



'Better Late than Never' (Guardian Education 20-04-2004)

Before you read:

Look at the headline 'Better Late than Never'. What does it mean?

Look at the opening lines

'After 50 years in the steelworks of Sheffield, a group of retired Yemeni men are finally getting the chance to learn English.'

What do you hope to find out from this newspaper article? Write five questions you hope will be answered.

1. _____?
2. _____?
3. _____?
4. _____?
5. _____?

2. While reading

Your questions.... answered?

Read the article quickly looking for the answers to your questions. Write the answers above.

Read the article quickly and look for the following facts:

1. How many students are in the English class?
2. Where are they from?
3. Where did all the students use to work?
4. How long have they lived in Sheffield?
5. How old are they?
6. How many times a week does the English class meet?
7. When did the class start?
8. What's the name of the class teacher?
9. Why are the students keen to learn English?



Better late than never

by LOUISE TICKLE

In a narrow room at the top of a large terraced house, 20 students are squeezing amiably past one another to their seats, chattering noisily, jostling the teacher, handing in homework and settling down ready for an English class. So far, it might seem, so ordinary.

These students, however, are an extraordinary group of individuals. They hold memories of a unique moment in industrial history back in the 1950s that brought them as young men thousands of miles from rural villages in Yemen to look for jobs in the Sheffield steelworks.

For three decades they laboured in the dirtiest jobs the steel industry had to offer. Now, in their retirement, each individual in this class has decided to become a student of a language they were never able to learn because, in most cases, no tuition was offered by their employer nor by the state.

With an average age of 75, this must be one of the oldest classes in the country. Mastering English is clearly not an easy task for any of these men. Saleh Ali Ahmed – at 81, the oldest student here today in the headquarters of Sheffield's Yemeni Community Association – smiles and shakes his head when asked how it's going. 'It's not so bad. I've been coming here four months now, but it's difficult when you're older.'

But the intense yearning to understand other people in their adopted city is almost tangible, and it is a feeling that has kept these students coming to class four days a week, every week since last September. Mohammed Alwy Omairat, 79, was 31 when he arrived in the UK in 1956. For many years, he worked in the local steelworks as the 'spare man' – a highly valued employee who was skilled at every job and could fill in for absent or sick colleagues in all areas of the factory. Dapper and dignified in a bright blue shirt, he has just gained a distinction in English for speakers of other languages.

'When I went at first to the employment office in Attercliffe [location of the steelworks] I asked the manager if we could go to English classes. 'We must learn English', I tried to say to him. He looked at me and said: 'Listen to me! You are not here to learn, you're in England to work, only work!' And that is what it was like. They did not give us any classes in English: we had to learn words in the foundries and rolling mills and try to understand what the gaffers said to us.'

Working in a dangerous industry without the ability to speak or understand English was particularly hazardous. Many of today's students point out that terrible accidents occurred because they could not read safety instructions or warning notices, or even follow English instructions, when they arrived at the factories.

Chris Searle, the group's teacher for the past six months, was astonished when he first heard the speech rhythms that had been picked up on the factory floor. 'One of the things that interested me as a teacher of English for many years was that theirs is a unique type of English, learnt almost entirely in a busy and dangerous industrial setting,' he says.

'They use the imperative mode all the time, and that's because they're used to having orders given to them. I had to get used to that – it's startling, because they talk in commands'. Of course, they only spoke English in the factory, and when they left, after long shifts of up to 16



hours sometimes, they would go to Yemeni cafés and to their houses where they would have spoken only Arabic.'

Ensuring that these students can learn to become more self-reliant in the language of their adopted country is clearly a passion for this teacher, who takes pains to acknowledge the contribution his students made as young men to the industrial wealth of the north of England.

'Being able to communicate is something that's been denied them and I can see what an injustice that's been in their lives', he says. 'They've given so much to England. Basically, Yemenis kept the steel industry going for the last 30 years of its life.'

In a class of such differing abilities, though, teaching the language can clearly be a challenge. 'This is just about the most differentiated group in terms of ability I've ever taught,' adds Searle with a grin, 'and I've had to use a lot of different methods. Some people have no experience of being literate in any language, so you're starting from the beginning to teach them literacy in English. With some, you just try to get them to shape the letters. But others, who are dedicated students, can be quite advanced. You have to give people tasks according to their ability, and, at the same time, you have to use the strength of their community experience to invigorate classes.'

Motivation comes from the chance to communicate the students' life histories and working experiences; all are committed Muslims and are keenly interested in the situation in the Middle East, which often furnishes discussion. Local issues, too, will frequently provoke debate, and by making the lessons relevant to each member of his class, Searle has created a learning environment which his students find satisfying both socially and educationally.

The question remains: why exactly should 20 retired, elderly men be taking the trouble to learn English when they have lived, worked and supported their families successfully for 50 years without being fluent in the language?

Mohammed Alwy Omairat answers this question with absolute clarity. 'I want to learn. I want to know how to speak. I want to know English grammar. There is shame not to speak English with good grammar when somebody has been in this country for 40 years. Some people ask me why I bother, but I just close my ears. I come to this class because I want to learn to communicate.'

He is backed up by Qassim Muthenna Obadi, 81. 'We want to know everything. When I see my doctor, when I sign my insurance, I want to know how to speak. When I was in the factory, I go from house to work, from work to house, and there is no time to learn. Because of coming here, because of Chris our teacher, sometimes life is easier.'

These are not men who are used to an easy life, and perhaps it is characteristic of their tenacity that in taking this opportunity, they are not choosing the easy option now.

'They're an example to anybody who wants to learn', says Searle. 'That a group of 20 men with an average age of 75 can study and improve their English, and do so with keenness and good humour, is an example to all students in this country. In that sense, they make a nonsense of old age, because their spirit is full of youth and fire.'



Read the article again, and try to find the answers to these questions:

10. Why weren't the men allowed to learn English in the past?
11. What problems did the men suffer because they couldn't use or understand English?
12. What does the teacher find interesting about the men's style of English?
13. What does the teacher find difficult about teaching this class?
14. Have the men's lives become easier since starting English classes?

Talking points

When you read this story, how did you feel?

Were you surprised that such old men are learning English? Why, or why not?

Is it more difficult to learn a language if you are old? Why, or why not?

If you were one of the men, would you be interested in learning English? Why, or why not?

Think about your country. Do old people learn new skills there? Why, or why not?

What do old people do all day in your country?

The teacher describes his students as 'full of youth and fire'. What will you do to make sure that you remain 'full of youth and fire' even when you are very old?



Check your answers

1. How many students are in the English class? 20
2. Where are they from? Yemen
3. Where did all the students use to work? Sheffield steelworks
4. How long have they lived in Sheffield? 30 years
5. How old are they? Average age - 75
6. How many times a week does the English class meet? Four times a week
7. When did the class start? Last September
8. What's the name of the class teacher? Chris Searle
9. Why are the students keen to learn English? So they can understand people in Sheffield

10. Why weren't the men allowed to learn English in the past? Their bosses just wanted them to work, not to study.
11. What problems did the men suffer because they couldn't use or understand English? Shame, embarrassment, and an inability to integrate or fully understand their doctors, or things like insurance.
12. What does the teacher find interesting about the men's style of English? The men use the imperative all the time, because the English they learnt was from the factory floor.
13. What does the teacher find difficult about teaching this class? They have very different levels of literacy and learning.
14. Have the men's lives become easier since starting English classes? Yes.