

By Shuai Li

Pitch imperfect

Holding the \$10,000 check felt unreal. It represented almost half of my annual stipend as a graduate student, and I had earned it in just 3 days by pitching my startup idea at the first Idaho Entrepreneur Challenge. Standing at center stage on the top floor of the tallest building in the state capital, facing an audience of prominent businesspeople, politicians, and other young entrepreneurs, I felt like a celebrity. My success was all the more rewarding because, as a nonnative English speaker, I had spent the previous 8 years struggling with a lack of confidence in my ability to communicate.

When I came to the United States from China in my early 20s to further my education, I knew that my language skills would need a lot of work. Although I had learned some technical English as part of my software engineering degree, I certainly couldn't hold a conversation. But I felt that the United States was the best place for me to grow, so I made the leap.

My accent and poor grammar made for tough going at first. While working at the college tutoring center, the most common question I would receive was not about a particular class subject, but rather a simple, "Can you say that again?" When a student ordered a quesadilla from me as I worked in the school cafeteria, I thought to myself, "I have no idea what kind of burger that is."

It was frustrating, embarrassing, and stressful. I felt I was letting others down and wasting their time, and I started to doubt my abilities. At times, I wondered whether coming to the United States had been the right decision after all.

But during those first dreadful months, I realized that the only way forward was to confront my discomfort with English by practicing at every opportunity. I forced myself to initiate conversations, including at home with my host family, at my part-time jobs, and while volunteering at a local museum. Talking to random strangers with my imperfect English was intimidating at first, but more often than not I received a friendly response, a nod or a faint smile, which made me feel that my effort was worth it. Every day I spent hours with a recorder, capturing and reviewing my pronunciation, looking forward to the day when people would understand me loud and clear.

During the entrepreneurship event, I realized that my practice had finally paid off. In the months that followed, I went on a pitching spree and managed to gather enough seed money to fund my startup. I forced myself to speak confidently



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in front of business mentors, my startup co-founders, and our new hires. I was even invited to speak at my university's first ever TEDx event about what inspired me to become an entrepreneur. Buoyed in part by my recent successes, I accepted the rare invitation. Even so, I was nervous about speaking at such a high-profile event. When I walked into the beaming stage light, I took my glasses off so that I wouldn't make eye contact with the hundreds of people in the audience. I prayed to all the deities I knew to calm me so that my tongue wouldn't move faster than my thoughts. All I wanted was to deliver a crystal-clear talk. When it was over, I was exhausted but relieved—and the audience's applause indicated that I had done a good job. Perhaps most important, I had proved to myself that I could confidently deliver a complex speech to a large crowd—in English.

My startup didn't take off, and I'm now back on a more traditional research path. These days, I put my ever-improving communication skills to use in mentoring students in the lab. Outside of academia, I'm more confident during social gatherings. A slight accent may betray my origin, but I know I can still grab my listeners' attention. And I greatly appreciate the people who have helped me reach this point by patiently listening to me over the years.

I've found that many international scholars tend to withdraw or build community mainly with people from their home country, and I understand why. But if English is not your first language, allow me to pitch you an idea: Talk to someone new every day. Get comfortable with discomfort and start using English to tell your story. ■

Shuai Li is a postdoctoral fellow at Washington State University in Pullman and will move to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, this month.

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