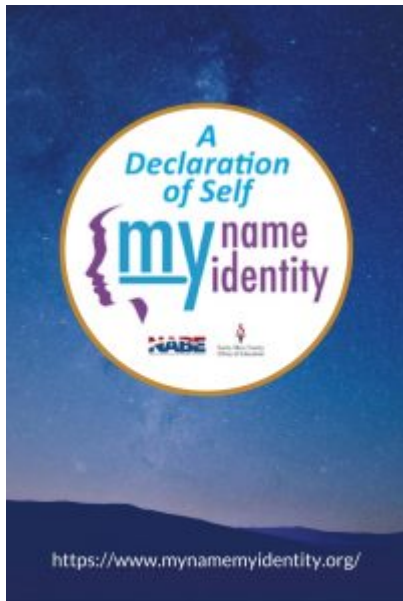


Try to Pronounce Students' Names



You'll never be able to pronounce my name," the student from Uzbekistan said. Little did she know I had lived in Kazakhstan for several years and the two languages are very similar. Nor was her name really all that difficult, just long.

"Is is Zulfizar Abduraimova (not her real name)?" I pronounced her name fairly well, I think.

She was floored. It was a small thing, pronouncing a student's name correctly. It had extra impact because you don't see a lot of Uzbek students in the US and it's not a popular destination for Americans, either. Of all the English classes in the world, what were the odds she'd walk into mine? But that little trick bought me a lot of good will and rapport with her.

Contrast that with an all-too common scene in my experience, fictionalized below:

"You'll never be able to pronounce my name. Call me Zul," says the student.

"Oh thank God," thinks the teacher. Then later in the staff room, "Zul? Who told her that was a good English name?"

“Have you met Shih-Wei? But I told him to call him Stephen.”

“Oh, really? I thought Shih-Wei was Rose’s real name. Can you believe there’s a guy who calls himself Rose?”

The chain reaction of disrespect

See what can happen when students adopt a nickname because they feel their name doesn’t *fit* English or their teacher doesn’t care enough to try to pronounce their name? Students end up choosing nicknames that are still mocked. The only thing accomplished is that the student learns that their name is indeed not a proper English name. How much easier it would be to learn their names, rather than give them nicknames?

Now I’m not talking about nicknames the student has chosen for fun. Or that their friends have given them. I’m talking about nicknames or shortenings of their name students take on specifically because they feel their name is “too hard” for English or “sounds funny to native speakers”. I’m talking about names given to hide or distort who they are.

Names are closely linked to identity. Respecting a student’s identity is the easiest way to build rapport. That’s why I applaud the [My Name, My Identity Campaign](#). The campaign encourages teachers to learn to pronounce students’ names correctly. There are some great resources to help you, including a great guide on [International Naming Conventions](#) and [four websites](#) to help you hear names and see them spelled phonetically.

What if You Can’t Pronounce Students’ Names?

I will add one caveat, which is that you may not be able to pronounce your student’s name as perfectly as a native speaker. We tell our

students that a native accent is not a realistic goal for most language learners. They shouldn't expect us to have perfect pronunciation, either. However, there's no excuse not to make an effort. They will be able to tell if you are trying or not. And it really will go a long way to building rapport with your students.

Cross-posted on [Alphabet Publishing's blog](#)