



I had signed up for an **English teaching** work exchange program in Czechia. It was held in the beautiful area of Treborn, 120 kms away from Prague. The program had twenty native English speakers and twenty Czech English speakers, and the idea was to improve conversational English by living together for a week in a nice resort and working together in a range of structured and unstructured activities. (The unstructured activities involved copious amounts of draft beer, much appreciated by all!)

The English speakers came from a range of countries—the US and the UK being predominant, but also teachers from China, Italy and Spain, who I started making new friends with. I got introduced to a completely new set of travelers—the forever travelers. Right on the first day I met an ex-professional tennis player/Silicon Valley exec who had started six companies and had now been on the road for twenty-eight years! Another engineer was at it for fifteen years. Most interestingly to me was the story of the suburban couple from Georgia—she a quality specialist and he of the insurance industry— who had kids in university like me and had yet done a major upheaval more courageous than mine: they did not even keep anything in storage, they had sold everything!

The goal of the camp was to improve conversational English. Since all of the structured time was to

be filled with conversations—which they probably had to repeat twenty times—we had to delve into their lives for material, and I learnt many insights. We stumbled our way into connecting, sometimes just with a lot of smiles. The teenagers were more confident in their speaking, and so were the professionals, but the others were less so. Everyone agreed that the language is strange, as it did not sound like it is written. A lot of folks had also studied German—it is considered the language of the EU economy—and felt it to be easier to study. But all they agreed that English is needed to get ahead at work and in the world, and continued their struggle with it. Especially frustrating were the tenses and the prepositions. While most were able to translate big words, they stumbled over making correct complete sentences, which became even more complicated as they also wanted to articulate complicated thoughts, literally trying to translate a string of disjointed phrases as they thought through complex scenarios. I started coaching them to speak simple sentences, and to pause for a bit to complete a sentence in the mind before saying it aloud.

A person that really struggled—in fact he did not even try to speak—was Kovo, a handsome man in his sixties, with long flowing gray hair, who just chose to give a sideways laconic smile every time he was asked to speak. When it was my turn with him, I spoke even more slowly than usual. Also, I decided to use a topic that seemed to be more successful with older men: their work. Usually there are a lot more English words that they already know with work duties.

So I started, “Kovo, what do you do at work?”

“Work?” He raised an eyebrow. “No English.” He shook his head. “What do you do at job?”

“Oh job. Okay. I Project Quality Engineer.”

I was much heartened; this was good. As a project engineer, he would have to do a lot of cross functional activities, and we should be able to find common words. He had said that he worked for cars, and I planned to relate that with my automotive experiences.

I tried, “Can you describe your job?” “Describe?” The eyebrow raised again. “What do you do?”

“Do?”

“Ok, Kovo, you go to job in morning? Yes? You drive? Yes? You park car? Then go in building? Then, what? You have coffee?” I was encouraged by him nodding and following along.

“Yeah, coffee.” “Then?”

Oh, pshwsh! The shaking of the head and smiling, no English.

Finally, we resorted to the translator app—the only person in the group who needed it. He typed, “I do meeting, I do documentation.”

I nodded and thought there was not much one can do with documentation and so I typed, “Can you describe a big quality issue you fixed?”

Oh, his eyes lit up, and he started to type, but I asked him to put his phone away and speak.

He started, “Hoses?” I nodded, yes, I get hoses.

“Hoses OD.” He drew a circle on his palm.

“Customer twenty centimeter. It nineteen point eight centimeter.” He drew another inner circle and looked inquiringly at me to see if I understood the issue. I nodded, beginning to get an idea where he was going, both of us intently looking at his palm.

I asked, “What fix you make?” Make is a clearer word than do, it seemed. “Drawing...” he gesticulated, trying to find a word.

I prompted, “Drawing Change?” Like the engineering term. “Yes!” He let out his breath in relief. We both smiled.

“Ok, a manufacturing issue or a design issue.” I probed, “Who made mistake? Company or supplier?”

We struggled for the word for supplier. Vendor did not work either. The word was Component Manufacturer. Turns out the vendor had manufactured to specs, but the issue was the specification itself. Specification, by the way, was a common word.

Both of us were much encouraged at the connection. We then proceeded to connect on the hose manufacturing process. I racked my brain on what I remembered of the injection molding process, and we walked through the steps one by one, delighted to find that almost all words were common. We stumbled a bit over Deburring, but the word Finishing was adequate, and as Kovo explained the

processes, he became more and more confident, which was great to see. Turns out that hoses were all that his company made, not the entire car disappointingly—I informed him that I had worked on a locomotive which has more than 20,000 unique components, and he was much impressed.

Compared to Kovo, it was a much easier job description conversation with Marek. Marek, a robust man of seventy-eight years Old, said with a small joking smile that he was basically doing the program to stave off dementia. But his clear eyes and steady voice made me sense that there was much more to this calm man. When he explained his job—in very professional English—he unveiled details of a fascinating career as a blast engineer for quarries, laying out dynamite, making plans, directing the workmen, sequencing the blast operations, a career which he yet continued to work as a consultant. Not only he, but his wife—his second wife—was also yet working as a steel technician at the age of seventy-five!

“We have good life,” he said in that calm manner of his. “I am at good point in life.” As I stared into his wrinkled but amazingly healthy face, I wondered whether I must live that long as well, and whether I have a responsibility to remain as fulfilled. And am I prepared for it, emotionally, financially? I felt a wave of something overwhelming cross over me; it felt like a long road to stay the course.

But I switched and decided to challenge him further, still. I asked him to imagine a story.

“Imagine?”

“Yes, like a fairy tale.”

“Ok,” he rattled off without pausing. “I imagine I am in New Zealand. I traveled with my brother to see my cousin. We went camping.”

I said, “Marek, it is a nice story but is it real or imaginary?” “True,” he said, “it is true story.”

“Ok, I am not asking for a true story, I am asking for an imaginary story.”

“For example,” I began (For Example is a very important phrase for the students, helps them follow the switch in conversation), “once upon a time, there was a king of the castle of Nizbor (a river town near Prague, I remembered from my canoeing). One day he decided that he should capture NZ...”

“I am a king?” he asked.

“No, Marek, another person is king. Imaginary king. Maybe, say, Charles the Nineteenth.”

He stayed perplexed. Then he shook his head. “Cannot do it.”

I was taken aback by the determined shake. This is usually a fun and easy game. I explained, “I am trying to help you improve your English further. With work words you already know, it is easy. With imaginary you will have to build and speak new words at the same time. Do try.”

Then I added more to the story. “The king comes to NZ with army, attacks and gets land...”

He thought and continued, humoring me: “He builds big house, big swimming pool...” “Ok, good, nice... then?”

He really didn’t like doing this imaginary story. His lips tightened. I was beginning to sense that he didn’t like being pushed.

Finally, he declared, “Big storm, everyone die, end of story.” I laughed. We both laughed. The tension was broken.

But after a few minutes, I persisted. “Don’t kill them off Marek, how about this? 200 years later. A man is camping with his brother. He comes across a bone. An old human bone. He takes it to the museum. They come and start Archaeology.... Digging... and they find?”

He absolutely did not like this extension to the story. “No find,” he said, his English worsening in agitation. “Only one bone in museum. People steal. No more bones. End of story.”

I then gave up, and we switched to talking about his winery process, the technical details of which he slid into with great relief. The winery process steps I learned are 1. Crushing, 2. Fermentation in plastic barrels 3. Filtering 4. Sealing in steel barrels. It is ready to drink after a month.
