Tales From the Trenches/ Récits des tranchées

Our Names

Cosette Taylor-Mendes

This article explores the subject of Chinese English-language students renaming themselves or being assigned English names. The principal concern of the author is that students are renamed for the convenience of the native speakers' pronunciation over appreciation for the students' culture or identity.

Cet article évoque le phénomène selon lequel des élèves chinois en ALS adoptent un autre nom ou bien se voient assigner un nom anglais. L'auteur se préoccupe du fait que les noms des élèves sont changés pour les rendre plus faciles à prononcer par les anglophones dans une démarche qui ne tient pas compte de la culture ou l'identité des apprenants chinois.

September has always been for me the most optimistic month of the year. I suspect it is this way for many people whose lives have led them to teaching. September routinely brings fresh pages of paper in notebooks waiting to be filled, new books with bindings waiting to be cracked open, and a return to sweaters and socks to enjoy the crispness of the air and the crunch of leaves underfoot.

As an instructor, I find that September feels unlike any other month of the year. Our campus is the most alive in September with students and staff darting between buildings and with a sense of purpose for the possibilities of what education will bring. Excitement for the experiences in the semesters that lie ahead seems most vibrant in September. Although the work and the sacrifices needed to succeed in one's studies or one's profession become clear by October, September allows us a moment to revel in promise. September marks my fresh start in the year and a renewal in my teaching.

As an English as a second language instructor, I teach most of the warm summer months away, even if I work at a more leisurely pace when it is 30 degrees outside. What marks our difference from others in the field of education is that our adult students have left their lives in their countries to come to Canada. They need us for guidance, not only in our language, but also in our Canadian way of life in order to cope and be successful in their studies or at (finding) work. Our students often do not have their family, their most

loved ones, or the societal supports they had in their countries to guide them. So we do not stay away for months like other teachers. We cannot.

This September began as it always had in our language program, with induction meetings, fresh supplies, and the much anticipated handing out of the class lists. In all honesty, the teachers I have known and have worked with await the class list much more than the curriculum and room assignments. We wait to run our fingers up and down the list to scour which nations are represented. By now we know how to recognize the nationality in the name. *Park* is a Korean. *Li or Wang*, he or she is from China. *Ito* is Japanese. *Méndez* with the z is a Spanish speaker, but *Mendes* is from Brazil or Portugal. Even if we have no idea if the student is male or female, we note our classroom diversity and plot our future lessons based on how many cultural perspectives we will have to debate the most popular issues in our English language books: cultural habits, family, love, natural disasters, travel, jobs, and movies. We anticipate how many cultural perspectives will be present to discuss the deeper issues and changing conversations that arise when we develop a relationship with our students: gender, globalization, childhood, independence, war, fear, education, or the future. In my estimation, I would encounter several Chinese students (but I was unable to decipher their sex by their names); a few Koreans (of whom I was also uncertain if they were male or female); two Japanese young men; quite possibly a young man from Mexico; and a young woman whose first language was Arabic. With my introduction lesson in hand, I was off to my first class to discover just how many men and how many women I was going to teach this term in level two/lower-intermediate.

Just a few minutes short of 9:00 a.m., I stopped and took a breath at the door before I went in. Butterflies in my stomach—September had set in,

"Good morning. Welcome to level two! My name is Cosette Taylor, but I would like you to call me Cosette."

I grabbed the chalk lying in its wooden hammock under the board and dashed my name across the dark surface, underlining my first name. A few students bobbed their eyes between the board and their notebook, writing my name down. Some of the students spoke quietly and slowly:

"Cos-set?" Several of the students pronounced my name like the verb, meaning to protect someone too carefully.

"Cor-set?" giggled one student after he checked his electronic dictionary.

"No," I replied, "Coz-et. It's French. I mean, my mother is French-Canadian and she gave me my first name. My father's family is originally from Scotland and so my *family name* is Taylor."

"But you speak English well if your mother is French?" asked an apparently suspicious young man who I guessed was from Mexico.

"Yes. Very well. I was educated in English." The students either looked at me motionlessly or nodded to show that they were satisfied with my qualifications.

"Cozy-et?" a few more tried. Somehow this did not feel warm and comfortable. We were not getting to the first-day bonding as I had hoped.

"Try, Cassette. Like what they had before CDs." I suggested. I reached into my bag and then held up the English-language cassette I had been planning to use the next morning.

"Ah, Cass-ette!" It appeared to be an *Aha!* moment for many of them, much to my relief. Most students were able to produce the word and identify with the product. Several wrote down my altered name phonetically in their notebooks. I could be a cassette, as I had been other terms. They were not learning French anyway. They were learning English.

I began the first get-to-know-you activity. I asked the students if they would turn to the person on their right and interview their partners using a handout I gave them with spaces for their partner's names, hobbies, reason(s) for studying English, and future plans. Most of the students made busy work of the task. Only a few who seemed already to know their partners wrote little on their sheet. I walked from group to group, learning about their interests and gaining a first impression of their abilities in English. Finally, the moment seemed right for the students to introduce their partners to the group using their handout as a prompt. Everyone is a little nervous on the first day.

