

What Language Teachers and Learners Can Learn from Nelson Mandela: Ubuntu: I am because we are

By Karen Rowan

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in attempting to explain the African concept of Ubuntu, begins this way: “Ubuntu is an approach to life that is very difficult to describe in English words.”

Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa, understood the crux of this problem. We cannot completely understand the perspective of another without understanding the language in which he speaks.

He cautioned his wardens that someday, when all of this was over, that they would be sitting across a table from each other negotiating. The outcome of that conversation, he prophesized, would be determined by how the wardens treated the political prisoners during their years of captivity. Twenty-seven years later, that proved to be true.

In endeavoring to understand the perspective of his captors while a political prisoner, he began to learn the language of his white wardens, Afrikaans.

Fellow political prisoner Fikile Bam gave an interview with PBS about Nelson Mandela.

“Well, Nelson was very serious about his Afrikaans, and not just the language, but he was very serious about learning to understand the Afrikaner--his mind and how he thought. Because in his mind, and he actually preached this, the Afrikaner was an African. He belonged to the soil and that whatever solution there was going to be on the political issues, was going to involve Afrikaans people. They, after all, were part and parcel with the land, apart from the points that they were the rulers of the land, but ... they had grown up and they had a history in the country, which he wanted to understand. And hence put a lot of work and effort into learning to speak Afrikaans and to use it ... He had absolutely no qualms about greeting people in Afrikaans, and about trying his Afrikaans out on the warders. He did not have any inhibition at all about that [...] He wanted to really get to know Afrikaners, as part of the people who belonged to the country.”

“Mandela himself studied Afrikaans systematically,” writes Sampson, author of the authorized biography of Nelson Mandela, “reading many Afrikaans books, and spoke it quite well.”

Here’s an excerpt from the History Channel’s biography of Mandela:

“During his incarceration Mandela taught himself to speak Afrikaans and learned about Afrikaner history. He was able to converse with his guards in their own language, using his charm and intelligence to reason with them and try to understand the way they thought. This caused the authorities to replace the guards around Mandela regularly as it was felt that they could were becoming too lenient in their treatment of their famous prisoner.”

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Archbishop Desmond Tutu continues struggling to find English words to define Ubuntu:

“It speaks to the very essence of being human. Saying, ‘My humanity is caught up... is inextricably bound up in yours. We belong in a bundle of life.’

And so we say in our part of the world, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’

It says not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather ‘I am human because I belong, I participate, I share. In harmony, friendliness, community[...] that you and I are made for interdependence. You and I are made for complementarity. You have gifts that I don’t have and I have gifts that you don’t have.’

And you might almost see God rubbing God’s hands in glee... Voila! That is exactly why I created you... that you should know your need for the other.”

At the age of 91, Nelson Mandela was sitting eating in his own living room. John Carlin, author of the 2009 book “Knowing Mandela” said that Mandela, previously barely engaged in the conversation interjected “My people said I was afraid. They said I was a coward because I reached out to the Afrikaner... They have seen the results. We have peace.”

It is notable, that the growth of Mandela’s Afrikaans was attributable to reading. All that is required for language acquisition to take place, according to Stephen Krashen, is “access to books and a quiet comfortable place to read.” Mandela had time and access to books, if not a comfortable place in which to read.

Language and culture are intertwined and interdependent. As speakers of other languages, we are also sowing the seeds of peace and mutual understanding. The big picture of language teaching and learning is the responsibility we have to conscientiously seek to understand the perspective of the people whose language we are learning.

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.” Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, died at the age of 95 on December 5, 2013. A political prisoner for 27 years, he learned Afrikaans while in prison and ultimately obtained for the citizens of South Africa the right to vote. For his collaboration with then President Frederik Willem de Klerk, they both received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 “for their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa.” Mandela followed as the next President of South Africa.

Perspectives on Ubuntu

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“A person is a person through other people strikes an affirmation of one’s humanity through recognition of an ‘other’ in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the ‘other’ becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The ‘I am’ is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance”. -Michael Onyebuchi Eze, addressing “the core of Ubuntu.”

“In the old days when we were young, a traveller through a country would stop at a village, and he didn’t have to ask for food or for water: once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not address themselves. The question therefore is, are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you, and enable it to improve? These are the important things in life. And if one can do that, you have done something very important which will be appreciated.” Nelson Mandela, in an interview with Tim Modise.

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Tutu, Desmond on Ubuntu. Web. youtube.com/watch?v=GaiKX5VdfVE