

THE TONGUE TWISTER

by Tim Torkildson

I never meant to grow up to be an ESL teacher. It didn't seem that I had the skill set for such a career. The consensus among my grade school and high school teachers was that I would do well in a job that kept me traveling and separated to some extent from the public. I followed their sage advice right out of high school, becoming a circus clown. It was hard work, and nothing to laugh at (can you tell I've used that joke before?). I traveled the world as a merry Andrew for several years before deciding to try my hand at obtaining a post graduate degree.

I found university to be a very welcoming institution. I majored in English, with a minor in Art, and graduated, magna cum so-so, after the requisite four years. I was not anxious to rejoin the big top, so took a paralegal job in a downtown law office. I still had no inkling of my approaching destiny as an ESL teacher. I was writing the Great Canadian Novel in my spare time. Nobody told me it would turn into the Great Canadian Wild Goose Chase, so I toiled away on my word processor in comparative bliss.

On vacation in Bangkok, Thailand, I ran into an old friend who needed someone to teach his native staff some rudimentary English. I took the job for a few weeks, as a lark. Some lark. What with cultural differences and my complete inability to formulate a simple lesson plan, my English classes were an unblushing shambles. Only the innate politeness and kindness of the Thai staff prevented me from being thrown out on my ear.

When my assignment was over, and it was time to return to North America, I decided instead to dig in my heels and get the drop on this here Teaching-English-as-a-Foreign-Language thing (known in academic circles as TEFL). Obtaining a visa extension, and giving notice back at the law office, I took a four-week teacher training course at TEFL International, in Ban Phe, Thailand, and was awarded a certificate that allowed me to teach in any public or private school in Thailand. The TEFL International course gave me the know-how to write up a decent, comprehensible lesson plan, as well as more solid grounding in grammar, phonetics and classroom management. I had no trouble landing a teaching position in Bangkok, and in my spare time continued to write what I now dubbed the Great Canadian Expat Novel.

I did okay as a TEFL instructor; in fact, I began to get a little smug. Getting the hang of this English teaching business wasn't so hard. I had picked it up in mid-life as a brand new career. Seemed like anybody could do it, if they spoke English growing up. Inevitably, my hubris came home to roost.

Two years ago, virtual online teaching came of age. Countries like Japan and South Korea suddenly

made money available for their own school teachers to brush up on their English via one-on-one sessions with professional TEFL staff world-wide. I couldn't wait to get on the bandwagon, and soon had online classes scheduled from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. each weekday. Each session was twenty minutes, based on a textbook lesson that popped up magically on the computer screen for both the student and me to work from.

The South Koreans I worked with were amazingly dedicated to learning English, but the Internet, while providing fantastic opportunities to span great distances in the blink of an eye, also provided something of a Berlin Wall—I found my students growing more shy and diffident as the weeks went by. They kept wanting to sit back and repeat phrases in English by rote. As any TEFL professional will tell you, that attitude is death to progressing in a new language. I needed something to break the ice each morning when we started our online exchange. Something to challenge them but not frighten or embarrass them.

And then it came to me, a memory from my distant grade school days. On those seemingly interminable days when both teacher and students were anxiously tracking the clock, when ennui seemed as palpable as the chalk dust, we would do tongue twisters! That never failed to rouse our spirits while keeping us somewhere near our academic pursuits.

So I tried a few on my online students:

*A skunk sat on a stump and think the stump stunk,
but the stump think the skunk stunk.*

**

*A big black bug bit the big black bear,
but the big black bear bit the big black bug back!*

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And my personal favourite: *Unique New York* (say it three times as fast as you can!).

Lo and behold, my Korean students opened right up—struggling with high good humour to master each word in sequence. In no time at all my students and I were bonding over the challenges of “she sells sea shells by the sea shore...”

And by the way, I am no longer working on the Great Canadian Expat Novel. I am now trying to come up with the next Great Canadian Tongue Twister!

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