

MY CLASSROOM PERU

Angela Huanca Barrantes is a highly respected teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) in the La Pampa neighborhood in the city of Ilo, and she has a strong impact on the lives of students at the Admirante Miguel Grau secondary school and at Centro Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, one of four binational centers in southern Peru.



Two students in Ms. Huanca's class present a dialogue for their peers.

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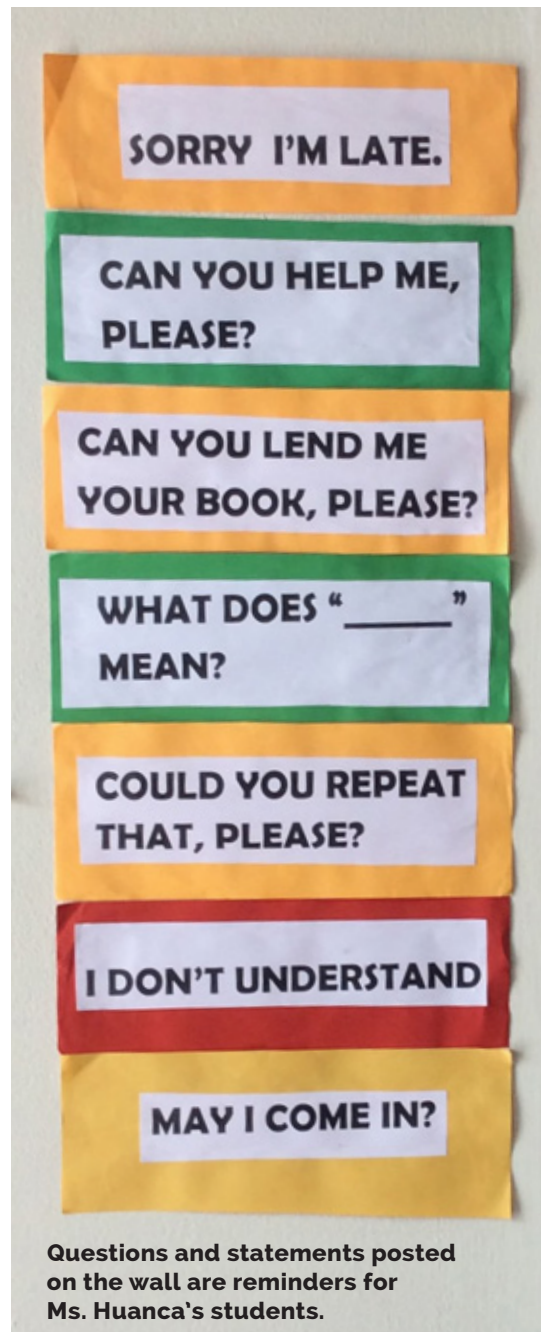
Yet Ms. Huanca did not always like English. In fact, she admits that at one time she disliked it because she did not understand it. Her feelings changed when, as an undergraduate student majoring in tourism at the National University of Saint Augustine, she enrolled in an English class taught by Rosa Sifuentes, who inspired Ms. Huanca to not only open her mind and heart to the English language, but also to one day share this newfound love. According to Ms. Huanca, “Teachers like Ms. Sifuentes inspire you to always continue learning, and I am still learning.” During her fourth year of university studies, Ms. Huanca worked at the university’s Language Center, and she realized then that as a teacher she could have a positive and important impact on others.

After graduating, she received a scholarship from the U.S. embassy in Lima to take a course at Georgetown University designed for EFL teachers. She, along with 17 other Peruvian EFL public school teachers, participated in the Rising Star program, which, she said, “changed my life.” Through the program, Ms. Huanca also attended training at the Centro Espiral Mana in Costa Rica, which she described as life-altering due to the holistic approach to education that the center promotes. “The center’s philosophy is based on what you as the teacher can do to serve your students so that they have the best learning experience possible,” she said, “and that really resonated with me. Being there was a healing experience.”

“My life as a teacher changed the day I became a Rising Star,” Ms. Huanca said. “It opened many doors and helped me channel my interests and to be able to share with others and learn from others, too. The embassy planted a seed in many teachers when they committed to the Rising Star program, and I am one of those seeds because I am able to

share what I have learned with others. It has a multiplying effect. We need to keep training more English teachers.”

Originally inspired by her teacher, Ms. Huanca now gets inspiration from her students. She is proud of the strong relationships she has with them—relationships built on mutual respect and trust. She believes a good teacher not only imparts knowledge and a love for learning, but also listens to



students and is empathetic to their struggles. She has learned that she should never make assumptions about her students, as that will inhibit her from truly being able to connect with them and help them learn.

