

## The Raft

by Xinyi Luo

"As the Reading Festival is coming, I'd like each of you to share one of your favorite books with the class on Friday morning next week," said our homeroom teacher on Monday morning.

"All right, Ms. DeWalt!" the class shouted.

However, by the time Friday came, I still hadn't found the appropriate one to be shared on stage. Unlike usual, I was so worried as I did not leave the classroom right after the class was dismissed. Ms. DeWalt came in and kindly asked me about what was wrong. After listening to my predicament, she led me to her office and selected one from her bookshelf. The book is "The Raft" authored by Jim Lamarche.

At that time, I did not expect this book to be my favorite until today. That night, I was completely immersed in the story and decided to present it next Friday right away. The story was about a boy named Nicky spending his summer vacation with his grandma in the countryside. Similar to me, Nicky is from a large city and could not bear life in the countryside. However, his mind changed after he found an old raft. He began to explore the woods nearby and drew beautiful scenes that he has seen. It was, without a doubt, one of Nicky's happiest summer vacations.

After I completed the book, I was a little shocked. Nicky, like me, was in a foreign environment and couldn't adapt to it in the first place. After I joined this class, I just couldn't fit in. With no Chinese faces and no one to speak Chinese with, my identity was fading away. Nonetheless, I had to get involved in the classroom with my poor spoken English. Every time I

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rose the courage to speak up, no one could understand what I am talking about. When I tried to use Chinese to convey my message more clearly, I suddenly realize how stupid I was to talk to a group of English speakers in Chinese to make my English more understandable. From then on, I barely talked in order not to make me further embarrassed.

But after I had read this book, I realized that I would have to find my way to adapt to this new environment. If I remained hidden from the problem, it would never be solved. "The Reading festival is a great way for me to get involved," I told myself. I did some research online and also asked Ms. DeWalt for help. After comparing various examples, I drew a map of Nicky's routine in the wood, tables with important incidences that Nicky had during his journey, and ultimately, a replica of the raft that Nicky had used when exploring in the woods. To make my presentation more natural, I didn't prepare the script. I wanted to be the storyteller and immersed into the story with the listeners together.

Here the day came, my heart was pumping quite fast as I could hear nothing but my heartbeat. I began to worry if I happened to forget anything important to say. I was paying no attention to anyone but memorizing the "script" in my head. Until I heard the voice, "Annie, would you please share your story with the rest of the class?" "Okay," I responded, with my voice trembling. With a deep breath, I started.

While I was presenting, I can feel my voice shaky and my hands sweating. I knew my grammar was messed up because I nearly forget the script. Still, I tried my best to put myself immersed in the story as I practiced at home. Luckily, it helped a lot as I could feel much more relaxed and was sharing a story that I just saw with my own eyes. After an introduction about Nicky, we started the journey together. As I was telling about each special incident Nicky experienced, I stuck the raft on the stop on the map and put my table beside it as a reference. As

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traveling towards the next stop, I described some beautiful scenes on two sides of the river with my classmates as if we were there.

As my presentation went by, I saw my classmates' attention shift from doing their things to listening to me with their eyes fixed on me. Ms. DeWalt was also looking at me with a big smile. When I finished, there was round applause in the classroom.

As I looked down at my classmates, I noticed that they were looking at me differently. They probably didn't expect a Chinese girl who barely speaks English to be able to give an excellent presentation. When I got back to my seat, the girl sitting next to me gave me a thumb up and said "Annie, you are doing a great job." "Thanks" "Could you lend me the book for one day, I am interested in the story." "Of course." "Thank you very much, I promise I will give it back to you tomorrow."

Thanks to the Reading Festival, I got to know my deskmate, Grace, who is still a good friend of mine until now. She not only assisted me with my studies, but she also invited me to play games with her friends during recess. As I became friends with them, I gained the courage to talk to them, even with my Chinglish. The more I spoke to them, the more I realized that my English was not a major issue. People might not get the meaning at first, but they can understand it as we had further conversations.

Similar to Richard Rodriguez in his book "Hunger of Memory," I could not speak my mother tongue language-Chinese at school as there's no Chinese. In Rodriguez's essay, he says: "I hear them and am forced to say no: It is not possible for a child — any child — ever to use his family's language in school." (Rodriguez) It was hard for me to speak out in English in the first few months. I felt unadopted into the class environment because I could not share my thoughts in English. In this way, I barely talked and I was lonely. But luckily, I began to raise my courage

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and talked to my classmate later. During the Chinese New Year, I even prepared a poster to share Chinese culture with my classmates. It's a pity that I couldn't speak Chinese. Despite this, I think it's more important to share our own cultures with foreigners to make Chinese culture known to more people.

Like Amy Tan's mother in her essay "Mother Tongue," I spoke "broken" English when I first arrived in America. We had both face the problem of misunderstanding from others. But it is not a thing that we should be ashamed of. Similarly, in Tan's essay, she says: "I knew I had succeeded when it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict "So easy to read" (Tan 4). "Broken" English does not mean you don't understand English at all. Speaking perfect English is great. But as long as you convey important information to others and people can understand it, there is no need to worry about your English.

From my point of view, it's common that people are embarrassed when they are unable to express their thoughts appropriately when learning a new foreign language. However, people must step out and try their best. People could cross the border of culture as long they have tried to do so. Most likely, there's a small raft waiting for you somewhere that will take you to a brighter future.

#### Works Cited

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