

Working with ESL Clients (June 4, 2018)

The other day I finished an editing assignment from a client who lives just a few miles away from my apartment here in Wilmette, Illinois. The client is a Chinese immigrant who had worked for an auction house in New York and in the kitchen of various Manhattan restaurants. After coming to Chicago, she began sending out applications to law schools in the Midwest. (That's what I was helping her with.) In her essay, she described her work at an auction house, which involved explaining to wealthy Chinese in the art market what the company had to offer. It is a pretty exclusive world, selling Pollocks and Rothkos to those able to afford them, but she decided ultimately that it was not for her. (Last November, da Vinci's "Salvator Mundi" sold for \$450 million at Christie's. According to *The New York Times*, the auction house marketing campaign included a video of "top executives pitching the painting to Hong Kong clients"; sales staff likened the painting, unknown until about ten years ago, to "the discovery of a new planet.")

This is all very glamorous, but it's not for my client. She would rather use her training in the law to help people who need help. Although I explained to her that the bar is a crowded and competitive world, she went through with the application process and was accepted by a law school in Michigan. She is taking classes part-time now at a law school here in Chicago and will transfer the credits when she moves this fall.

Her English is quite good. Most people with experience in working with ESL clients know that writing is the hardest thing to do in a second language. A sentence is either grammatically correct or not; errors that can be overlooked in conversation stand out conspicuously when they're written down. We both had a laugh over her misuse of the word "lap." She was discussing a work of art in which a female subject was standing with a garment around her abdomen. She described the middle range of the body as "the lap," and I had to explain that the word is not a part of the human anatomy. You have a lap sitting down, I told her, and you can put a book or a pet there, but it obviously disappears as soon as you stand up.

The client not only wants to acquire a law degree but also to become a legal writer. All lawyers have to write, of course; writing is just about inseparable from practicing law. But this young woman wants to write for the public and not only for the courts, clients, or other lawyers. She hopes, I think, to explain difficult legal subjects to the public and make a name for herself. It is another reminder of the ambition these young Asian immigrants bring to their new lives in the U.S. Her classes, as I say, begin this fall, and I hope she keeps me informed of her progress.

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