A pretty young Asian woman began, "My partner is Na. She is from China. She likes to read books and watch romantic movies." Na blushed uncontrollably but smiled brightly. I welcomed Na, quickly skimmed my class list, and put a small check mark next to the name Na.

Na was next, "This is Ju-ree. She is from Korea. She likes to go swimming." I had no Ju-Ree on my list. I looked to the two names I suspected were Korean, but they did not look anything like "Ju-Ree" or "jewelry" for that matter.

"Excuse me, how do you spell your name, Ju-ree/jewelry?" I asked innocently.

"Jay-u-l-eye-ee, Julie. My Korean name is Eun-ha, but my host mother calls me Julie," she replied. I checked off her name on my class list and decided against asking her why her host mother had named her Julie. I welcomed Julie to level two and continued,

"Okay. Could you please introduce your partner," I said, looking at the young man who I had guessed was from Mexico.

"Ya. This is Michael." He said gesturing to the young Asian man who was twice the size of his Spanish-speaking partner.

"Michael?" I tried not to appear skeptical, but I was already certain that I did not have a Michael on the class list.

"My first name is Wei. But I want you to call me Michael or MJ because I like Michael Jordan." His answer seemed logical enough. We soon learned that Michael played basketball every spare moment he had. Michael then introduced us to Luis, an engineer from Mexico.

Next, Hiro, a young graduate of a travel/tourism program in Kyoto introduced us to his partner, Jian or Jim. Hiro explained that his name pronounced in Mandarin sounded similar to the English name Jim.

Halaa, the young woman from Saudi Arabia introduced her partner, a young woman from Beijing in tight bell-bottomed, embroidered jeans, platform shoes, and a frilly blouse as May.

"Could you please tell me your name in Mandarin?" I asked. For my list.

"Zhang Shuxian."

"Could you repeat it please?"

I looked at my list again. In that moment, I was certain that I was blushing like Na, only I did not smile brightly. On the contrary, I felt as though I could have heard the name 100 times and I would not be able to put a check mark next to the right person. Finally, quite embarrassed, I had to walk to the student's desk with my list and ask her to identify her name. Within minutes I was darting between desks asking students to identify their names on my list. This is how I met the Chinese students in my group who had taken on English names: Snow, Rocky, Eric, Gracie, Brad, and Echo.

And although the first-day get-to-know you activities have gone well, and although I get the needs analysis completed with my new group of students, the new "name game" created of first-day Mandarin to English phonetics leaves me feeling as if I am doing something wrong. As the weeks pass, the idea that a young man from Inner Mongolia is named Archie or a young woman from Beijing is named Ashlie normalizes. But the first day, I feel sad.

Like many Canadians I admittedly have a hard time pronouncing names in Mandarin or Cantonese. I have a colleague who worked in Taiwan for several years, and I envy her confidence as she lets their names roll off her tongue at graduation or when formal roll calls are required.

I returned to the staff room for lunch. A new colleague entered shortly afterward and asked,

"Isn't it odd to call Xi, Li from Harbin, China, 'Walter'?" Most of the seasoned teachers, including myself, do not respond.

In the weeks ahead I eventually ask the renamed students why they chose the names they did. Snow and Echo told me that their names were their own names translated into English. And when I met a young woman named Rice a year later, she tells me the same. Rocky, like Michael, had chosen his name based on a hero or someone he had seen in a movie or on television. Both Eric and Brad liked the way their names sounded when they found them on a list

of names on the Internet and tried them out on their host families. Gracie was interested in a popular singer with the same name.

As time passes I continue to begin each semester with new faces and new Western names, and I perennially wonder how renaming affects one's sense of identity. Do Rocky, Walter, Gracie, or Ashlie have an English persona in which they are able to live the language they are learning to speak, understand, read, or write? In this case do they prefer an English name? Or are Rice, Snow, or Echo willing to settle for their names translated as any noun or verb from one language to the next? Does something fundamental not get lost in the translation? Are the students who retain their names from their first languages braver, more independent, or more nationalistic? I have always wanted to know but have been afraid to ask. Renaming forces me—a teacher who chose ESL/EFL because she considered herself more "worldly" or more "open" to different cultures and alternative ways of living or coping with life's challenges than the average person—to consider if I am appreciating or even respecting my students' cultures or identities in calling Zhisheng "Bill," for example. If I reflect on my experiences as "Co-se-to," "Co-zetch," "Co-set-tee," or "Cosetka," I remember how I got used to and have even written e-mails to family, friends, or former students using my newly pronounced name that was and still is *my* name. I think that if I had to change my name, I do not know who I would be.

Note

The students included in the above story are composite characters based on several teaching experiences. All names are pseudonyms.

The Author

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