

Kaijia Liu

Anne Bello

ENGLWRIT 111

9 October 2020

Overfilled Water

Have you ever tried to steam steamed buns at home, using a strainer-like colander with a median-sized pot? (In China we have the real professional bamboo steamer sets). First, you have to drive to HMart (a large Asian supermarket), go to the freezer zone, and in one of the freezers sits a bag of Brown Sugar Steamed Buns (yes, its color should be brown too). After you go back home, follow the instructions on the package: take out the buns, pour some amount of water in the pot, and then put the buns in a colander in the pot, turn on the stove, wait till they become soft both inside and outside, turn off the stove. Now finally you can enjoy the delicious steamed buns. I was struggling with figuring out how to put steamed buns in the pot with the overfilled water above the colander. I wandered around the house, trying to find some sort of stand to lift the colander more. While my homestay mother, a mother of five, a lady who has plenty of life experience, came over and saw me, she asked: “June, why don’t you just pour out the overfilled water?” I facepalmed. How did I not think inversely? If I cannot change the height of the colander, at least I can change the amount of water.

To some degree, culture and language work similarly. The same identities cultivated under different cultures speak and behave differently. Language is the water (varies and boils to make the steam). The delectable steam buns are the outcomes of steam that is sweet understandings. However, language barriers and culture gaps are the overfilled water that inhibit people who cannot code-switch, from reaching the understanding level. Sadly, there are not many people who play the role of my homestay mother who was able to think backwards and got rid of the overfilled water, including the Chinese English teachers who

taught me weird Chinglish (by saying Chinglish I mean the improper use of English taught in English classes in China) and the American English teachers who gave vague feedback like “wc”(word choice).

Shen mentioned in *The Classroom and the Wider Culture*, “In writing classes in the United States, I found that I had to reprogram my mind, to redefine some of the basic concepts and values that I had about myself, about society, and about the universe, values that had been imprinted and reinforced in my mind by my cultural background, and that had been part of me all my life” (46). I came to America for my senior year in high school when I got a chance to experience a completely different education system, compared to the one in China. The senior English class was also technically my first year in a “real” English class – learning English with an American teacher and classmates from different countries. I found out that the setup of an American English class was similar to a Chinese class in China: I read books and analyzed what happened in the books, I learned grammar and utilized them in my compositions. Also, both languages have hard literature, English literature has Shakespeare and Chinese literature has Pi Pa Xing (classical Chinese article). Nonetheless, what really differs in American English and Chinese English class is the culture.

I started learning English in kindergarten. I remember vividly how hard I was crying because I could not finish the daily letter practice while other kids had already completed and gone home. I asked Julia, my 16-year-old homestay sister, if she was forced to practice writing ABCs when she was young. This is how she sarcastically replied: “No I was born knowing how to write”. In elementary school, most of what I did was follow the textbook content, memorizing vocabulary, and grammar. One typical example of Chinglish greeting is like the following: “Hi Nancy, how are you?” “Hi Mike, I’m fine thank you, and you?” Whereas in America, people normally use “What’s up/How’s going”, and answered with “Not much”/ “It’s going”. Even when people ask, “How are you”, “I’m fine thank you, and

you?” is not even close to a real English response. In middle school, there was a 3-point question for a comprehensive reading in every single English exam. The questions always started with “Why”? My teacher would emphasize thousands of times: “Remember to start your answer with BECAUSE! Otherwise, three-points off no matter what you write afterwards.” The “why-because” stereotype had been implanted in my mind for the past seven years until the day my senior English teacher told the whole class, “Guys, do not use ‘because’ in your essay.”

These stereotypes have bothered me in my English writing, and I wonder how I can improve it. The answer is stated in “Learning the Language” by Klass, “I’m afraid that as with any new language, to use it properly you must absorb not only the vocabulary but also the structure, the logic, and the attitudes¹”. Klass learned the new medical language. She was struggling, but afterwards she understood her colleagues as she understood the “medical culture”. They need their medical language to communicate and effectively help their patients. Likewise, I must learn about American culture, to think in a Western way, and to write with American logic, instead of just pretending I understand English.

Languages are complicated. They change with time, with generations, with geography, and with culture. We automatically assume that everyone else is in a similar situation as we are. Therefore, it is hard for people to realize that there is “overfilled water”. For instance, our class read *Cuckoo’s Nest* in late senior year when we had started remote learning. I went over one of the discussion sheets where I quoted directly from the book. My teacher highlighted part of the quote “grilling one of his friends” and commented with two letters: “wc”. I thought it meant water closet, but apparently it did not in this context. I asked my classmate, he explained it meant “word choice”. Knowing the full term did not help a lot. I was and am still confused. For a non-native speaker, the line between formal and informal,

¹ Page numbers for this text are not available

oral and written English is blurry. No one told me if I can or cannot write or even quote “it sucks” in an English assignment. It might be my job as a student to know what “we” means in that context, but it must be my teacher’s job to clarify what word I should choose instead of the one I chose. She might have assumed that I understood, just as Shen’s composition teacher asked him why he used “we” and not “I” in his paper, assuming “I” means the same in every culture, and just as American businessmen gave Chinese hosts cheddar cheese as gifts without knowing the fact that Chinese barely eat cheese (Shen 9). One language taught in different countries varies with local culture. The overfilled water would evaporate fast if only “composition teachers would not be afraid to give foreign students English ‘cheese’, but to make sure to hand it out slowly, sympathetically, and fully realizing that it tastes very peculiar in the mouths of those used to a very different cuisine” (Shen 9).

While Shen focused on the gaps in the classroom, I have found that culture gaps exist outside the classroom as well, adding the overfilled water. I personally love Korean dramas, from which I learned that “fighting” (파이팅) is the most common way to say “good luck” in Korea. Characters in Korean dramas say “fighting” to their friends before exams, before job interviews, or before any big event. I thought this was a common phrase, since “fighting” was translated literally to “add oil” in Chinese, they mean the same thing: wish someone to work hard and have a good outcome. I used “fighting” with one of my friends who played football in high school the night before the game:

Me: “I heard that you guys have a game tmrw?”

Him: “Yeh June.”

Me: “FIGHTING!!!”

Him: “Playing, I play football, I don’t fight football, June.”

I was really confused but realized after a second and replied “Oh haha GOOD LUCK!!!” At that moment, I was extremely awake even though it was nearly midnight. I

assumed that most people watched Korean dramas, which turned out to be wrong. To fix a question, we need to find out the question first. Luckily, I am aware of the gaps now.

Shen wrote, “I realize that the process of learning to write in English is in fact a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity” (9). To me, not only writing in class requires balance, casual talk with friends also does. It is absolutely fine if there is overfilled water in the pot, as long as I keep trying to seek new ways and meet new people. I believe I can understand American culture more, so that the overfilled water evaporates, and the sweet steamed buns can be made. I know the process is time consuming, but the interest in different cultures and languages is worth it.

Works Cited

Shen, Fan. "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 40, no. 4, December 1989, pp. 459-466. doi:10.2307/358245

Klass, Perri. "Learning the Language." *A Not Entirely Benign Procedure: Four Years as a Medical Student*, Penguin Group, 1994, pp. 39-42.