

2010

# Do I Know You? (Cultural Languages)

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## Recommended Citation

Hood, Estella M., "Do I Know You? (Cultural Languages)" (2010). *A with Honors Projects*. 13.  
<http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/13>

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*Do I Know  
You?*

*(Cultural Languages)*

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December 17, 2010  
Communication*

Communicating is something we do everyday, whether it's verbal or written. When we speak, our minds form thoughts and it seems effortless that we transform these into phrases and sentences. Depending on our message, the speaker may get excited or is whispering. We in turn take what is given us, and start to form thoughts, ideas, assumptions, and judgments using a host of emotions to converse back. This all seems so easy and something that we do so naturally but take for granted. It's kind of funny that there is so much miscommunication going on, when everyone trying so hard to be understood. I found knowing a second language has helped to remind me what it is to understand and communicate, especially within my own culture.

This brings me to why I feel so very fortunate to be a Mexican-American born in the South Side of Chicago. All around Chicago there are areas of different ethnic groups, speaking different languages and celebrating their heritage everyday. I grew up in a Latin community where Spanish was a first language to many. My parents wanted English to be the family's' first language because teachers told my parents they would confuse us with two languages. I grew up immersed in the Latin culture comforted in the sights, smells, the ideology, and the experiences that formed the base of who I am today.

Spanish was spoken all around me and I learned it mostly by hearing and mispronouncing but always getting corrected. I'm not as fluent in speaking Spanish as I would like to be but I can still hold my own in a conversation. So to hear Spanish spoken is as natural as hearing English. However having lived in the Champaign area for so long and rarely

hearing Spanish, I have to think about what I want to say. It is true, if you don't use it, you can lose it.

So in having to think about what I wanted to say made me realize the mechanics involved with speaking in general. Face it most of us talk without thinking. When I speak Spanish I need to concentrate and it makes me more aware of the whole process of thinking. It is pretty incredible how the brain can take in a language and decipher it into another.

During this entire process of breaking it down, you are paying attention and comprehending what is being said, forming a thought, and preparing a reply. As you form your reply, your brain is looking for the words that will best fit, because not all words translate, your brain is picking, choosing, and structuring. This is all happening in a matter of seconds, across many different levels, just for one thought. I think my active listening skills are stronger because of being bi-lingual; which has made me slow down and listen more attentively. I have a tendency to not just listen to the words being said but I try to read the eyes, take in facial expressions, body language, and catch, but not necessarily act upon the tone of the voice. The tone of the voice isn't always a true indicator of what is being said, so listen to it, but don't draw all your conclusions from the tone or you might miss the message.

On an everyday basis, we don't think about how we form our thoughts and I didn't either until I met Arcenio, an international student from Panama, studying at Parkland for a year. I met Arcenio, who is in the CCID (Community College for International Development) program at Parkland. Arcenio's goal is to learn English well enough, so he can teach it in Panama. He wanted to practice talking English; so I thought why not, we

have somewhat of a common link. I say somewhat because we are both of Latin descent and we speak Spanish, right? Just as people are different so is the Spanish spoken from, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Panama, etc., it is Spanish but with different dialects and some of the words have different meanings. Just like in Chicago, where there are pockets of ethnic groups, Panama has provinces where Portuguese is spoken, and Arcenio's province speaks Nybe.

So how do two Latin people have a conversation, when the common languages between the two are familiar but not? Well, probably to see us talking was a little comical. We used our hands a lot, using the air to form gestures and meanings. I tried reverting to Spanish to keep Arcenio in a comfort zone but he kept politely switching to English, reminding me of our purpose. We used eye contact for extra interpretation of what we were trying to say. At one point we even drew pictures but found out that neither one of us could draw, so we left that alone. We laughed a lot, said "umm", "how do you say?", and gave explanations hoping that the other one could find the right word(s) and would know what was being said. It kind of felt like playing Jeopardy but we were both winning. On occasion we reverted back and forth with Spanish to English; when that was the only way to be understood. But there again some words got lost in the translation in both languages. We had to not only to break down the language but break down the concepts that we were trying to tell each other. Because of the language barrier, we tried to keep our conversations simple, so that we wouldn't lose each other. That's when the mother in me came out, having raised two kids; you learn how to explain things in a simpler manner, which sometimes makes more sense. We were really giving our brains a

workout but it made both of us stop and take the time to really communicate to one another.

