

CLD Corner — What's in a Name: The Problems with Anglicizing Client and Student Names



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In the movie *Forrest Gump* (Paramount Pictures, 1994), the young Forrest reluctantly stepped on the school bus as he viewed the driver as a stranger. Only until Forrest and the bus driver exchange their names could he board the bus. And then they “ain’t strangers anymore.” School may be the first and most complex journey most children undertake. They meet people who may not look like them, sound like them, or think like them. To bridge differences, one must become acquainted with each other. The exchange of names allows people to explore each other’s culture.

In many cases, during the first educational interaction, some students are asked to change their names to others that are either easier to say or sound more “English-like.” However, one must consider: *What message was sent to these young students when they are asked to change their names? Is their name too different, too foreign, too difficult, too offensive? Do they have to change their names in order to fit in and acculturate to make everyone more comfortable before they can be assimilated into the mainstream culture?*

According to *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.), “to anglicize” is “to make changes in quality or characteristics; to adapt (a foreign word, name, or phrase) to English usage, such as to alter to a characteristic English form, sound, or spelling.” In other words, change the word, name, or phrase to an English version. Anglicizing ethnic names has been a typical occurrence in the United States, where 13.7% of the population are immigrants (Budiman, Tamir, Mora, & Noe-Bustamante, 2018). A study by Zhao & Biernat (2019) suggests there are tangible social benefits derived from the use of anglicized names. In an effort to detect the presence of name bias, the authors used a series of hypothetical moral dilemmas in which people had to choose whether to sacrifice one person in order to save others. The authors suggested that under certain conditions, immigrants with ethnic-sounding names such as “Qiu,” “Jiang,” or “Ahmed” were more likely to be sacrificed than the immigrants with anglicized names such as “Mark” or “Adam.” The study results exposed name biases. However, the authors also stressed that suggesting that individuals change their ethnic-sounding names to prevent bias may have detrimental effects on their self-concepts (Zhao & Biernat, 2019). Voluntarily adopting an anglicized name may help someone avoid discrimination. It comes with a big cost—sacrificing self-identity.

A person’s name shapes their identity and even their personality. Names can impact one’s profession, settling location, marriage, academic performance, acceptance in a school or job, and the quality of their work (Arai & Thoursie, 2009). A name could have many meanings, whether they are significant or not. A name can present an entire historical event or tell a whole story about family traditions from generations past. Pronouncing a name correctly and using it correctly brings value to the person. It fosters and encourages self-worth and self-love. Pronouncing a name correctly shows respect and understanding of the person’s traditions, culture, beliefs, and family history.

The two authors recall their personal experiences as students of different ethnic groups when asked to anglicize their names at schools:

*My name is **Quan Nguyen**. I came to America in 2013 as an international student from Viet Nam. I remember on my very first day of high school in America, I was asked by staff at the front office if I had picked an English name for myself. I asked her why I needed to have an English name. She told me that the teachers may have a difficult time calling my name. I obliged because I did not want to make anyone uncomfortable. I had to come up with a name right at that moment. The first English-*

sounding name that came to my head was “Jay.” The staff wrote it down, and I was Jay for the next three years. I did wonder much later, “Why didn’t she ask me about my name? Or how I would say it?” When I found out that I had to go by my legal name in college, there was a surge of anxiety and insecurity. I was afraid of being exposed. Roll call was always a nightmare.

Everything changed for me when I became a graduate student clinician at Texas State University. My first client was a 4-year-old with a moderate to severe speech sound disorder. He had trouble producing almost all English consonants. The first thing he learned to correctly produce with me was my name. He was very proud of that. This is how you pronounce my name: /kʷən ɲwiəŋ/. It means “King of the Spring” in Vietnamese. If a kindergartener with a moderate to severe speech sound disorder can say it, I know other people can say it.

—Quan Nguyen

My name is **Arantxa Saucedo**. As long as I can remember, I have always been the person who constantly repeats their name to strangers and then is ultimately told, “I can’t say that. What’s your American name?” All through grade school until senior year, teachers would skip my name because it was too difficult to pronounce. In the sixth grade, the usage of nicknames became a strategy of avoidance that to this day has been a part of me.

I remember when I first decided to use a pseudo name due to the frustration and exhaustion of having to repeat my name. Freshman year of college can sometimes be a cultural shock when you never experienced anything outside a 10-mile radius from your home. Peers would ignore me or not want to initiate a conversation to avoid saying my name. I would usually get the question, “Is your name Aztec?” My name originates from Basque descendants. Unfortunately, I have always used nicknames and pseudo names to avoid my birth name. When the opportunity came to take a stand and be proud of my name, I felt that I failed by using a common name in America.

—Arantxa Saucedo

When our parents choose our names, they want to give us something we can carry with us for the rest of our lives, something that could remind us of our strength, our home, and our statement of purpose in a world that does not always nurture us as they would want. Our parents also want our names to encompass love and positivity. So they often say, “I love you,” “I really like your idea,” or “You are so kind,” before calling our names. When we are requested to change our names, it is a blatant erasure of culture and identity and a demolition of self-love.

Changing our names does not change the fact that we are Asian or Latinx, that we lived in other countries, that we speak different languages, or that we were raised in a culture different than yours. As a matter of fact, our Anglicized names reflect the discrimination, systematic racism, and xenophobia we have faced. It is unfair that the names we were given have a bearing on our academic performance, economic opportunity, and social life. Today, as we are reclaiming our identities and resisting the internalized oppression that was forced upon us, we ask others to participate in the cultural sea change, to address their own bias, and to act together to redefine cultural values.

