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ENGL 131 C

Jan 18th, 2013

The American Host Family

At the age of 16, I went to an American High School in Florida as an exchange student. Instead of living on campus, I was arranged to live in a different discourse community – a local host family. A discourse community is a group of people who share similar ideas and values about certain things and they have their own way to talk. My host mom was an elementary school English teacher and my host dad was working for a factory. My 29-year old host parents didn’t have any children, but I do have a “host sister” – a 17-year old Thai girl. It was the first year for both of us to be in the United States. The British English used by us, the grammar mistakes appeared in our dialogues with our host parents, the topics and taboos in the conversations, and the special experts and beginners made this discourse community so unique.

The British English words used by my host sister and I confused my host parents at the beginning of that year. My host mom took us to Walmart to buy some snacks the first weekend after our arrivals. I told her I wanted to get some biscuits. She looked a little bit surprised when she heard what I said, “There are no biscuits in Walmart. We should get them in a restaurant.” Few minutes later I found some Oreos on the shelves in front of me, but she had just told me there were no biscuits! I pointed to the Oreos and asked her and she suddenly realized what I meant. “Those are called cookies in the United States, not biscuits.” This happened a lot during the year I was living with them. I used “trousers” instead of “pants”, “angry” instead of “mad”, “strange” instead of “weird”, and “clever” instead of “smart”. The Thai girl liked to use “sweets” to indicate “candies” and use “crisps” to indicate “chips”. Our host mom corrected us for few times but we still used those vocabulary words often.

Besides the lexis, we also used the non-standard grammar and syntax in this American host family. Once in the year I was asking my host mom why I could have a fluent conversation with her easily but the English of my classmates and the waiters or waitresses were so difficult to understand. It took me really long time to think of the replies. She told me the English she spoke with us was a little bit different from what she spoke with the Americans. She was making an effort to use the vocabularies we knew or probably the vocabularies used in British English. She was also trying to pronounce every word so clearly so we could understand her the first time. When we were answering her questions, we didn’t care a lot about grammar and we were not trying to say everything in the American way. Sometimes we even didn’t use complete sentences. We knew she would understand since we were together for a long time and she was an English teacher. She was very good at understanding the English spoken by non-native speakers. There were some foreign students in her class. My host sister and I felt really comfortable when talking to her, but we did have a taboo in the discourse community. Our exchange student program had a rule that we couldn’t talk to our parents on phone or Skype for more than 45 minutes per week, and we were recommended not to talk about our families too much because they wanted us to be a real “American kid”. We also knew that our host mom was trying to make us happy and took us to many attractive places like Universal and Disney World. It might hurt her feeling if we were being too homesick, so we rarely talked about our nostalgia. Actually this was a little bit sad sometimes, because we missed our home so bad and really needed to tell someone about this.

In this discourse community, the experts were definitely my host mom, my host sister and I as we spoke our “unique English”, but my host dad could be called a “beginner” in some way. He was busy on the weekdays and needed to have rests at weekends, so we didn’t get chances to communicate with him very often. When my host sister and I were talking to him, we would pay much attention on the lexis and syntax for he didn’t know many British English words and our words. Sometimes he still needed my host mom to be the “bridge of communication” between him and us, otherwise he would not be aware of our opinions. Because of this, the Thai girl and I found our host mom so trustworthy.

Since we trust her so much, she played many roles in our lives, and our topics include almost everything. Obviously, she was our mom at first, so she took care of us and gave us much advice. She would remind us to take a jacket if we went out in the evenings; she would ask my host sister to pay attention in class and turn in her homework in time after she failed her math tests; and she would guide me if I had extreme opinions. But she was also like our peer. We told her our secrets that we would never tell our moms. She knew my host sister had a boyfriend in Thailand (my host sister’s parents didn’t allow her to be in a relationship with someone when she was in high school) and she also knew I always went to bed at 2 or 3 AM when I was at home (I was supposed to go to bed at 11PM). Because my host sister and I were using a second language, it’s harder for us to hide some facts when state one thing. Therefore, we were probably more honest than ever. We also talked about her salary, her previous relationship with another man, and her unstable relationship with her mom.

Compare to the other discourse communities I enrolled in, my host family was obviously my favorite one. We used American and British hybrid English words, the sentence structure was not complete all the time and the grammar included many errors. It was really a free situation even we did have a taboo – homesickness.