

 011005 English Expert

Well, I am afraid that the travel plans have fallen through once again. Santiago, one of the guys that I was going to Norway with, was unable to go this weekend due to a heavy work load. Actually, we all have several projects due this week so it is probably good that we had the extra days to work on them. We handed our wind turbine project in yesterday after spending around 10 hours each evening trying to get our simulations on the computer programs Maple and Matlab to work. Finally late on Wednesday night we had a breakthrough and it felt really good to finally hand that report in on Thursday after only finishing it a few hours before the 8AM class.

Micah and I have postponed our trip to our October break when we will have a week off from classes. We will have more time to explore Norway rather than to just dash up for a weekend. The reason that we had not originally wanted to go during the break was so that Santiago could go with us. Santiago will unfortunately be able to accompany us during the break because he is flying to Peru to talk to his girlfriend about getting married. A serious case of misplaced priorities. :) Anyway, at this point, I will just tell you when I have gotten back from Norway rather than when I am going since the date seems to be a moving target.

However, I am sending you pictures with this email! The pictures were taken by Micah during our bike ride to the art museum a few weeks ago. The pictures will be sent in a second email.

Notes

Being a native English speakers, the other people from the US and I are often looked at as resources during conversations for unknown words. For example someone will be talking about one of those things that you use to keep the rain off and I am expected to supply "umbrella". I don't mind this role, but it means that I have to always be on top of the conversation so that when the question comes I will be able to answer from the context. In general, the other students here have tremendous English vocabularies and I am constantly amazed at the words that they do know. So, when they don't know a word it is often something that is not commonly heard.

The role as English referee can lead to some problems, however. For example, in my Partial Differential Equations class, the professor has a habit of excessively using the word "trivial". "This triple integral that I have derived is trivial to solve and so I will just write the answer." The native English speakers in the class (US and Britain) have picked up the habit as a sarcastic way to describe a situation where we are stuck. At one point, we were working on a lab that had us baffled and so we called it trivial. Eric, one of the other students who was not a native English speaker asked what "trivial" meant. I explained that we were using the word in this case to describe a problem that was really difficult as something that is easy in a sarcastic way. Unfortunately, Eric didn't understand that the meaning was sarcastic and starting adapting "trivial" to mean

something that truly was really difficult. He starting saying thing such as "one thing that I find to be really trivial is this equation here", meaning that he couldn't solve it. Oops. Hopefully I have since set him on the correct path.

In addition to the English referee, I also sometimes wind up trying to correct misconceptions about the US by students from Europe. For example, one student who has been to the US was told by his German bank that certain credit cards are only excepted in certain regions of the country. The bank even had a map to indicate that Visa is the only credit card accepted in New England and Mastercard is the only card accepted in California. But, don't try to take either with you during your travels to the deep south since that is the territory of American Express. I don't think that I was able to persuade my friend that this is not true. Another misconception that I have heard is that although people in the US must pay for their mobile charges, land phones are free to use except for long distance calls. Food is another problem where hamburgers are seen as king. I also ran into this in China. But, how do you describe the hodge-podge of foods that are now part of the US diet? So, I usually just explain the food that I like to cook.

Computers

Here in Denmark, in addition to everyone having a mobile, people here are big consumers of flat screen monitors. Every business that I have seen including banks and travel agencies all use flat monitors. The labs at DTU are probably split 50-50 between old monitors and the flat screens. I am curious as to why the monitors have been such a big hit here despite the costs. Maybe they are more environmentally friendly?

TV

As I have mentioned before, I get the bulk of my news from the BBC. The majority of their correspondents in the Middle East and Asia are currently women. Jackie Rollands is actually broadcasting from inside of Afghanistan and Sussana Price is in Islamabad. I note this not because a woman not be an effective correspondent. Rather, being a female in a male dominated society must involve all sorts of hurdles that they must pass over in addition to those of doing their job and I am very impressed.

While on the subject of TV, there is an Arab television station that I pick up off the satellite feed that includes a take off of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire". The stage and the setting are all identical to the original show, but the questions are all presented and written in Arabic. I was flipping past the station one day when I came across the show. The contestant at the time was a woman dressed from head to toe in the black covering of which name eludes me at the moment. The only part of her that was showing was her eyes. It made for a surreal take off of the US television show.

