

Original Research Article

Why English: How Studying English Reshaped My Life

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Abstract: As a one of the generations who value the importance of ambition and dreams, it is vital for us to link our old ideals to the real life scenarios. For me, embracing a new experience of English learning has definitely impacted my life as not a student but as a man, and showed me many opportunities that I would have never dared to think of. Just like many fellow classmates of mine, being matriculated into the English course was not my own choice to begin with, and the subject was nothing but a bore to my youthful eyes. English? Why English? I am perfectly fluent in Chinese, and I did not see a reason for me to pick up another language from start. My interest lied elsewhere, and to be more specific, the economics. I am not going to deny that the economics is still and always be what I long to study in the future. Actually, it was also where my complicated relationship with English began.

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In the first term of my University life, the tutor assigned each student with a specific topic to discuss in a diagnostic essay, and unfortunately, my topic happened to be something about how climate change effects individuals in daily life and what measures could be taken to alleviate the problem. Though I had absolutely no idea about whatever that effect will be, I am fairly certain that the topic itself would torment me gravely if I had not figured something out. The ‘something’ turned out to be roommate in the end. By telling me that his essay was to do with the new noble class in America, he offered to help me with mine providing I share what I knew about that concept. For all I knew, I had only read the translated version which would not be much of help if I did not go through the original materials for him. So I did. Saying is always easy, and it was only when I sat down at my small, square desk with copies from various economic magazines that I realized I cannot understand a single thing said by layers and layers of unfamiliar words. It would be humiliating to admit my inadequacy to a new friend, and the only help left for my was the thick, dusty dictionary lying high above the shelf. When I climbed up the stairs and smirked narcissistically for my smartness, I was never aware that was where my English learning process began until looking back from years later, with the dusty dictionary fallen out and the essay nowhere to be found.

The experience opened many doors for me. Apparently vocabulary was vital enough for a freshman student to stand out in his class and to be noticed by the professor, but it was not all, and certainly not the important part. As I began to understand more English essays on economy, I realized there were so much alien topics and discussions that I never knew from Chinese articles. Therefore, English became more of a portal to further resources than a mere subject to me. Reading English articles permeates gradually into my life, and secured its place when I had volunteered to translate some papers at the university. The process required not only vocabulary, but dedication as well. Though performing poorly for the first few weeks, my ability built up with generous help from other participants. I left the job with slightly better translation skills and immense confidence. I stepped closer to the heart of the community I belonged the way I had never been before, and the people there nearly smothered me with their kindness and amiability. However, I was well aware that sort of opportunity does not turn up for everyone though it absolutely should. That was exactly why I applied to join the student union: to provide each one with the encouragement they deserved, and show them a joyful way to develop their academic skills as well as their hobby. It remains my creed even today. After all, the ‘do what you love’ motto was not restricted to the hipster economy in the good old 80s’, but today’s general education as well.

If you think making it into the student union was evidence enough that I was already a changed man during my sophomore year in the university, you are probably right. The change that happened next was less visible but more fundamental to me. After all these papers I translated, and all these articles I had devoured, I came to the fact that I learned English well not because I am an intelligent student, nor that I am more assiduous than my fellow classmates. It was because it connected me with what I long to learn. Reading in English has armed me with different structures of thinking, and propelled the idea of chasing after what my devotion truly dwells, which had always been buried inside my tumultuous head. The entangled paths of life unfolds in front of me as I plodded on, slithering through the slots between academic studies and the obligation of being a member of the union and relaxed into the scattered piles of magazines every weary evening. My horizon broadened day to day, and the small town boy had

grew out to be a man of his own ideas.

