



## **From Self-Doubt to Self-Acceptance: An ESL Learner's Journey**

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This article is a narrative inquiry into how an ESL learner transits from self-doubt to self-acceptance after having come to the United States and becomes more open to communications with others. Three aspects are found to be critical for the learner to reach self-acceptance: sharing language experiences through storytelling; finding one's own expertise in collaborative learning; awakening to one's own membership in diverse settings. The last section provides teachers with practical ideas regarding how to foster ESL students' self-acceptance and empower them to be actively engaged in conversations with others in English.

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Three years ago, a Chinese girl flew to the United States to pursue a graduate degree. She sat in the back of the university classroom, writing heavy notes on materials but not speaking much. She ordered the food in restaurants by simply pointing to the dish name on the menu and saying "this" or "that". She did not

quite get what the bus driver said about where she should get off for her destination, but dared not to ask for clarification in front of the passengers.

The girl, who had been learning English for 13 years in China, felt helpless and difficult to navigate her studies and daily life after she landed on the United States. She kept asking herself: what was the point of having invested efforts in learning English for so many years – only to find that she had so little expertise in the language now? What she had learned in China was not what was frequently used in the United States. Whenever she started communicating with others in a variety of English that they were unfamiliar with, she was harassed by the awareness of how incapable she was as a speaker of English. This girl was me, the “me” at the beginning of an ESL learner’s journey in the United States.

### **Sharing Language Experiences through Storytelling**

Having become so afraid of being judged as an incompetent speaker of English, I put on a mask of understanding with ease what others had said. When the whole class laughed about the professor’s joke, I also wore a smile, even though I did not quite get it. After the bank representative explained the procedures of applying for a debit card, I directly said, “Okay, thanks a lot,” though I was still not exactly sure about how to do certain steps. Although my

self-image was presented as a capable English speaker at those moments, I knew from the inner side that I was struggling with using this language.

At the very beginning, I only talked with Chinese friends who were also international students about my “mask of understanding” and how uncomfortable I felt about it. Surprisingly, my friends resonated with me and shared similar experiences. This led me to realize that my struggle with English was not an indicator of me personally being an incapable language learner, but was a result shaped by what I had previously learned regarding English and the way how I had learned it in my mother country.

This realization granted me the strength to present my stories in front of my peers who spoke English as their first language, most of them having been teachers of different subjects in U.S. public schools. To my surprise, my peers not only showed their understanding with caring attitudes, but also established connections between their own lives and my stories. Some of them talked about how my experiences guided them to see their own ESL students differently. Others expressed how the stories brought them back to their previous lives in foreign countries.

The storytelling exposed my language experiences and struggles to others around me. The non-judgmental and thoughtful feedback from my audience

empowered me to accept what I was as a second language user. It was because of the self-acceptance that I started living in harmony with my previous English learning experiences. Instead of questioning whether my English learning in the past had been a big waste of time or not, I gradually became more focused on how to better live in the present moment.

### **Finding My Expertise in Collaborative Learning**

At the very beginning, I stepped into my graduate classroom in the U.S. as a “tourist” (Freiberg, 1996, p. 32). The main focus was on learning from my professors and peers. I became a knowledge receiver who was occupied with taking in what had been told, without realizing what I could contribute to others’ knowing with my own knowledge and skills.

It was not until I reached out to a peer who was teaching English in a local high school to be my partner for a research project that I gradually moved out of the “tourist” mode. Without any hesitation, my peer agreed to work with me. I was at first very nervous since I was afraid that my language inefficiency would become a barrier between us. However, at the first meeting, my partner emphasized that she valued my expertise in research methodology and was looking forward to what would develop from our collaboration, which laid a solid foundation for me to bravely speak my mind.

