

## **How much does a haircut cost?**

by Nghi Vo

Regular barbershops may give you a fresh haircut for as little as \$10, but if you prefer a more sophisticated look, a luxurious hair salon can cost you up to \$100. While it is somewhat expensive, it is not so costly that it makes you ponder day and night or question your life decisions. As for me, I paid that high price for a haircut.

That day was not my first visit to this hairdresser. In fact, since one of the owners is a close friend of my mother's, I had been getting my hair done there for the past two years. Ginza Matsunaga is the name of that high-class Japanese hair salon located in the Intercontinental hotel complex in the center of Saigon, Vietnam, where I was born and raised. Ms.Thu, the shop's founder, handles business between Vietnam and Japan; therefore, her Japanese is outstanding. I admire her at this point because, as someone engaged in Japanese culture, hearing Japanese spoken well by acquaintances motivates me to explore the language further.

The salon's chief hairstylist is a native Japanese. I can not remember his name as two and a half years have passed since his last work there, but I can never forget his friendliness and professionalism. As my mother and I walked into the shop that day, he smiled and said, "Xin Chào! (which means hello in Vietnamese)" It took me by surprise and amusement. Of course, who does not enjoy hearing foreigners speak our language? When the barber asked what haircut I wanted that day, an idea came to me: "Ah, should I also answer him in Japanese?" I must be honest; my Japanese was fairly limited. They were mostly from Japanese anime that I watched as a kid as I tried to listen to and imitate the characters in the film. But with what I had in mind, I could definitely say, "Maegami kiritai. (I want to cut my bangs)." At least, that was what I assumed.

I opened my mouth, about to convey my thoughts in Japanese, when suddenly my throat tightened; the sound I made was so tiny that I wondered if I had just lost my voice. To my confusion, the chief hairstylist was still smiling pleasantly, his eyes wide with expectation. This made my jaws freeze even more; I could not put my thoughts into words. It had only been a few seconds, yet it seemed like a century. Eventually, I swallowed, grinned, pointed to my bangs, and raised the scissors sign.

Although the hairstylist nodded happily, I knew I had squandered his expectations of my Japanese, or, at the very least, I had squandered my own. I had a bad habit of worrying too much about what was happening around me, and this awkward incident had been on my mind all day. How odd. Why was I so anxious over a simple phrase, and it was not even a part of a long conversation? Thinking back, I discovered that I could not answer the barber in Japanese that day because I was frightened of judgment. What if my statement contains grammatical errors? What if I trip my tongue while speaking, and my pronunciation sounds weird? What if they do not get what I am saying? Would I not become an "empty box squealing" in the eyes of the people there if such embarrassing things happened? I knew I was overthinking things at the time, but I could not stop the stream of thoughts that came flooding. At first, I figured I could not speak properly since I did not know much Japanese. However, after reflecting for a while, I realized, "oh, when I communicate in English, I too have such stressful moments."

Not to brag, but I excelled at English from an early age compared to my peers. I was nearly an English teacher's assistant in elementary school since many classmates could not catch up with the instructor's words. When I was in middle school, I could keep up with all the jokes in English and even create a few of my own. Until my high school years, despite studying in an environment full of gifted students, my language talent was not overshadowed; it improved each

day I grew older. In fact, my anxiety about communicating in English did not arise in the early days of learning the language; instead, it seeped into my consciousness so gradually, so quietly, that I could not even recall it. But I could vaguely remember that it was because of the times my classmates gave presentations in English, and occasionally, there would be someone who teased their pronunciation.

In my memory, I was never mocked for my ability to speak English, but placing myself in the shoes of others who have been there made me want to go back to being an ancient person living in a cave. Surprisingly, among those schoolmates who have difficulties talking in English, some typically perform well in English examinations, particularly in grammar and written assignments. This reminded me of a line from “Why Do We Talk Like A Book?” by Chihao Sun: “I didn't know why a person who could write with a variety of rhetorical devices and abundant sentence structures couldn't handle daily English conversation” (4). Perhaps it was not just me, but many of my friends also found their throats dry, their tongues fluttering, and sweat drops whenever they tried searching for words in their heads to assemble a complete English phrase. Even worse, people who have been ridiculed for their imperfect English communication will consider it even more challenging to escape this psychological phantom of using foreign languages.

So, how can we escape this anxiety we feel when speaking English? In truth, this is a question I have been contemplating for years, and perhaps I still have not found a definitive solution. Nevertheless, in order to overcome this fear, I enable myself to engage in conversations with foreigners but also not put pressure on myself to do brilliantly in all those encounters. The irony is that before I became aware of other people's opinions about the ability to utilize English, I was so self-assured in interacting with others in English that, looking back, I believe there was

nothing wrong with my speaking skills at the time. That was about 8 years ago, I suddenly gained huge confidence in speaking English that even I now cannot imagine being that naturally while communicating in a language that is not my mother tongue.

What makes a child of 10 years old speak a second language more fluently than an adult? The explanation could be the child's carefree attitude. They are not old enough to understand the harsh judgments of this society; they are not sensitive enough to understand that, in some cases, people will lose interest in conversation if their partner makes too many mistakes when talking; and, most importantly, they need not be afraid of being judged for their simple English because they are just kids. Years ago, perhaps I was arrogant; I dared to think that my English was better than anyone around me and was indeed good enough; therefore, I did not have to fear judgment. But ironically, that naive thought was what made me so good an English speaker back then. I wonder if I was still that unbothered child, could I have had a better talk with that Japanese hairdresser two years ago?

Still, turning a blind eye to all such comments like a kid is not a decent choice; what I usually strive to accomplish is to accept good-intentioned opinions and not mind the criticism that only serves to satisfy people's malice. I did not have many opportunities to enhance my English abilities in Vietnam, but after I began studying in the US, communicating in English eventually became a daily activity I couldn't run away from. In the beginning, I forced myself to perfect every conversation, from short to long, from the cashier to the new friend, from the phone to the classroom. But as time passes, I no longer have the time or energy to bother with what other people think, and I no longer mind looking for fancy phrases or complex sentences to translate my thoughts from Vietnamese to English. I say whatever comes to mind. To my surprise, my new perspective toward expressing myself in English not only helps me feel more at

ease but also makes my dialogues a lot smoother and effortless. I never imagined that my obsessive focus on the language I speak would be the barrier to acquiring the fluent English I had always desired. Maybe the issue is more with the speaker's psyche than with their English capability. When I can communicate without considering which structure is better or which word sounds more like a native speaker, I realize other people do not really mind my language level but rather the content of the story I am telling.

If anyone were to ask me how much the haircut ended up costing that day, I would answer that it took me several nights over the years to think about my capacity to communicate in languages other than my mother tongue. But, in the end, I am still pleased with that haircut as I know that if I ever get the chance to see that Japanese hairdresser again, I will be able to ask him, "Genki desu ka? (How are you?)" as casually as I converse with my friends in English today.

#### Work Cited

Sun, Chihao. "Why Do We Talk Like a Book?" University of Pittsburgh, 2015.