How English language teaching has changed lives for the better

by Eugenia Yurinova
Hello!
My name is Eugenia. I have been a teacher of English for 12 years. 9 years of those I spent teaching English to inmates of a high security prison who didn’t have a secondary education.
'A foreign language for semi-literate convicts? When would they ever use it?' I wondered when I first walked into the freshly painted classroom and faced new students – all of them grown-up men with criminal records far longer than my own employment record (for I was fresh from college).
The first lesson was a disaster. Not a word from my students. Not a smile. Just greyish morose faces, shaven heads, cold eyes watching me, tattooed fingers lazily moving beads on a string. I felt scared and frustrated. That evening, I cried.
My wise and kind father listened to my story, hugged me and said, ‘Those men haven’t learned how to be human in their own language. You’ll have to teach them to be human in English’.
I brought a stuffed toy kitten into the classroom for the next lesson. To review the ABC, I threw the toy to the students in turn, asking them to call the letters and to throw it back to me.

Some students didn’t move, and the toy landed on the desk. I came up to them, picked up the toy and went on with the activity.

At one memorable moment a tall, heavy student (Nikolai he was called) took the toy and held it, and wouldn’t give it back. I waited, holding my breath. The whole class waited.
Nikolai turned the toy around in his hands, then looked straight into my eyes and said, ‘My little girl had such a kitty back at home. Haven’t seen her for seven years now. It’s ‘L’ you’re pointing at’.

He handed me the toy and added, ‘Don’t blame the guys over there for not taking the toy. They can’t touch it, you know. Can’t touch what everyone else touches, I mean’.
That was the first time I had a glimpse of the merciless ‘code’ that governed the lives of my students. Who was I to oppose or question it? But that’s just what I did at nearly every lesson.
We played games. We sang fun songs together. We mimed the verbs we were learning. They worked in groups and as a whole class. They learned about the life in English-speaking countries.

But above all, we learned to speak English! The sounds of the unknown language made them smile and laugh – at first because it was so incomprehensible, later because they could actually understand what I was saying and say something themselves!

It was a most rewarding feeling: to know that the ice in the hearts of those hard-boiled men melted, at least for the 45 minutes of the lesson, to the magic of a new language.
Was it a life-changing experience for my students? I truly hope it was. It touched some of the more tender cords in their souls, reminding them of how to be human beings.

I also know for sure that my own life has changed with this experience. I have been able to see how learning a foreign language helps to overcome all sorts of barriers – social and psychological alike. I am thankful for that.
All the photos were made by the author unless stated otherwise.