My peer's belief that I could contribute to our collaborative work greatly relieved my self-doubt and helped me become a "citizen" (Freiberg, 1996, p. 36) who could take the responsibility and make his or her own contribution to the learning community. In this way, I was able to find myself as an equal collaborative learner with my own expertise, instead of a passive learner simply taking in information. In the collaboration, my peer and I did run into misunderstandings or misinterpretations sometimes. Nevertheless, I started seeing them as natural happenings in the process of communication and actively looking for ways of clarification. I became more focused on how to achieve a better understanding between us. The research project we have been working on will now turn into a book chapter publication next year.

### **Awakening to My Membership in the Diversity**

Before I came to the United States, I was mainly exposed to two types of English: American English represented by the *Voice of America* and British English by the *British Broadcasting Corporation*. Although I learned later from a linguistics class that there exists a wide variety of Englishes, I assumed that those different types of English were mainly created and used by people from different regions within the countries where English was one of their official languages.

I kept comparing my own English with the two types of “Standard English” to which I had been exposed for a long time and which led me to miss the forest of diversity around me. In my social studies class, the professor guided students to discuss the diversity of English from a global perspective. It was not until then that I came to realize not only did people within the United States develop their own regional English, but people from other countries were also using English in their own ways. When I saw people from countries where English was not one of their official languages confidently communicate with others by using their own versions of English, I was awakened to the fact that I have also been part of this language diversity.

This awareness not only dragged me out of the continuous negative self-evaluation, but also shifted my attention from grammar and accent to the meaning that I truly wanted to express. The self-acceptance was enhanced when I realized that my English has been an enrichment of the diversity.

Three years later, I asked professors questions that occurred to me in class. I collaborated with my peers on research projects. I negotiated with the dealer for a lower price to get a second-hand car. I am not saying that I no longer have any language problems. Grammatical mistakes are still sometimes embedded in my sentences. The fluency of my English does regress if I do not speak English for

three days. Body language is still a good alternative for me to express myself when I do not know how to say what I want to say. I still consider myself an English language learner and I will always be. However, this consideration will no longer mute me because my self-acceptance has encouraged me to be focused on expressing what I am, instead of questioning what I am, which in turn makes me more open to communication with others and thus brings more language learning opportunities.

### Significance for ESL Teachers

When English language learners start doubting themselves as capable beings because of their second language use, it might be helpful if teachers could guide them to reach self-acceptance. The self-acceptance here does not mean that students are satisfied with their current language level and stop investing efforts in learning English. It means that students are equipped with different lenses to see themselves, which might empower them to be truly open to communications with others in English, instead of isolating themselves.

The three turning points in my journey have guided me to be in harmony with myself and move forward. How could they apply to your students who are English language learners? How could you set up the turning points in their

journeys? You might want to consider these three ways to address such questions with your students.

Invite students to share their language experiences so that they might gradually become comfortable with their identities as second language learners. It could start within the community of English language learners so that they might find more resonance and a sense of belonging. Learners' language experiences should always be responded to with a caring attitude, which could help them tell their stories without feeling vulnerable and being judged. In this way, students could potentially see "other alternatives that may be more appropriate or fulfilling" (Carson & Langer, 2006, p.31) regarding themselves.

Employ collaborative projects to help language learners find their own voice. Students within a group could be given a few minutes to talk about their team members' expertise at first and how they think that expertise could contribute to the projects. Learners are thus guided to see themselves as the ones being able to make the projects better. This collaborative process might not only increase one's self-worth, but also lead to language learning through negotiation of meaning, comprehensible input and opportunities for learners to produce language (Martin-Beltrán, Chen, Guzman, & Merills, 2016).



Expose students to the diversity of English from a global perspective.

Teachers not only show students how English varies across regions within the United States, but also introduce them different versions of English from countries where English was not used as an official language. If possible, teachers could invite people of similar background as English learners to tell stories about what their lives are like in the U.S. and how they are using English to communicate with others. Therefore, the learners might see a positive potential for their future, which helps relieve their burden of feeling not proficient in English (Llurda, 2009). As a result, they might become more comfortable with their own versions of English.

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