



Sun, sport & semantics

South Africa is fast becoming a hot spot for foreign students to learn English. Nick Dall reflects on seven years of watching these students react to the Mother City.

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People from all over the world are coming to study English in South Africa. Cape Town is the hub of the local industry, but there are language schools in Joburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth and even Jeffrey's Bay.

We could flatter ourselves and attribute this to the clarity of our accents, but in reality it's more to do with the weakness of the Rand. Either way, people from places as diverse as Colombia and Cameroon, Belgium and Bosnia are getting to know our country and its people in a way that regular tourists cannot.

So, what do these foreign students think of South Africa, and would they come back?

In Cape Town, many students stay with host families and it's either a triumph or a disaster. One Mozambican student spent a week sleeping on the couch in the lounge because he was too embarrassed to ask his host couple to remove their Great Dane from his bed.

Students also often have to put up with screaming babies, inadequate heating or excessive amounts of sport on TV. But they did come here for a South African experience, didn't they?

There are success stories, too. Those who are lucky enough to stay in the Bo-Kaap during Ramadan are given real insight into a tradition that most non-Muslim South Africans know nothing about. Then there was the student who stayed with a man who had been imprisoned on Robben Island...

The students eat home-cooked South African meals. The Brazilians complain about the "sweet sauce" that goes with all South African food (I never managed to work that one out) and the Germans bemoan our lack of "real" bread. But they also like what we eat: Many a lunch hour is spent munching rotis from Mariam's. The Europeans, especially, can't get enough of our fruit and veg.

The jury is still out on biltong, though. I had one Swedish student who ate handfuls of it; other students won't allow it to pass their lips. Boerewors is accepted by everyone except the Germans: It's not "real" sausage.

Not everyone is in agreement about how "real" our beer is either, but this doesn't stop them from investigating. Our wine is another topic that requires research, often at the wineries themselves. Even the Germans agree that the scenery is beautiful and the wine is "very good value for money".

But it's not only the wineries that the students visit. They realise very quickly that Table Mountain really is a mountain; that the Noon Gun is very loud when you're standing right next to it; that Seal Island is aptly named;

Q: What did you do yesterday, Bo?

A: In yesterday, Linda and me drive Beaufort West and in the evening we come back Cape Town.

Q: Beaufort West! That's six hours away. You were in class until lunchtime.

A: In Korea, road is very busy. I like to driving in South Africa.

and that the jazz band at the Waterfront only has three songs in its repertoire.

I once took a class to the World of Birds in Hout Bay. A Korean Methodist minister who didn't usually enjoy any departure from the textbook or classroom, seemed to be in his element, taking photos of just about every bird.

"Are you having a good time?" I asked.

"Not really," he responded.

I was taken aback. "Why the photos then?" "For my children."

Besides Korean ministers, most foreign students are amazed by the wildlife South Africa has to offer. Even in Cape Town they are subjected to bigger spiders than they're used to, they encounter baboons and sometimes even one of the four deadly snakes that occur on the peninsula. And that's just if they stay on dry land. The sea has its own dangers: man-eating sharks, bluebottles, icy water...

But the biggest danger has nothing to do with fauna. Most students are wary of crime, especially when they first arrive, and a few are petrified of it. Refreshingly, however, some of them give the unsavoury segments of our society much more credit than any South African ever would.

When I heard this story one Monday morning, I couldn't believe my ears: Two female Japanese students were the only passengers in a minibus taxi from Rondebosch to Cape Town, which suddenly came to a halt in quiet side street. The *gaartjie* pulled a knife on them and demanded their money, cameras and phones.

"Why are you doing this?" asked

the one student with better English, genuinely interested.

"I'm poor," the *gaartjie* said. "I've got a wife and children. You are rich."

"What would your family say if they knew where the money came from?" she asked.

The *gaartjie* didn't know what to say to this, so the driver intervened, agreeing on an "escalated" fee of R200 to take the girls into town.

Fortunately very few students are exposed to crime. Not so bureaucratic red tape. The students who stay longer than three months have to deal with the Department of Foreign Affairs when they extend their visas. Usually, by that stage, they have learnt the phrase "TIA" – "this is Africa". I had a Belgian student who used it in almost every sentence: "I went to the shop to pick up my kite, but of course the shop was closed. TIA." Or, "A man on the train took a baby cobra out of his pocket and showed it to me. TIA."

Asian and European students are amazed at how slow the service is in restaurants and shops, while South Americans and North Africans are unfazed by it. Students notice things that pass us by: the new automatic gates at Cape Town Station, for example, which are permanently disabled and manned instead by glassy-eyed ticket checkers.

Of course, the students also bring some of their culture to us. All students of English – from Saudi Arabia to Switzerland – seem to be united by a love of football. They watch every Champions League game at Dubliners (pronounced dub-LINE-errs) on Long Street, and arrive late for class the next morning.

But students must also assimilate. Rugby is like a captivating horror film: gruesome but impossible not to watch. The rules and the result are of secondary importance to them; it's the raw power that they love. They attend games at Newlands and paint their faces and drink Castle draught on the terraces.

Cricket, however, is often a step too far. Much like the present perfect and its irregular past participles, the rules of the game cast a spell over them. But that doesn't stop them from going to live games and passing out under the oaks after the tea interval.

And, when it's time to call stumps on their time here, they become quite emotional. At graduation, they give farewell speeches in English that has sometimes improved, sometimes not. A common sentiment is that South Africa is not at all how they had expected it to be.

Let's take that as a compliment.