

It's a funny language

by BRIAN LOCKHART

Several years ago, I had a part-time job in a local place doing rather mundane, assembly-line work.

It was unusual, as half of the team there had regular jobs like mine and used this job to make some extra money and pay bills. The other half of the employees there considered the place to be their sole means of support.

It was a real mix of different people.

All in all, I liked everyone there, and we actually had a lot of fun at work.

There was one fellow I worked with who was ethnic Chinese, grew up in Jakarta, Indonesia, and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering from Nebraska State University.

My friend spoke enough English that we could converse; however, he was having trouble obtaining employment as an engineer, as he said no one would hire him because he didn't have a command of the language.

I'm not sure, but maybe being an electrical engineer requires good verbal skills to avoid electrocuting someone on the job.

I asked him, how in the world did he graduate from a university without being able to speak the language?

He explained that although he understood only about 20 per cent of what the professors were saying, he understood the numbers. I guess that enabled him to pass his exams.

When we worked together, he would often come in and ask me the meaning of a new word he had heard on a television show.

I would explain the word and use it in context so he understood.

I recall one time he came to work and asked me what it meant when you refer to someone as a 'jerk.'

He was watching a TV show the previous night, and the word 'jerk' was used several times.

I explained what it meant, sort of.

That is a hard word to explain. Is a jerk an annoying person? A disagreeable person? Someone you don't want to be around?

I finally poked him in the chest a couple of times with my finger to be annoying. He laughed and said he understood.

I only speak one language, although I took French in college and have been trying to learn more of it over the past year, so I can at least ask for directions if I'm lost in Quebec.

It must be difficult for a person to learn English as an adult. There are so many words with double or ambiguous meanings that it must be hard to understand how it all works.

I was driving through Alliston a couple of weeks ago with an out-of-town friend of mine, when I pointed out the Honda automotive plant.

To someone just learning English, how would they process that? Isn't a plant something you place in a pot to grow? Or the method of putting seedlings in the ground? What has that got to do with a place where they build cars?

There are words with several meanings, and it is often hard to explain them.

The sun goes UP in the morning, and you also look UP. You get UP in the morning, and rise UP to an occasion.

You can also put UP with something, ask someone to speak UP, find out your time is UP at an appointment, bring something UP for discussion, start UP your computer, start UP your car, and offer UP a solution. On top of that, you clean UP your house, put UP supplies, cut UP a piece of paper, and pull your car UP to the curb.

Try explaining that word to someone who has never spoken the language.

I used to work with a Polish woman who taught me a little about her first language. That's when I learned that not all languages have articles like the word 'the.'

That's why you will sometimes hear people using English as a second language utter a phrase like 'close door,' rather than 'close THE door.' The word simply has no context for them, at least at first.

I was once standing next to a woman in a store who was from, I believe, Northern Africa, asking for a box for her purchase.

She simply could not say the word, and it came out something like 'bookus'. I think that whatever her native language was, it just didn't include any pronunciation that ended in an 'x', and that would be a tough one to learn.

Whenever I run into someone who is still learning English, I always take the time to listen to them and help them out.

After all, I may need some directions in Quebec someday, and I hope the person I ask will be just as patient with me.