Aid

Unicef planes have begun to arrive in Asia with foodstuffs destined for the Afghan refugees. The supplies originated here in Copenhagen where large Unicef warehouses can be seen from the train as one goes to the downtown area.

The news is still dominated by the terrorist attack as I imagine it must be in the US. People here are still waiting to see what the US response will be as I imagine that people are doing everywhere. Being removed from the US, it is difficult for me to judge the overall mood of the public. Are people more aware of the world or are they learning towards isolationism? Clearly, anyone who thought that the US could isolate itself from the rest of the world had that misconception shattered on September 11th. One could argue that people in the US have become oblivious to the rest of the world. In a sense, we as a people have allowed ourselves to be psychologically isolated from this world of which we take up a very small amount of space.

How many people in the US can name the Prime Minister of Britain, our closest ally. Let alone the names of the prime minister and president of our neighboring countries to the north and south, respectively or the name of the leader of Afghanistan. (I would need to look up the Canadian and Afghan. Bush also had to do similar homework during his presidential campaign.) One only has to pick up any but the largest US papers to find a desperate lack of international news. For example, the St. Louis Post Dispatch maybe dedicated one page to reporting all of the non-US news each day.

The psychological isolation is particularly acute when it has come to the Arab nations of the world. The administration has said that in hindsight it was a mistake to have kept so many US forces in Saudi Arabia after Desert Storm. Saudi Arabia is a monarchy with a government that is friendly to the US, but which does not necessarily represent the public opinion of the people that they rule over. The presence of so many US troops for so long must have been very difficult for the government. From this perspective, is it any wonder why they now do not want to allow the US to use these bases to potentially wage war with another Muslim state? A state which Saudi Arabia was one of three nations to recognize until a week ago?

Wouldn't it be neat if the keen desire of the administration to foster working relationships with other countries to form an international coalition against terrorism will focus the attention of Americans to the rest of the world? The quiet decision by the conservatives in the House such as DeLay to finally stop their efforts to block the payment of some of the back dues that the US owes to the UN is a very good start. (We will pay \$582 million of the \$862 million that we owe.) The US has been the biggest debtor nation of the UN according to the Washington Post, which is terribly embarrassing as we rally the nations of the world to action.

The average European has a pretty firm grasp of the geography of the US whereas most people in the US would probably be hard pressed to point out the nations of Luxemburg

or Belgium on a map of Europe, let alone Andorra (or Denmark for that matter)! (What is the largest country in Europe? Denmark of course! (when you include Greenland)). How can we as a people increase our knowledge of the people and politics of the rest of the world? Does it start with our education or is it a subject which people just do not find of interest? Travel is one route to better understanding. It seems that people here in Europe have a different concept of international travel, but that can most likely be attributed to the compact size of the European states. What is the public perspective of the terrorist attacks in Kashmir or the loss of the airliner over the Black Sea? Has our general perspective of acts of terror or despair elsewhere in the world changed from indifference since September 11?

What is being noted in the news here is the bipartisan support that the President is currently receiving from Congress. The support of congress for the President's antiterrorism package shows a national unification. (The BBC is reporting that \$8 billion of the \$40 billion anti terrorism fund is for the rebuilding of the WTC. Is the breakdown of the money involved accurate?) However, the pork that is being attached to the larger anti-terrorism bill that is now in Congress is disheartening. Opening the Artic wildlife reserve for oil drilling has no place being snuck onto the anti-terrorism legislation.

Sorry to have gotten onto the soapbox. I'll get down by concluding that I most certainly am planning to travel as much as I can during break and thereafter. The warnings of the State Department are to be taken seriously, but I am not going to let the terrorist threat deter me from having the experiences that I came here to have. Plus, with so many people canceling reservations, hotels are rumored to be desperate for guests and willing to negotiate to levels compatible even with the Scandinavian hostels (not as inexpensive as elsewhere in Europe). Tourism here in Europe is predicted to suffer tremendously as people in the US stay to their side of the pond and as the airlines here go belly up one after the other. (Who would have thought that Swiss Air would allow its over ambitious expansion to destroy the company? Let's just hope that Sabena survives with the help of the Belgium government since my return ticket for Christmas is on that carrier!)

Enjoy the pictures!

Jeff



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