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THE JOYS AND
SORROWS OF TEACHING
HIGH SCHOOL ESL:
SARANGEREL'S STORY

Susan R. Adams

ENGLISH AS A second language (ESL) teachers lead fascinating lives. We have the privilege of working closely with students from many countries, richly diverse cultures, and a cornucopia of languages and dialects. Our students and their families move to pulses and beats that are not always discernable to us until we get to know them and their families, learn their stories, and understand their dreams and desires. Until we do the hard work of listening, asking good questions, not

making assumptions, and digging into these stories, most of us know we are not really reaching and teaching the whole child; and of course, this entire process is complicated enormously by the number of languages spoken by our students.

Contrary to popular misconception, ESL teachers do not speak all of the languages of their students. Mainstream teachers often bring non-English speaking students to me, sigh, and say, "Could you talk to her? She does not understand a word I am saying!" I then proceed to explain in simple English what the teacher had been trying to say, and the mainstream teacher is almost disgusted when it works. "Well! *I* could have done that!" is a common response. "Why *didn't* you if it is so easy?" is what I always want to say. Many of us speak some of the more common languages, especially Spanish, but few of us are prepared to speak the languages of those groups with small representation. I speak Spanish and can manage fairly well with other Romance languages, but I am no match for African or Asian languages with which I have no experience as a learner. I often have students from four continents, speaking 12 different languages. The vast majority of my students are Spanish-speakers, and we communicate pretty well. Others have been from French-speaking African nations and we found a way to get our points across. Sometimes a student has arrived speaking a language that is new and seems obscure in our community. Take, for example, Mongolian.

Sarangerel, who was promptly renamed Sara by the other teachers in my urban Indianapolis high school, came to our school in late February. She had only been in the United States for about six months, but had already attended at least three other schools that we could verify. She was 17 years old, extremely courteous, slender, dark-eyed with a spark of determination and humor, reserved with the other students, and highly motivated to do well in our school.

Sarangerel worked hard to adapt to the ways of our urban, mostly African American high school quickly, and it was clear to all of her teachers that she had already taken many of the traditional high school courses in her native Mongolia, but that she struggled to communicate her deep knowledge in English. While she floundered in U.S. history due to a lack of background knowledge and a textbook written in college-level English, she excelled in math and science, especially when she could demonstrate her skills in numbers or diagrams.

She was a joy in class, always checking to make sure that she was doing what the teachers wanted, somehow always exceeding expectations in spite of her beginner's status in English. At the end of every class period, she would approach the teacher with anxious eyes, insistent that we tell her how she had done and what she could do better next time. This practice set her apart for two reasons: Most students made a mad dash for the door at the bell to soak up some social time in the hall and it made

her late to almost every class, but she had a way of smiling shyly and smoothing her tardiness over with teachers. Somehow we just could not penalize her for caring so much about her own learning.

Because Sarangerel had already been enrolled in three other U.S. schools, she had learned some English, so while our conversations were slow and stilted, we were mostly able to understand each other in simple terms. I was able to schedule two class periods of ESL a day with her, with our long-term plan being to have her graduate high school at the end of the following year. Sarangerel was very clear in her mind that she was headed to college and we all believed her. She worked tirelessly on every task I laid before her, preferring to work alone and to write instead of working collaboratively with the other ESL students in the room. Sarangerel worried constantly that she was not making enough progress and that her spoken English was not pleasing me.

Although her mother had accompanied her to our school when Sarangerel was enrolled, it was impossible to communicate directly with her mother, who spoke no English. No one in our district was readily available to translate, so we muddled through, assisted by Sarangerel's previous enrollment experiences in other schools and by her sincere effort to understand what we said. When I sat down with her to complete the enrollment forms and to go over her transcripts, I attempted to understand why she had already been in so many schools in so few

months. We did everything we could to communicate such complex explanations to each other; anyone watching us would have thought we were playing Charades, or even Win, Lose or Draw. Sarangerel endured this tedious process with a gentle smile, great patience, and a keen sense of humor as I ruled out migrant worker status and other employment explanations for the frequent moves. Every question I asked seemed to come back to “friends live there” and after a while I let it go.

Less than one month after Sarangerel arrived, our annual state assessment rolled around. In spite of the fact she had been enrolled less than one year, she insisted on taking it. I was convinced that she had a chance at passing the math portion of the test if she could decode enough of the text in order to solve the problems. I had given this test many times and I had seen ESL students who knew far less math than Sarangerel pass the test, which is basically a ninth grade algebra and beginning geometry test. The test is composed of two parts: a multiple-choice, number-crunching component, and a far more difficult, extended-response component. Sarangerel labored intensively over the test, sailing easily through the multiple-choice portion and then bogging down over the extended response questions, which required her to decode the story problem, show her work, and often, and explain her answers.

Long after the other students had finished the test and left, Sarangerel plugged away determinedly,

sometimes crying quietly when she ran into scenarios she could make no sense of. Although the test designers claim our assessment has been rigorously examined for cultural biases, that year's test was a running series of story problems based on a high school preparing for homecoming, a distinctly middle-class American tradition, and one not always practiced in urban high schools. We had celebrated homecoming in early October at my school, but most of my students had largely ignored it, seeing no reason to participate in such activities as screaming pep sessions in the gym or sitting in the cold to watch American football. If we had only known that homecoming was going to be on the test, I would have insisted they pay attention!

