

Rugens Jean Baptiste

Professor. Dan Ryan

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Do I Have to be Able to Speak English to be Considered an American?

March 22, 2009: at the age of 5 I was young, scared, and nervous, but excited. On that day I was introduced to my new life. Arriving in America was something I'd only dreamed of. While the cold foreign spring air hit my face, I knew that I was emerging into a world that was completely new to me. Before I left my childhood home in Haiti, my mother said to me in her saddest tone, "Don't forget who you are, my boy. Don't become too American." I would not see her face again for 7 years. Unfortunately, all I wanted to become was the "American" she spoke so negatively of. Upon arrival in the States, I started to question what it meant to be an "American." Is it being a legal American citizen? Is it dressing and eating the ways Americans do? Or perhaps it is mastering the ways to communicate like an American? Do I need to speak English properly to be considered an American? What I've learned is NO.

A couple of weeks later my father enrolled me in my new elementary school. Needless to say, I was very anxious, yet very determined to speak English fluently in the quickest way possible. Back then I believed the quicker I learned English, the quicker I would be able to fit in and become the "American" my mother desperately did not want me to be. While sitting in this bright beige classroom with colorful drawings and signs hanging all over the walls, I tried my best to read what was written around me. I tried to make sense of each word I read but quickly got frustrated due to my lack of understanding. I felt like a lost creature in a maze. Everyone around was speaking in an unfamiliar tongue, and suddenly I felt a tear ascend down my face. I

wasn't sad because I didn't understand what everyone around me was saying or what was written around me. Instead, my sadness derived from a place of feeling like I did not belong. It was the first time in my life I felt so out of place. Back at home, I understood what others around me said. I could read any sign and understand what it said, and more importantly, could maintain a conversation with anyone. I quickly wiped the tear off my face to prevent anyone from asking if I was okay.

Months later, I was getting adjusted to this new environment. I noticed I was doing very well in math. Back at home I'd already excelled and mastered what was currently being taught in my second-grade math class. However, I was struggling greatly in other subjects such as English, Science, and History. Although my teacher would independently break down what she was teaching to me, it was still hard for me to grasp the lessons. I felt as if all my peers were completely ahead of me.

Over the summer my English got a little better, and I could understand some common phrases. I was determined to master English and speak just like my fellow classmates. I knew it would be difficult but I didn't want to feel out of place. During the two-month break from school, my father and sister would speak to me only in English to ensure I understood English the fastest way possible.

In September of that year, I entered the third grade. My family at home noticed the great amount of progress I had made in a short amount of time. Therefore, going into this new school year, my confidence level was a little higher than the previous year. One week into the school year, I noticed every time I spoke out loud I would hear some giggles. I seemed to have forgotten because I had not yet mastered English. At times my pronunciation of certain words was vastly different from the ways my peers would pronounce them. This is similar to how Alisha Mughal,

a writer from Pakistan who immigrated to Canada, wrote in her recent *Catapult* article, “Can I Be a Writer if I Can’t Speak English Idiomatically?” that her writing “didn’t flow with the reflexive comfortableness I sensed in the words of some of my favorite writers.” When comparing her writing to some of her favorite native American authors, she, just like me, discovered that even though we can understand English, when we speak or we write in English it will display to others that English is clearly not our first Language.

As the year progressed, with the help of my Amazing ESL teacher Mr. Smith, I began to focus on how to properly form sentences. I express the insecurities my accent has brought me to Mr. Smith. His reply was to put more effort into speaking and writing English in a grammatically correct way. Instead of focusing on how I may sound to others, focus on speaking English properly, he also said to me. For example, I would commonly misuse words such as “to, too, and two” & “they, there, and their. ” He emphasized that I needed to spend more time mastering the proper usage of those words for my reading, speaking, and writing skills to improve.

" Everything in me is diverse even when I eat American foods like hamburgers, which to clarify, are American when a white person eats them & diverse when my family eats them," Jose Olivarez wrote in his poem “Mexican American Disambiguation.” This powerful quote really spoke to me because Olivarez was pointing out that as a Mexican living in America, he will never be classified as just an “American.” Instead of desperately wanting to become this ideal “American” version of myself, I needed to make peace with the fact that I would never become this perfect “American.” Due to my vastly diverse background, such a thing is untenable. Being older now, I have made peace with the fact that I will never be viewed the way I desperately wanted to be viewed when I first arrived in America. I am a mixture of two different cultures. I

have learned to adapt to both cultures and crafted myself into the person I am today. So no, Mom, I have not forgotten who I am. I will not become “too American.” Instead, I will become my own version of what I consider an American to be.

REVISION

- I removed my Lastname from the top of each page because I accidentally wrote it twice.
- I removed the education essay from the top of my paper because it was not needed.
- I deleted the extra spaces I previously added.
- I capitalized all the individual words in my title.
- fixed all the comas issues I had in my paper.
- I clarified my age in my introduction.
- I replaced my lowercase a with uppercase A.
- I deleted the s in hit because it was not needed.
- I replace the word “avoid” with “prevent”
- I replace all the lowercase “d” with uppercase “D”
- I moved the last sentence of paragraph 3 to the first sentence in paragraph 4, in order for my narrative to flow properly.
- I created a new paragraph for the summer section of my essay.
- I replaced the word “comprehended” with the word “understood”, in order to keep it simple for the reader.
- I indented the beginning of my 5th paragraph.

- I replaced the word “seem” with “seemed”
- I formatted the name of the publication I was citing.
- I specify that the author was talking about her writing.
- I fixed an error I made when spelling “powerful quote”
- I replaced “he” with the authors that wrote the poem I was citing.
- I removed the “ed” from the word “considered”