

Taking Full Advantage of the English Language



Laryza Alcántara Garduño

English Expert and CEO

Anglo-American Global Learning

Spanish translation

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I often tell my students that English can **save** their lives; their reaction? Giggles and lighthearted chuckles as if something amusing had been said. I know it sounds a little overstated, but it's true. It has for me.

I'm what you would call an 'accidental learner of English'. I learned it, or better said, I *acquired* the language out of **pure need**. No one asked me if I wanted to learn it, no one cared if I liked it or if I thought it was too difficult or simply a useless skill. I was just thrown into a world of English-speaking people who could not care less if I understood the language or not. So, when you find yourself in a precarious situation like this, you learn to *survive*. And not only did I survive and became skilled at being understood as well as an avid chatterbox, **I made it a way of life**.

I was still in elementary school when my family moved to a small city in the south of the United States due to my father's MBA and PhD degree studies. Even then, during the 70's decade, the Mexican

government gave out scholarships to study abroad as long as you overcame the language barrier, so it was a win-win situation for the whole family.

We lived there long enough for me to become, not only fluent in the language, but fortuitously a native speaker as well. And although, I didn't think much of it at the time, my English knowledge has helped me touch lives and has helped me grow in ways I could have never imagined. The **domino effect** has given me great opportunities in much unexpected ways and in areas I could not have anticipated; furthermore, it has had a **positive** effect on the lives of other people around me.

My journey, taking advantage of my skill, started as an easy way to get some extra cash during my late teens. Because of my English knowledge and fluency, I was asked to substitute classes at my sisters' bilingual elementary school. Of course, nothing can prepare you for what it's like to be in front of a classroom. I was inexperienced and very *naïve*. The kids were uncontrollable. I just stood there, helpless, trying to get them to calm down. The kids were lovely in the end, once I'd won them over, but for me, it was a very challenging and life-turning event.

From this early experience I learned two essential things: I had a knack for teaching, which was something very far off from my major in graphic design, and most importantly, that every teacher devotes his or her life to education for reasons as individual to them as any other part of their identity. **Teachers do more than teach, and their impact extends far beyond the classroom.** As a teacher, you are more than just an educator: you are a **mentor**, a **confidant** and a **friend**. One of the most common reasons to become a teacher is to make a difference in the lives of as many students as you can.

In the mid 90's and the **NAFTA** (North American Free Trade Agreement) made quite a change in the country. Suddenly the 'English for shopping' was no longer enough. The country's economical and international development had a dire need for professionals to know the language. Proficiency in **English language skills had, and has to this date, a strong impact on employability.** In this regard, data is widely available and unequivocal. Consequently, strong communication skills in English became a *must* if you wanted to stand out in an already competitive working environment. So once again I took full advantage of the opportunity. My options were suddenly greater than ever before: translators were in high demand; publishing companies needed experienced native speakers to train English teachers for the new educational requirements, simultaneous translators and interpreters for diverse business industries were popular and extremely well paid.

It was a piece of cake getting jobs in these three sectors thanks to their desperate need for English speakers. The industries would even pay for your specialized training as long as you had the core

element: strong communication skills in English. Suddenly, my world expanded and I took freelance jobs in these three areas due to the fact that they were all intertwined.

As time went by, whether by need or inertia, the country's evolution took a globalized turn. And once again, I took advantage of the situation. **Today I have my own business, I am my own boss, I work as an English teacher, a translator for a variety of international businesses, and as a language consultant for several important publishing companies.** I have been lucky enough to do exactly what I love and I have come to realize that it's the people who go the extra mile who tend to find success more often than not. I can tell you that I have made a living all these years, not by teaching English - that was incidental...my main job has been taking advantage of the language. Yes. Taking all the advantage I am capable of!

When you know something is unequivocally true, such as the need for strong communication skills in English in every professional area and in this globalized era, it's an extraordinarily valuable asset to **put a lot of energy into it.** Take into consideration that English is a *skill*, not a *subject*, and it is imperative in today's world for a variety of reasons, most important being its indisputable role in professional success. Even people with the best degrees may struggle if they don't possess strong communication skills. And the opposite too happens all the time. People with average degrees make great careers when they have solid work ethics and communication skills. If you look around, you'll find plenty of persons struggling in one way or the other because of lack of effective English, both spoken and written. The growing, and already well-entrenched, globalization will continue to increase the role of cross-border communication.

If you have strong communication skills in English, many more options open for you when you graduate from college, or even in your current line of work. Speaking English allows you to actually broaden your world and your opportunities, from job possibilities to the ability to relate to people from every country. Furthermore, the ability to speak English is a shortcut to distinction, it positions a person in the limelight, raises one's head and shoulders above the crowd.



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So, in a nutshell, here goes my best advice: **Learn English!** Use your language knowledge to your advantage and take all the advantage you can!! English gives you a head start. It doesn't matter if it's to touch and inspire lives or just plain personal-fulfillment and professional growth. English can really **save your life in ways you could never imagine.**

Sobre el autor

Laryza Alcántara Garduño

laryza21@hotmail.com

Laryza Alcántara has been a part of the ELT field for more than three decades. She has performed as an Academic Consultant for various Publishing Companies and has worked with various Universities and educational organizations on projects involving teacher training, syllabus design and material production. She was the English language counselor and was part of the design committee of the B.A. in Administration and Teaching of English at the Universidad del Valle de Atemajac campus León and the Academic Leader for OES Latina. She is currently a consultant in English Language Teaching and collaborates with different publishing houses, in addition to offering training to national and international companies in the language. Today she has her own training, consulting and translation business: Anglo American Global Learning