She tells people how proud she is of her students and how honored she is to be their teacher. Ms. Huanca's family, like those of her students, is from the highlands of Peru. She and her students are second-generation immigrants from the highlands, and their grandparents learned Spanish as a second language; their native languages are Quechua and Aymara.

Ms. Huanca is aware that learning English is a challenge for some of her students, especially when their parents are not involved in their learning because their top priority is making sure the students' basic needs are met. Still, she chose to work at the Admirante Miguel Grau school because she knows how crucial it is that her students feel that they are special, take pride in how rich their culture is, are proud of who they are and where they come from, and believe that anything is possible.

"The problem is not the students," Ms. Huanca said, "it is the people who judge them and underestimate them. My students are fantastic. Every day I strive to figure out what else I can do to make them shine. My students know that I care, I love them, and I think that they appreciate me. I listen to them."

Ms. Huanca, along with her colleague María Nuñez, recently completed a six-week course on methodology at

Arizona State University on a scholarship from the Peruvian Ministry of Education. Ms. Huanca is pleased that her government is invested in improving the way Peruvians teach and learn English. "Things are changing in a positive way," she said. "The government realizes how important English is and how it is a way to bridge the gap between the different populations in Peru."

I get inspired by my students, by observing them and seeing what does and doesn't work.



María Nuñez (left) and Angela Huanca Barrantes, the only two EFL teachers at Admirante Miguel Grau school, share a close working relationship.

Ms. Huanca typically spends her mornings and afternoons teaching EFL at the Admirante Miguel Grau public school and her evenings teaching at the binational center. She and Ms. Nuñez were allocated a special room for teaching English, but the school is now under reconstruction, and that room has been turned into storage space. "We do not know when we will get it back," she said. But that hasn't deterred Ms. Huanca, and she works

diligently to create meaningful lessons for the 12 groups of 40 high school students that she teaches for 90 minutes a week. She said that when she started teaching, she tried to cover as

much material as possible, as required by the Ministry of Education, but her data indicated that she was not helping her students become successful in their learning.

Due to the frustration that she saw on her students' faces and that she felt as well, Ms. Huanca knew it was imperative that she drastically change the way she was teaching.



Students relax in the courtyard of the Admirante Miguel Grau school.

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She began by implementing strategies that allowed her students to own the language instead of simply memorizing vocabulary and grammatical structures. She does this by using cooperative learning strategies, such as pair work and jigsaw activities. To capture and maintain her students' interest in learning, she incorporates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities into her daily lessons.

Knowing how important student feedback is, Ms. Huanca uses a variety of formative assessments throughout each class. She does what she calls a “wrap-up” at the end of each activity to find out whether her students have grasped the concept being taught and practiced. She also has her students answer self-assessment questions at the end of every class to see whether she needs to review the material or whether students are ready to move on. These formative assessments are essential to her lesson planning and the success of her students.

Ms. Huanca's classroom consists of a small blackboard, 40 student desks (some in a state of disrepair), and a small table that serves as her desk. She uses a variety of visual aids, realia, and donated books and materials from the U.S. embassy to enhance her teaching. She and Ms. Nuñez develop their own lessons.

“I get inspired by my students, by observing them and seeing what does and doesn't work, and then I am able to adapt my lessons to better assist them in their learning,” she said.

Ms. Huanca prides herself on being able to provide her students with a variety of

activities—especially those designed to develop speaking skills—that make students feel comfortable enough to take risks and speak freely about the topic at hand. “I always think about my students' needs and what activities will work best with them based on their age,” she said.

In a high school classroom of 40 students, one might expect that chaos, not learning, would prevail. But Ms. Huanca maintains an environment conducive to learning while also allowing students to have fun. Hers is a classroom built on mutual respect, appreciation, and—above all—teaching with an open heart and an open mind.

Her students believe it is important to learn English because it is fundamental to their lives, and many of them would like to travel to the United States and want to be able to speak with Americans. One student said, “Our teacher is interesting, fantastic, motivating, understanding, patient, and wants the best for us.”

It is not easy to win over the hearts and minds of 480 teenagers, but Ms. Huanca certainly has.

This article was written by **Deanna Paglia**, an English and Spanish second language teacher and teacher trainer who is currently the English Language Fellow hosted by Centro Cultural Peruano Norteamericano in Arequipa, Peru.

Photos by Deanna Paglia