



A Shared Experience of Intercultural Bridge Building Made Possible Through the Use of English



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...languages may also be supported for their ability to build social bridges across different groups...and bridges for increasing intercultural understanding (Baker, 2011, 382).

While conducting a research project in Malaysia in February 2007, I had the opportunity to visit a mosque. Upon entering the mosque, I was greeted by two young male attendants, who spoke very little English. As I sadly do not speak any Malay, by making use of simple English words and gestures, I asked if it would be possible to tour the mosque. One of the young men answered that I could and invited me in.

The young man, whom I shall call Ahmad, directed me towards the main prayer hall. It was a large and impressive circular space, whose walls and high dome-shaped ceiling were beautifully ornamented. I paused and looked around me in reverent silence. Then I asked Ahmad if he would show me how to pray. He agreed and watching him, I followed his movements closely. He seemed pleased but suddenly, he began to gesture as if firing a weapon. Then crossing his arms in front of his chest to signify the word "No," he asserted that, "This is not Islam." I nodded my head to show that I understood.

After the visit, we made our way outside, where a heavy downpour greeted us. Seeing this, Ahmad told me to wait while he re-entered the mosque. Returning minutes later, he explained as best as he could that someone was going to drive me back to my hotel, which happened to be situated somewhere on the other side of the city.

As we waited for the driver to arrive, Ahmad produced a small photograph of his wife and young son. I reciprocated by doing the same. During this time, we had a heartfelt exchange as we looked at each other's photographs and shared simple words - "wife," "son," "daughter," "family." Then a little red 4-seater car appeared. In it was a young couple who had just finished their mid-afternoon prayers.

We both got into the car, greetings were exchanged and then we started for my hotel in pouring rain, which by this point was falling fast and furious. With fogged out windows, poor visibility and city streets that were quickly flooding, the young driver was resolute. He more than once stepped out of the car and into the rain

to ask people huddled under leaky bus stops for directions to my hotel.

As challenging as this drive had become, we finally reached the hotel. Shaking hands with everyone and thanking them profusely for their kindness, trouble and generosity, Ahmad held my hand, looked straight into my eyes and very matter-of-factly proclaimed, "Sylvain, *this* is Islam."

As I bade farewell and stepped out of the car, I realized that despite our cultural, religious and linguistic differences, the exchange of no more than a handful of English words had permitted us to communicate and connect at a level that allowed us to get in touch with our shared humanity. Within a few hours, pure strangers had become friends.

Aside from its ability to build bridges between people, English is also a key that unlocks an important door to endless possibilities for communicating, sharing and learning with others about each other. South African writer Harry Mashabela described it best when he referred to English as a "much-needed unifying chord...[that] make[s] it possible to share the experiences of our own brothers [and sisters] in the world" (as cited in Crystal, 1997, p. 101). Echoing the very same idea, my chance encounter on that rainy afternoon in Malaysia was just such an experience.

References:

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