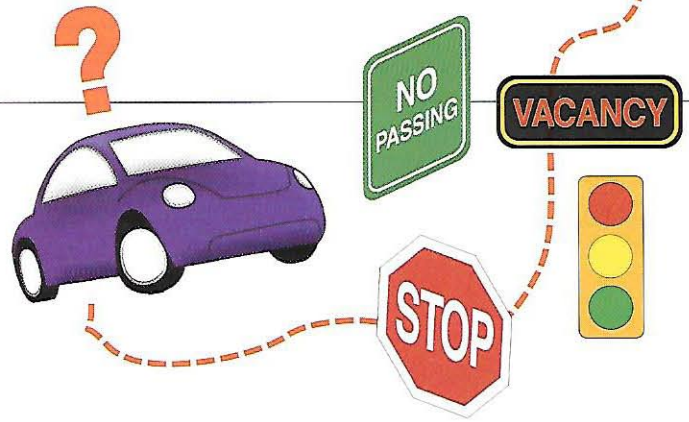


LONG JOURNEY

Understanding English isn't as easy as ABC—but it sure can make people laugh.

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Everybody has heard at least one story about the funny situations foreigners get themselves into when they first come to this country.

Quite a few of those stories have to do with the fact that the “foreigner” is usually not very fluent in the native language. How about that one about the guy who went to one of those night spots with the cutesy gender descriptions on the restroom doors, and didn’t know whether to choose “Buccaneers” or “Wenches”?

This one happened to my brother: He had just arrived to the States, and a friend was driving him around town. He kept seeing all these hotels with “vacancy” signs. At a certain point, he said to his friend: “Man, this “Vacancy” hotel is a huge chain, isn’t it?” And his friend jokingly answered, “Oh, yeah! But not as big as their main competitors, the “No Vacancy” Hotels...”

Here’s another classic: A friend of mine came to Orlando and was driving to Cape Canaveral. He had saved for a long time for this trip, and the highlight of his stay was going to be his visit to NASA. Well, at a certain point of his trip, the four-lane road he was on became a two-lane road. A little later, he noticed a sign that said, “No Passing.” (which simply means you cannot pass another car). Extremely disappointed, and thinking he could not pass because the road was blocked ahead, he turned around and drove back. True story.

Funny, huh? Well, not when it happens to you.

When I came here, I never thought I would have to go through such embarrassing situations. After all, those were for people who didn’t know their English very well. In Brazil, I had studied English very hard since high school and had attended several good private language courses. I had also chosen English as my major in college. Of course, I knew I was going to have to learn a few slangs and stop saying things like, “I’m going to check if the correspondence arrived” or “would you be so kind as to pass me the sugar?” But I always believed

that due to my “deep” knowledge of the English language, I would be in for a smooth ride.

I had been living in the United States for two years, and in Orlando for a few months. My husband, an all-American guy from Georgia, was at the time working for Martin Marietta’s (now Lockheed Martin’s) data processing department. We had just one car. I had just gotten my driver’s license and was excited about the fact I had the car that day, for the first time. A friend had given my husband a ride to work, which was just five minutes away, and I was supposed to pick him up for lunch. Since I have virtually no sense of direction, I was a little nervous about trying to find my way in a strange city. My husband assured me it would be a piece of cake. “It’s just five minutes from here. Don’t you remember? We’ve done it many times together. You can take the back road to the first stop sign, turn left and then it’s a straight shot to my work. That’s all: left at the stop sign and then straight,” he said. OK. First stop sign. Five minutes. Sounds easy. I can do it.

So, at the assigned time, I went to pick him up. He was going to wait outside for me. I took the back road and looked for a stop sign. Now, I need to explain one small detail. In my native language, Portuguese, the word “sign” would translate to “sinal,” which happens to mean “traffic light” and not “stop sign.” So, I was actually looking for a stop light. I didn’t find any, and I kept driving along the road, until it ended. I turned around, went back and decided to start over.

Maybe there was a light, and I just hadn’t noticed it, I thought. I got to the end of the road again—no light. I went back to the office and called my husband. Somebody went to call him outside (he had already been waiting for 20 minutes).

“I never saw a stop sign!” I yelled.

“What do you mean? It’s the very first sign you come to,” he responded. “How can you have missed it? Did you take the right back road? Just go back again, and turn left at the first stop sign you see.”

Well, there I went again. No light. End of

the road. At that point, I saw a couple of women in front of a house and decided to ask for directions to Martin Marietta. Unfortunately, I also didn’t know at the time there was another Martin Marietta branch nearby. The well-intentioned ladies gave me directions to the wrong branch, which was about a 30-minute drive from there.

At that point, my husband was extremely worried. He had spent his one-hour lunch time standing outside, waiting for me to make that five-minute ride. I hadn’t called again. He was thinking accident, hospital, police. He was about to go inside and ask somebody to drive him around to try to find me, when one of his co-workers called him—“Your wife is on the phone again.”

I had made it back to our office, after brilliantly figuring out that the nice ladies had sent me the wrong way. But I still didn’t know how to get to where my husband was. We had the same argument again.

“But there is no sign!”

“What do you mean, there is no sign? It’s the first stop sign!”

So there I went again, for the third time, to try to reach my destination.

After getting to the end of the road one last time, it finally dawned on me that maybe, just maybe, he was talking about that road sign which said “Stop” back there at the first intersection. I started over, finally turning left at the stop sign, and what do you know? I got to my husband’s work in five minutes. And just an hour and 25 minutes later than he was expecting me! Needless to say, we didn’t have lunch that day, and my husband and his co-workers had a good laugh at my cost.

And, so it was that my “five-minute ride” became one of those embarrassing and humiliating stories that everyone laughs at, and one that my husband (now ex-husband) always had to bring up when we met people.

My theory is that this is all part of a major conspiracy to make it impossible for the poor foreigners to ever fit in. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.