

What's in a Name?

Cari Hastings

Ready To Work Instructor/Conversation Class Facilitator

“That which we call a rose/ by any other name would smell as sweet.” – William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Let's take a note from Shakespeare. The quote above is from the moment when Juliet meets Romeo. She is concerned about his last name. “Tis but thy name that is my *enemy*. Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.” She goes on to say that he would be perfect if not for his title. A name holds importance. It holds our heritage, our legacy, and our stories. This is no different for our students than it is for Juliet. It is important that we pronounce and use our student's names the way that they like. So that we are honoring them and their story.

Often when immigrants come to the US they are asked to fill out forms declaring their name. This causes more trouble than you think it does. Students whose name is not in the Greek alphabet like English, or has different sounds than English must now shove their name into an English mold where maybe it doesn't fit. For example, many Chinese students use an 'x' in their name for a sound that is not an 'ks' sound in English but a mix of a 'ks' 'sh' sound. In my second language of Khmer (Cambodian) there are several sounds that are not in English. 'Ga' makes a 'g' sound but 'Go' makes a 'gko' sound. I am sure as you read that you are not even sure how to make that sound. Trust me when I say it is even harder to hear the right sound. And even worse when that particular sound is in the word, “thank you.” So, as you can see, not all names fit in the mold.

Not all names fit the US mold of first, middle, and last name. Many cultures have a given name, then use their father's name, and their grandfather's name. I love this culture of pointing directly to their heritage and legacy. Many of my students tell me that when they get to the US and have to fill out these forms they just use their given name as their first name, father's name as their middle name, and their grandfather's name as their last name. No problem, right? Wrong, now when they have kids in the US they have a tough decision to make. Do I follow my culture, my family, my heritage? Or do I follow my new US culture? If they choose the former and do not have the same last name as their children, many (especially men) are confronted with questions at every turn. They are confronted in their schools, doctors office, and other government agencies. One student expressed that he just wishes someone could just understand that sometimes it is normal for him and his son to not have the same last name.

Finally, students often feel pressure to use or make up an English name, because their friends and teacher can't pronounce their name. After working with students who will say... “Just call me John,” in a very upset or displaced tone, I have asked them about it. Some students feel disconnected from their culture and start to get feelings of homesickness. Some like the name at first, recognizing that it is a link to their newfound culture, only to find later a feeling of loss or identity. Others will find a deeper connection to their English name and really truly want to be called by that name. Whatever the story and whatever reason a student has changed their

name. I encourage you to be patient with them and yourself and try to learn the name they want to be called. Show honor to their culture and heritage by listening carefully to the tone in which they say their name. Do they comment, well... people can't pronounce my name. Or do they positively say, "My English name is Daisy because my Chinese name means a kind of flower and Daisies are my favorite flower." (Quote from Daisy in an SPL Conversation Class)

What's in a Name? A great deal of feeling. Let's be people who understand these complex feelings of belonging and identity and allow people to be called what they want to be called.

What to learn more about names? Here is a Facebook Reel of a Black woman sharing about historical black family names. I personally found this very impactful.

<https://www.facebook.com/share/r/XfSPDYCQ4jP1d1ip/?mibextid=xCPwDs>