

A Horse of a Different Color?

(Cross-Culture Insights in the TESL Classroom)

By Jason B. Alter

Before the Year of the Horse gallops away from us, let me share with you a few insights on how to capitalize, for a class in English as a second language, on many horsey expressions and horse-like departures. Of course, "horse" and "hoarse" are homonyms. Cf. "He's a little hoarse" and "He's a little horse." (This is a good example of a minimal pair for vocabulary practice.)

Is the fact that the expression "dark horse" occurs both in Chinese and in English a case of borrowing, or is it an argument for the universality of thought?

What do you say to a horse when you want him to stop? Cf. the English command with that in other languages. Teach the use of "Whoa!" when we mean "Now, just a minute!" Trace the etymology of "Giddyap!"—"Get you up!"

Of interest to those with a propensity for reading the sports page first, there was a recent gridiron stalwart who was nicknamed "the Italian stallion."

What's the plural of "hoof"? Is it "hoofs" or "hooves"? It behooves you to check.

Compare a "horse race" and a "race-horse." Explain the expression "Hold your horses!," and give the students practice in using this. "Give a man a horse he can ride . . .," a well-known line, appears in an exercise in the Prator/Robinett *Manual of American Pronunciation*. What do you call a person who rides a horse in a race? Cf. a "disc jockey."

On a literary note, mention the "Headless Horseman." Mention that Washington Irving's name appears to have the surname and the given name reversed. Cf. "This is Washington, Irving."

Why has horseracing been referred to as "the sport of kings?" Get a discussion

going on the merits/demerits of legalized gambling.

Examine the expression "the going's good." Note that "going" refers to the track.

Far be it from me to suggest that we should "beat a dead horse," but the teacher can judiciously purvey cultural *bons mots* by "horsing around."

Who would prevail, the individual who is "as strong as a horse" or the one who is "as strong as a ———"? Fill in the blank.

Composition topic: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

Cf. Make him drink, and Make him a drink. (This is a minimal pair for structure.)

"That's a horse of a different color." This example can show the vagaries of the literal vs. the figurative interpretation.

Let the students come up with contexts in which they would obtain information "straight from the horse's mouth."

What attitudes do students from different cultures have vis-à-vis horses? Discuss the S.P.C.A. (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). In Boston, they used to have a plethora of public watering-troughs in summer for thirsty horses. (We've come a long way, baby.)

Who said, "My kingdom for a horse," and why? Ask the student for other words ending in "-dom." (It goes on and on.)

If the TESL practitioner has any horse sense, he/she will remove the students' blinders and lead them away from total adherence to the given text. The teacher may be subject to an occasional horse-laugh, but this is the price one pays to encourage spontaneity.

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Let the students individualize their completions of: "Wild horses couldn't. . ."

If a person eats like a horse, how does he eat?

Horsemeat is not pleasing to the American palate, but why not? Get a discussion going on cross-cultural gastronomical preferences.

Where are the "horse latitudes"? Teach vocabulary through rhyming: "attitude," "gratitude," "platitude."

What kind of a sound is a "Neigh"? How many "ayes" and how many "nays"? (Cf. 'I only have eyes/ayes for you.) Anent parliamentary procedure, how do you spell that titan's name — "Robert's" or "Roberts" as in Rules of Order?

To continue from the sublime to the ridiculous, note these words from French: hors de combat and hors d'oeuvre. On a punctuation note, would you italicize these or not in common usage?

Ask for literary "works" that are germane to our topic. Would you accept Steinbeck's "The Red Pony"? How about "Three Men on a Horse"?

Wouldn't you relish getting away from the rat-race and settling down in a "one-horse town"? I'm reminded of an ad in the *New Yorker* that described Palm Springs: "You wouldn't want to leave there."

As for subterfuge in academia, there is that occasional student who will risk taking an exam for a buddy. N.B. the term "ringer."

Historically speaking, there was the Trojan horse—that can still be seen, in modern times, at University of Southern California football games.

Well, just be chary about putting the cart before the horse, but don't hesitate to be innovative in the language classroom—as long as you don't get on your high horse. But, enough, I must be trotting along.