By the third year of my college life, I forget often that English is my major. My study life is decorated by loads of articles in different fields of which I had never heard before. As academic pressure builds up, I am caught between examinations and errands from the union. There were surveys that needs to be done, one after another, and endless wording lists. The dreams that had been floating inside my minds peddled away, grovelling to cold, atrocious reality. The pillow I used to pile up as cushions and read upon are put away when most of my nights are spent in the top floor of the main library with broken heater, covered in a knitted blanket which was given as a gift at my last birthday. My confidence took a blow when so many unfamiliar words danced in circles just before my eyes, and the sophisticated sentence structures were just impossible to understand. I had thought that after everything I pulled through, the dilemma should be tackled easily with some effort. It was not. The more anxious I was, the more impossible it seemed to be to pass the examinations without failing. Despair crept through the bookshelves, seeping in from the corners, and I felt like drowning in already. I do not know what else I could do to fish myself out of the predicament. I had believed, for so long, that I am good at my English, and that I enjoy trying to be better at it. That was no longer the case. The foundation was shaken apart, and I staggered to follow up each day when weariness is strangling me from the inside out.

Though the businesses in the union still goes on day to day, I felt more separated from people than ever. All those tests, and essays, wrapped me tightly up like a cocoon. Things outside became only a blurry panorama, and even the closest of my friends melts into the background of it. Days swept past like wind, as the light went out and on, streaming a glimmering map of time. One day, I read an article about how the author encountered a peasant in the gallery of Van Gough, and the latter told him that staring at those paintings offers him comfort and tranquility. I read the passage three times to get all the answer out of it, and stopped, thinking this was exactly what I need: comfort and tranquility. It genuinely made no sense to compare my longing to achieve something in the field I love to the blazingly bright stars of Van Gough, but somehow, the analogy succeeded in propelling me forward. It was nothing like the movies that when the epiphany just crushed onto the leading role, and he was suddenly clear-headed and full of courage. It was a slow process, nothing grandiose about it, and it happened in serenity instead of the presumed passionately vivid clips. It happened like a faint touch, blended with the dazzling light of daybreak as of sunset.

The warmth is tepid, but it was there, guiding me through the shuffling paperworks, and remind me often of the old days before my busy university life had began, of my childhood friends and dreams. How naive we had been, to think that we all were going to live in the ideal life. I remember one of them claimed she was going abroad for she was so keen about the ancient architectures of European countries, and I had said something to rebut, but she just relented that said at least it would broaden our mind in a way that we were to be astounded by ourselves one day. I wondered if that was the truth, and if she had succeeded after all. Maybe it was exactly what I am lacking of: horizon. I was too used being a leading part in the small community here I sometimes forget how much in the world there was left to see. Maybe the only thing that had been hindering my progress was not the sophisticated words not the papers that piled one, it was me myself, losing ambition and settled for mundanity.

In the end of the semester, I passed all the examinations and even won some compliment from my tutors so I would be able to continue my master study in the university as well. I turned down that offer. To see the world, that is, and never be too satiated with former achievement, having belief in myself, trying to do better the very next time- those were the most important things studying English at university had taught me, and I would not make the same mistake I once did again, for errors are likely to occur sooner or later, but learning to deal with (and learn from) them is an important skill in itself (Addie Johnson, 2004). I learned from them with such indomitability as the first time I try to figure out the puzzling phrases from the piles of magazines. Looking back from where I am now, I do not see how far I have come, but how the wonderful memories colour my mind still with happiness and contentment.

It is amazing as well as surprising when all those fore-mentioned memories were rained with the traces of English. Sometimes a paragraph from a long forgotten article, sometimes a tricky word I misused often, and sometimes, like the case with Van Gough, a certain notion I had drawn from reading. It gifts me with the courage to seek after my passion, to discover not only who I am but also who I wish to be. It was never an exaggeration to say the process had shaped my life entirely. I am about to board on a new ship that would carry me to another field for which I dreamt as child, but my association with English, like an old friend, would never broke. By sharing the experience, I do wish the same kind of friendship might blossom in others' life as well. Believe it or not, such a beautiful phase would be a pity to miss.

References

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