall 2010

#### WRT 101 and WRT 201 teachers:

If any of your students have good writing and interpersonal skills, please ask them if they would like to become peer tutors in the ELRC. It is an excellent opportunity to meet students from all over the world. They can come to E-156 before the end of the spring semester for more information.

## Arriving

By Samia Habashee

Learning English has allowed me to study hard subjects like philosophy and literature here at BCC. I feel great that I am able to philosophize in English as if I were a native speaker. When I first started taking that class online and found out that the discussions are what make up most of the grade, I thought that I wouldn't be able to do it, but I discovered that I could!

Literature is hard for non native speakers, and my course requires paraphrasing poems. First, there were some poems from Emily Dickinson to paraphrase in class with the teacher. Then I started to test the beautiful meaning of the poems and started to paraphrase by myself. That made me interested, so I researched the poet, Emily Dickinson. I was reading a lot in English, and I realized something greater. In the first test I found myself sitting in a class with Americans, and I was doing the same work as they were. I could get good grades like them and might be better than some.

(Beginning - continued from page 1) able to use everything you learn the minute you learn it in a new sentence, but that magical new sentence has a bigger chance to come out wrong than it has to come out right. And you see the corrections of a paragraph written by you to realize that every chance you took by introducing new vocabulary words on your assignments came out as a mistake. But you need to keep trying. Playing it safe to get good grades will not improve your English, so you feel a pressure that is not only coming from your teacher; it is coming from you, too.

But sooner or later you learn. You discover that you are thinking, dreaming and writing in English. You start asking your native language friends to talk to you only in English because as you learn, your need for new vocabulary grows bigger. You then notice that you can read out loud to people, and they will actually understand what you are saying. And it feels great. It gives you power and confidence to believe that you can do anything you want.

I am proof that it is possible.



**Workshops:**

**Conversation through Newspapers**  
Tuesdays at 12:30  
*Professor Ed Murtha*

**Grammar Q & A**  
Wednesdays at 11:00  
*Professor Ed Murtha*

**Conversations**  
Thursdays at 11:00  
*Professor Beverly Decotiis*

**Vocabulary Development**  
Thursdays at 2:00  
*Heloise Ruskin*



(Think - continued from page 2) going through because I was in their shoes too. That's why I keep reminding them try to think like Americans. Learning a new language doesn't only mean learning its grammar. You need to experience the language too with talking, reading, writing, watching and listening. And every day I meet students who think they are too old to learn a new language, or they feel ashamed because of their accent! It gives me great pleasure to remind them that their accent is like a spice in the meal; it makes the meal richer, but if you put too many spices, it could be hard to eat that meal. It is like every other aspect of life, the more you do it, the better you will get. I remind them that more they read, write, talk and listen, the better their language skills will get. And one last thing I keep reminding myself and my students; it is never too late to learn. : )

Bergen Community College  
**English Language Resource Center E-156**  
Telephone: 201-612-5292  
Supervisor: Marilyn Pongracz  
Assistant Supervisor: Dale Egan  
Faculty Liaison: Prof. Ed Murtha  
Director of Learning Assistance Services :  
Khairia Fazal

### ELRC Schedule Spring 2010

Monday	9:30 - 6:00
Tuesday	9:30 - 7:30
Wednesday	9:30 - 7:30
Thursday	9:30 - 7:30
Friday	9:30 - 3:00
Saturday	10:00 - 2:00