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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 with a local host family. My host mom was an elementary school English teacher and my host dad was working for a factory. My 29-year old host parents don’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. Even we had been studied English for years, grammar mistakes appeared regularly in our dialogues. We also couldn’t get rid of the deficiency of lexis. There was another problem bothering us – the British English words (or probably Asian English words) we were using 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 vocabularies often.

Besides the lexis, we also used the non-standard grammar and syntax in this discourse community. Once in the year I was asking her 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 trying 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 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.

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 on 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.

The topics existed in this discourse community include all aspects of our lives. My host mom played many. Obviously, she was our mom at first, so she took care of us and gave us many advises. 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). We also talked about her salary, her previous relationship with another man, and her unstable relationship with her mom.

There were not as many taboos as the other discourse community had, but we did have one. 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.

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.

Mengsu,

This is a very interesting paper- your participation in a DC like this is unique, and you do a good job of analyzing your language choices and the effects that they produced. In general, your organization is quite effective, although I think that you might consider making a more formal introduction with an explanation of the definition of a DC and a road-map of what you will talk about in the paper. Overall, though, you make some excellent points, and I’ve suggested some questions to consider in my comments above if you choose to revise this for the portfolio. Well done!