So what did I learn from Arcenio? I saw the happiness and pride in his eyes and in his smile, because one of his dreams, to come to America was happening. He was so happy to be here and not all of us can say that or we just take it for granted that we are here. When his coordinator picked him up from the airport she asked him if he was hungry. He really did not know what she was saying but it was finally understood he was hungry. She got him Mexican food and he said as hungry as he was he hardly ate. Although the food was familiar, it was prepared differently, not using the same ingredients, so he didn't eat much of it. He told me of another instance when friends asked him if he'd like to go out and eat a taco. Now you would think that tacos are pretty much a common food. Not so, Arcenio's voice was a little incredulous and his eyes were questioning, because in Nybe taco means a soccer shoe. He didn't understand why anyone would want to eat a soccer shoe, let alone feed it to him. So after his friends explained what it meant here, and after tasting a taco, he found out he liked them. He says he's getting used to eating Mexican food. When I asked him about his family, He told me how his Mom died of a brain tumor when he was in his teens. Seeing the hurt in his eyes and listening to him trying to control his voice, you can recognize pain and sorrow, which knows no cultural or language barriers. His Dad died earlier this year but he has his brothers and sisters. I asked him how he liked living in Champaign-Urbana: He said it was nice and he got lost a couple of times, it is a good town but people aren't as friendly as what he is used to. I needed him to explain that to me because coming from Chicago; I find this town very friendly. He said people are always busy going somewhere not taking the time to stop. He

felt in Panama, people weren't in so much of a hurry and showed an interest and were much friendlier. He has made some good friends here and likes having made the connections. The biggest challenge he has is in talking to people. Like many people from outside the U.S., he struggles with how words and expressions have more than one meaning and knowing the difference. I told him sometimes those of us who were born here, have that problem too. I don't think that was much comfort to him. The more I talk to Arcenio, I've noticed that his English is improving. He still speaks "broken English", which doesn't use the complete sound of the word, does not use the correct tense, or the correct word, but there is definite improvement. He is impatient and wants to learn English better and faster. I asked him how he liked Parkland and how his studies were coming along: He said Parkland is a good school, he liked the teachers, and he only got lost a few times in the building. As for his studies, he said they are going good and he looked away, not wanting me to see he has difficulty sometimes. I never thought about as a student, not only do you have to comprehend English but do it by reading, writing, and speaking it! I know there are times when I have trouble understanding what I just read and I know the language. But it just shows Arcenio's perseverance of him working hard on his next dream, to know English.

I've enjoyed talking to Arcenio and spending time with him. I had invited him and another international student to my house for Thanksgiving, where there was no Mexican food being served. If I want Mexican food for the holidays, I'd go to the original place, my Mom's house. Since neither student observed Thanksgiving in their own culture, they got to eat a traditional dinner. The day was in the 30's, chilly for us but definitely cold for them. Arcenio is used to a warmer climate and high humidity. So when a light flurry of

snow started to fall, they both went outside. Arcenio had never been in snow and he stood out in it, just smiling for the experience. He reminded me of a five year old, as he smiled. I hope he never loses that enthusiasm to learn about life. I tried to explain to them that it would get much, much colder here and a lot more snow. Well, now that the temperature is in the single digits, he says it's cold. I told him it will be colder come January and February; I don't think he is looking forward to that experience.

What did I learn from this experience? Not understanding a language spoken is like hearing a joke and being the only one who didn't get it. You feel isolated and not part of the group or what is going on. But you don't need to know a different language to have feelings of not belonging. So if you ever are fortunate to speak to someone of a different language, please, please, do not talk loud to them, they are not deaf. Don't talk so slow that they could fall asleep before you finish the sentence, because it wasn't that you talked too fast the first time, they just speak a different language. Understand that you have both started the communication process, so just stop, smile and enjoy the journey that is about to unfold and have fun.