How Can We as Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) Enact Positive Change?

The impact of discrimination does not end once the experience is over. It may continue to have profound effects on the person’s self-esteem. Becoming aware and acknowledging these ongoing acts of discrimination are the first steps in supporting our clients. Culture change or expanding our worldviews is all about behavioral change. The following are recommendations as to how we can enact behavioral change that leads to expanding our worldviews:

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1. **Do not ask clients to anglicize their name.** It is important for us to understand that having a name that holds cultural meanings is very powerful to the clients. The consistent mispronunciation of one’s name or a request to simplify or anglicize their

name is offensive and disrespectful. Such practices that disregard the client as a person can compromise the clinician-client relationship. Names are not just a collection of letters and sounds; they encompass various elements of cultural identity.

2. **Learn more about your own culture.** Not everyone in the culture and the community engages in the same traditions and customs. You can always learn something new.
3. **Research other cultures.** Researching a culture is especially important if your client's culture differs from your own. You want to understand their beliefs in an effort to be more inclusive.
4. **Reject stereotypes and become aware of your own biases.** As professionals, it can be difficult to avoid commenting about anything that is different from what we have experienced. If we take the time to ask our clients about who they are and how their background impacts their speech and language, we will forge trust and rapport with our clients. This also will help establish better communication and trust between you and the client's family. We must be aware of our own biases by engaging in self-reflection so we can leave them at the door when assessing or treating someone. Without awareness of our biases, we will continue to diminish culturally and linguistically diverse clients' self-worth and self-esteem.
5. **Educate others.** Not only should we educate ourselves but we also should educate others who may have a misunderstanding of another culture and language. For our young clients, use children's storybooks to increase cultural awareness, identity, and pride. Children's storybooks can help increase identity awareness in culturally and linguistically diverse students (Smyer & Westby, 2005). "The Name Jar" by Yangsook Choi (2013) is a great starting point! As clinicians and advocates for all, we have the responsibility to educate each other by recognizing and pronouncing names from a variety of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Only through the willingness to communicate with one another and learn can we improve our cultural awareness and reduce the need for anglicizing ethnic names.

In other words, you're going to have to learn my name!

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[The CLD Corner](#) was created in an effort to provide information and respond to questions on cultural and linguistic diversity (CLD). Please follow the Communicologist and TSHA's website in order to obtain new information provided by the CLD Committee. If you have specific questions or topics you would like for us to cover in future issues, please email publications@txsha.org.

Lessons from the Pandemic: A Student's Perspective

By: Matthew Randal, BS, TSHA Graduate Student Representative



Disclaimer: Before reading what I have written, please understand that I am writing from and existing in a position of privilege. While the pandemic did disrupt my lifestyle and fundamentally changed the previous school year I thought I would have, I was able to attend university with no shortage of financial and emotional support. My situation is unique, and I acknowledge that. Thank you for understanding.

The mass migration to virtual school was an extraordinary test of patience. Students and educators alike were not equitably impacted by the move that blurred the line between work and home life. And for those of us in clinical settings like audiologists and speech-language pathologists, our hurdles also became barriers to our patients and the communities we serve.

From an academic standpoint, we had to be our own technical support to acquire the proper hardware and internet speeds to facilitate "Zoom school." Even if one had all the necessary equipment, it was a slow transition to deliver and absorb instructional content from computer monitor to computer monitor. For those with young children, childcare often became a luxury as it was difficult and expensive to maintain. Therefore, many young ones were visible and/or audible on the other side of the camera because parents needed to juggle their schooling and their family commitments. There were staffing shortages and long wait times at nearly all school offices. For those with mobility or sensory impairments, their navigation of the pandemic world was immeasurably more difficult than my own. In spite of these phenomenal challenges, within my cohort and department I witnessed a truly inspiring wave of support, encouragement, and patience. Students actively checked on each other, made meals, and took notes for one another. Professors extended grace regarding assignments and exams. Even though most of us had never previously met in person, over virtual school we fashioned meaningful bonds that sustained each other daily.

There was no shortage of personal emergencies that competed for our attention. My classmates were not immune. My instructors were not immune. Our facilities were not immune. Our publicly funded services were not immune. Everywhere we looked, there was both a need for and a demonstration of patience, and the latter was truly inspiring. However, the most outstanding examples of patience and thankfulness were observed within our clinical patients whom we serve. Backlogs of patient appointments were slowly being welcomed back to our clinic. They had been waiting for months to be seen for hearing evaluations, fixing of their equipment, and prescribing of new hearing aids. They were supremely kind toward students whose clinical skills were largely underdeveloped due to safety restrictions in place because of the pandemic. We appreciated their sweet spirits and enjoyed making that precious human connection that had been missed for so long. In the moments when we were meeting the needs of our patients, it was a heartwarming reminder: *This is why we are here.*

It has been refreshing to reflect upon the beauty that is teamwork and of community. I have been truly humbled by the goodness I have seen in those around me. As I begin this new school year and return to in-person instruction, I am extremely thankful for this small semblance of normalcy. It is a pleasure to be in the presence of outstanding faculty and clinical professionals as well as to grow