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English and Me

I admit, as a second-language English speaker, the thought of “If we were having this argument in my native language, I’d be kicking your butt” has occurred to me more than once. Don’t get me wrong though, the fact that I’m not great at expressing myself in English doesn’t mean I despise English at all. Even though it took me a long time to build up my confidence in English, I’m always proud of being a second-language English speaker.

I started learning English when I was three years old. My mom, a typical Chinese mother, firmly believed that I was a prodigy at that time and tried to make me learn as many skills as possible. I, on the other hand, worked hard because I wanted to please her as well as the other adults around me. However, despite how genius my parents and teachers thought I was, my English skills were actually not very strong at that time.

One weekend, I took a trip to the Beijing Zoo with my dad. As I was jumping around and looking for the animals, a white guy came up to me and said “Hello” instead of “*Ni hao.*” Apparently, he couldn’t find the bird house and wanted to know where it was. Even though I understood what he was talking about, all I could let out was a quiet whisper: “No, I can’t speak English.” We ended up walking to his destination together without much talking. Ironically, even though I couldn’t even speak up to a foreign tourist at that time, I believed that my skills in English were better than anyone else’s.

In junior high school, my grades started to decline due to increased stress and competition. My mom began to worry. She soon turned to the belief that China wasn't the right place for my talents to shine, and quickly sent me to a winter camp in America. I was fairly confident in my English skills when I left, but my confidence was quickly shattered after I arrived. People didn't speak like the English listening materials, and my English didn't seem to be comprehensible to them. As if that wasn't bad enough, I also broke my elbow during the trip. With the splint on my arm and everything, I had to explain to everyone I met how I broke my elbow in English. "I was running, didn't see the wood and fell" was the story I eventually came up with. I would use "tripped over" and "a pile of" if I need to describe it again today, but those phrases were too advanced for me five years ago.

Even with my broken elbow and broken English, I couldn't help but fall in love with America. From a thirteen-year-old's perspective, everything in America was new and exciting. Therefore, I studied English eagerly the next summer, watching every American TV show available online and copying down all the "colloquial" phrases in them, such as "leave it to me" and "put your hands in the air." As I was memorizing these phrases, I firmly believed that I would no longer run into any language problems if I could only use these phrases fluently, not knowing how naive I was at that time.

Since I officially arrived in America as an exchange student, I've made countless language mistakes both in classes and in daily life. However, what shocked me the most was how my English formed my relationships with other people. My five-year-old host sister called me her older sister at home, but she would refer to me as an "exchange student" in front of her friends and tell them that my English was "not very good." I was the

“international student” at school, and it was impossible to make close friends even though everyone was nice towards me. It didn’t take me long to notice that large group conversation was not the place for me, for I didn’t want to embarrass myself by falling short of words or making the wrong comment in front of everyone. I felt like I turned into a different person whenever I spoke in English: I couldn’t talk in memes, make shitty jokes, and be that funny and sarcastic me anymore. It was hard to be confident in America; I was always ready to apologize, repronounce things I said, or take out my translator. I hated making phone calls, because asking someone to repeat something over and over again on the phone was way more awkward than talking in person, not to mention that I usually gave up and pretended to understand after three tries.

My English skills also limited the activities I could be involved with. In high school, I always wanted to be a Communications major, possibly even a radio host in the future, unwittingly trying to forget the fact that my English was never going to be as good as my Chinese. I joined the TV studio at my school and worked as a news anchor for a year, until I got kicked out because I couldn’t read as fluently as native speakers. For similar reasons, I never got a solo part in choir or a lead in theater club which were usually given to high school seniors. To be fair, none of the Chinese students at my school had succeeded doing any of these things, but being told that I couldn’t read fluently enough was hurtful for a prospective Communications major. Fortunately, as a stubborn person, these influences had never wiped out my confidence or stopped me from pursuing my dreams.

After all I’ve talked about, you might think that my imperfect English was what caused me to suffer in America. However, it was also what helped me build up my confidence. As I

spoke more like a native speaker, people started to ask me “Where are you from?” instead of “Which country are you from?” When I answered Beijing instead of Massachusetts, they acted surprised and gave me generous compliments on my English, saying that they thought I was an Asian American. Whether that was an act of kindness or not, I was glad to know that I made progress. On the other hand, even though my English was never the best in America, people who knew me in China often invited me to give English speeches or hold English classes in summer. Even though the speeches and classes were only open to a small group of people, the fact that someone was willing to pay me to learn English was something I could hardly imagine a few years ago.

With all these positive outcomes, I’ve become more confident in my English skills than ever before. However, I never thought that I would be able to get an American accent, since my Chinese accent had always sounded so strong to me whenever I spoke in English. On my trip to Japan last summer, however, I met a British guy and a Canadian couple while I went scuba diving. In our conversations, the Canadian couple mentioned that the Canadian accent was similar to American accent so they couldn’t tell which state I was living in. After I explained that I got my accent in China, the British guy commented that even though I did have a Chinese accent, my American accent was still strong enough for them to tell that I lived in America. I was only aware of my Chinese accent ever since I arrived in America, and that was the first time someone told me I have an “American accent.” I was both shocked and flattered, for one of my biggest goals in life was to sound like an American.

Despite everything I’ve struggled through, I’m proud of myself as my English becomes better day by day. I can’t describe how happy I was the first time I realized that I could think

in English instead of Chinese. Learning English has opened my eyes to a whole new side of communication, and helped me understand the American culture a lot better. Every time I memorized a new English idiom, I feel one step closer to being an American. “English is not my first language” is finally not an excuse I use, but something I can proudly say.

I would never forget how that British guy told me “You have an American accent” casually. To me, that was something I’ve always longed to hear: that I sound like an American.