My other students had balked over the same homecoming scenario and many had quietly pleaded for me to explain what the storyline was talking about, which I am not permitted to do during state assessment testing. Testing is always a painful experience for the students and the ESL teachers alike. I knew that all I had to do was explain in rough terms what homecoming is, and then most of them could have easily answered the story problems. I knew from working closely with their math teachers that they had mastered the math skills necessary to pass this part of the test. What they could not do was make sense of the scenarios and communicate their responses in the kind of English required by the test.

On the test, there were questions about the amount of lumber needed for building parade floats, how much

space would be set aside for crowds, and other details lost on this young Mongolian woman who had never even witnessed homecoming. I knew without a doubt that Sarangerel could do far more than the test required if it were in Mongolian, but I paced the classroom and chewed my fingers anxiously, hoping she could sift through the unnecessary details and solve the simple math problem underneath. Finally, she sighed, closed the book, wiped her eyes, and smiled at me. I hugged her, sent her home, and hoped her brilliance would be apparent to the graders.

About two weeks later, Sarangerel's mother appeared in the doorway of my classroom. This did not surprise me; parents of English language learners (ELLs) often bypass the main office and go straight to the ESL classroom in hopes that they will be welcomed and understood there. Going into the office meant that our well-intended secretary would shout "Wait here! I will get Ms. Adams!" repeatedly as she picked up the phone to call me, leaving them to wait helplessly in the corner. As Sarangerel glanced up and saw her mother in the door, her face fell. As we both walked to the door, I muttered, "What is going on?" She said, "We moving tomorrow." My other students got quiet and pretended to do their work, but were listening intently so that later they could pass on the *chisme* (Spanish for gossip) correctly and with juicy details to their friends. They were accustomed to parents wanting to speak with me, but those visits were generally

to deal with behavior problems, and Sarangerel was never in trouble, so they were very curious.

I invited her mother inside our classroom door, where I could keep my eye on my students but maintain a respectable distance away from them. Her mother was dressed like a professional business woman in a suit jacket, skirt, nylons, and heels, although they were a few years out of fashion and might have been bought at Goodwill instead of Macy's. I felt frumpy indeed in my ubiquitous denim jumper, orthopedic shoes, and with my decidedly inelegant school ID around my neck. With Sarangerel's translation help, I told her mother how well Sarangerel had adapted to our school, how all her teachers adored her, how hard she worked, and how happy everyone was to have Sarangerel in our school. My students stayed calm, quietly listening to this exchange, which was all usual fare for parent conversations in my classroom. Her mother beamed as Sarangerel gave her the short and modest Mongolian version of my praise.

I put on my best, authoritative, take-no-prisoners teacher face and cut to the chase, insisting firmly that her mother reconsider moving, pointing out that we only had six weeks of school left and that Sarangerel's grades would suffer in the move. Her mother smiled politely and insisted that they were indeed moving tomorrow to be closer to friends in Virginia. Clutching at straws, I blurted, "What about your friends here? Couldn't Sarangerel stay with them until the end of the semester?"

At this her mother hesitated, but then replied that all their local friends were males and it would be inappropriate for Sarangerel to remain with them. Frantically racking my mind for solutions, I resorted to begging, "Please, *please* do not move Sarangerel again! You have no idea how difficult it is for her to keep changing schools, and she is too respectful to tell you. You are being very selfish! She is doing well here, and she needs to finish the year with us! You need to stay here for Sarangerel just a few more weeks!"

At this emotional outburst, Sarangerel stopped interpreting, too uncomfortable to tell her mother what I had said, and physically moved away from her mother and me. Then the craziest thing happened. With no one translating, Sarangerel's mother began explaining in Mongolian how difficult their transition to the United States had been for the parents, how they had looked high and low for work that would support the family, how desperately lonely they were for their home, family, and friends in Mongolia, and how worried they were about providing a good future for Sarangerel.

By now we were both weeping openly, clutching each other while Sarangerel and her classmates watched with gaping mouths. No translation was necessary. This was one of those moments where things just work, where our essential humanness is our real connection, and where stopping to translate would have meant a loss of nuance, intention, and depth of feeling. Our fears and

frustrations gushed out, and we somehow understood each other deeply and completely. Finally, after we had each poured out our hearts in our own languages, with me taking one more chance to try to explain how difficult it is on kids to be jerked in and out of schools, we smiled, wiped our eyes, laughed a little, and hugged each other fiercely.

I turned to Sarangerel, apologized for embarrassing her, and told her how deeply sorry we all were to lose her, that we loved her and wanted the best for her. After many good-byes and a few more tears, Sarangerel and her mother went to the office to officially withdraw her from our school and arrange for a transfer to the fifth school number in Sarangerel's short U.S. journey. Shaken, I returned to my students who were so quietly stunned by the drama they had just witnessed that they said nothing, most of them avoiding eye contact with me. We were all saddened by the loss of our new friend, Sarangerel, and we all sensed the fragility of our being together, knowing we could lose someone else tomorrow.

Three weeks later, I received notification that Sarangerel had passed our state math assessment. I wished I could have celebrated this victory with her and could have savored the triumph of overcoming a test designed to trip her up, but I sat quietly picturing her in her new school, and hoping those new teachers were loving her and realizing her potential. For me, this is the epitome of what it means to be an ESL teacher; we suffer so many

painful losses and few bittersweet wins. We laugh and cry with people who do not speak our language or understand our school systems, but who long for something better with us. We taste the magic of transcending borders and reaching out to one another across differences. There is no other teaching job quite like this.