

LEARNING TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE

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When I first came to the United States at the age of eight, the only English words I knew were hi, bye and cat. At that time, I thought I would never learn how to communicate with people around me and I was hit with the idea that I would have no friends in America. Now, I think back and say, was I wrong or what? Having lived in Ukraine for eight years and knowing how to speak only Russian, it felt weird going to an American school with American children in America, I felt that I was the odd one out; everyone around me could communicate easily with each other, laugh and all I could do was just sit at my desk looking dumbfounded as to what was going on around me. The first few days of grade one were terrible, I didn't understand what the teacher was saying or what she was writing on the board, I didn't understand what the girl sitting next to me was trying to whisper to me, I had no idea what was going on. I hated it and I knew something had to be done about it.

At that time, I thought I would never learn English and that all the other students would think I am dumb and I thought I would have no friends in America. Trust me, I wanted to learn the language badly but I had no idea how I could start. Since my teacher and my parents noticed I wasn't getting anywhere by not knowing the language, they arranged me to have a tutor at school that would teach me and a couple of other kids from Mexico how to speak, read and write in English. I would go to that tutor everyday and learn some English; how to describe the weather, what day of the week it was, colors and many other basic elements of the language. Since I really wanted to learn I worked hard and memorized the words and phrases by reciting them on my way home after school. My tutor gave me some easy books to read at home and practice and my parents helped me at home with writing and reading. After a few months I was beginning to speak some simple English and I was proud of myself, so proud that I started to talk a lot in school, a habit I still haven't quite lost. This habit of talking has gotten me in trouble with my teachers over the years but this is one of the major things that helped me speak English much better and lose my Russian accent. At the end of grade one, I was able to communicate easily with my newly made friends and we had a lot of fun.

But I wanted to be even better at English. Just simple English was not enough for me, I liked the way my teachers talked and used "hard" words, and I wanted to learn "hard" words too. So somewhere in grade two, I dumped the easy picture books and went on to chapter books. Easy ones at first but those got harder too as I went along. I was doing well in all of my subjects and I knew that knowing English was what helped me. I was feeling like I needed a bit more of a challenge and I was able to skip grade three altogether and move straight on to grade four. By that time, my English was better than a lot of the "local" American kids in my class. By this time, I was reading Harry Potter and much more challenging books than the ones when I first started with my tutor back in grade one. My mom worked in the city library at that time and I think that also helped me a lot. I used to go to the library very often and just sit there looking at and reading the non-fiction books, then going over to the fiction section and borrowing novels to read at home and at school. I really liked it; I began to enjoy watching the news; something I knew most of my friends didn't like to do.

I was wrong. In the beginning, I would have never imagined that I would learn English and use it as my primary language nowadays. I was worried and upset but I didn't give up, I learned, most of the time without even trying. Just talking with my friends, watching TV, reading books; I was doing it all for fun but those are the things that really helped me, not studying from textbooks like there was no tomorrow. I don't know, that's just the way I learn, through unrushed, practical learning. And so I think that when somebody really wants something in life and I mean yearning for something, that person will usually work really hard to achieve it. When I was in a situation where all the kids around me had fun and could communicate with each other while I was standing at the sidelines and not knowing anything, I really wanted to join in and have fun with the other kids. So I worked hard and learned English. Learning English changed my life a lot. In the beginning, I didn't know anything and I was having no fun. I like to have fun and I love to talk, even back in Ukraine I was always talking and getting in trouble for it. And now I was here in America and I couldn't talk to anyone because no one spoke Russian and therefore, I couldn't have any fun. That is why learning English was really a life-changing moment for me. I was living in a society where everyone spoke the language and I knew I had to learn it. I actually think there was no escaping learning the language for me since everything and everyone around me was English and American. Now that I know the language, I can communicate with so many people all over the world because as of now, English is the international language and knowing it made my life easier and more fun.