

## Reminiscences of the Stay in Milwaukee

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It was half past one p.m. when I arrived at the Houston Airport to make a transfer to Milwaukee. The weather was just fine and I thought it would be a perfect day for my first day in the U.S. However, it is said that the first thing doesn't always turn out good. To my sadness, there seemed to be no sign that an exception would be made to my case. As soon as I was released from a stern-look staff of the Immigration Office and took the first step on the carpet lying in the huge terminal, anxiety for my destiny in this new country fell upon me and I almost wanted to go back to Japan. That agitation came neither from the difference of ethnicity between the U.S. and Japan nor from my incomplete English. I just couldn't find the way to a gate for the next flight.

I was first so ignorant that I couldn't recognize an electric board showing which gate I was supposed to go. Whenever I asked the staff, I was told wrong ways, otherwise, I couldn't understand them correctly. Later I could find the board and get to the correct gate, but it took me a considerably long time and I was by then exhausted. The thought that there was nobody to rely on there had made me feel desperate and I was at a loss and just sitting on a chair nearby a coffee shop. I became almost suspicious of everybody before me and worried if I could live among these people. This disconsolate fear had produced further confusion in my mind and prevented me from asking anybody what to do next. In fact, I was so frightened and uncomfortable with talking to people that I wasn't even able to order a cup of coffee at the store. This may be understandable because everything was the first experience to me and of nothing I tried to do bore a fruit at all. In such a very stressful mood, I was thinking of people who encouragingly sent me off abroad and how they would regard me if I got back home on the very next day of my departure.

Soon, I felt I came so far from Japan and the Japanese language within no more than a day. Becoming aware of my weakness that I hadn't realized so long, I remembered bringing a book with me, which a friend of mine gave to me as a memento before my leaving Japan. What's inside is impressive poetry with a lot of pictures of all over the world where the author of this book traveled on his lengthy journey. Although I was then the last person who derives treasure from reading poetry, having nothing to do till my departure time, I started reading it with no attention on its contents. It seemed to me that I just had a longing to see the Japanese words with my eye. As I flipped over the pages, some passages soon struck me. What these indicated was very clear to me and, suddenly, made me realize a necessarily important aspect, i.e., that I could enjoy whatsoever awaited me in this new world. Before this realization, I had been ashamed of my ignorance to another culture almost unknown to me and afraid of being disappointed to see me making awful mistakes such as being unable to flush the toilet at the terminal. However, this should be a matter of time to get used to and things that I don't know then should be acquired

through my following experiences that I will surely get a chance to have. In other words, in such circumstances, I would have been like a naive baby who willingly accepts anything he sees and feels, good and bad, and gains them all as instructive experiences, which are very accurate. Having come up with this delightful conclusion, I felt that a screen, which had long blinded me and left me no room for such imagination, finally faded out. "There is nothing to be afraid of. All I have to do is to enjoy whatever may come." These thoughts brought me an invincible attitude to anything and, as I headed to be aboard the plane for Milwaukee, my heart was about to dance with excitements and expectations for future. This is how I started out my eight-month stay in the U.S., the country of great opportunities.

Why I decided to stay in the U.S. for eight months seems reasonable and was very simple. I had had then vague desire to be capable of English sufficiently because I was sure that it would do any good to me in the future. Then, the idea to go abroad and study English thoroughly with some certain length came upon me, which is presumably the best and quickest way to be competent at languages. Fortunately, I was then the first year-student of a college and I had time to do this. Moreover, the expenses for the stay didn't seem to matter to me. Although I had no financial base to afford it, I was certain that I could gain fairly enough money doing part-time jobs in my second year of the college. Thinking of such plans with some excitement throughout a lecture that I was attending, I went consult with my teacher on my ambitious hope as soon as I got out of the lecture. As a result, I was recommended to go to Milwaukee, the U.S. and participate in the Intensive English program called ESL (English as a Second Language) in order to meet my needs. This was exactly what I expected. Before long, I set my departure date to the U.S. sometime in the spring of 2003, which was the beginning of my third year in the college.

The ESL program that I attended from March through October basically consists of four stages of classes, that is, listening, reading, writing and an advanced class called Immersion class, which is regarded as the final stage of this program. Applicants first take a placement-test and are assigned to the most appropriate class according to their English abilities. Then they attend their classes throughout a month from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Here's a unique point of this program. Normally one takes listening, reading and writing classes at the same time. But, in this program, students take only one of them for a month intensively. The first stage is defined as listening comprehensions, which is required for students to understand what an ESL teacher is saying in a class. Then, followed by a reading, writing and the Immersion class in order as a result of a test that takes place in each of the classes respectively at the end of months. If you successfully got a high point on your, for example, listening test, you will get a chance to take a following reading test and, then, a writing test if you did good on your reading test, to move up to the upper class. So, theoretically, you can jump up to the immersion class from a listening class, without taking other ones. Of course, students' requests are often taken into consideration for their class assignments.

I was assigned to the reading class at first. Here were my classmates; two talkative Polish

girls, a calm Russian woman, two shy guys from Taiwan, two cute Korean girls, a considerate Mexican lady, a kind-hearted man from Burkina Faso, Africa, a mysterious man from Pakistan, a brilliant young man from somewhere Middle East (I don't remember where exactly), a more talkative middle aged man from South America (I don't remember either) and three Japanese guys. So my reading class had sixteen students including me. As a matter of fact, we all were of different background from one another as well as our levels of English efficiency. Even though we all had passed the listening test, it doesn't necessarily mean that we would have been in the same line in terms of other English skills such as speaking and writing. In other words, we had merely had fairly good listening comprehensions enough to skip the listening class and had been in need of reading abilities individually. It may, therefore, seem chaotic and devastating to take part in such a class like where while one is thinking of the answer of the problem, another is trying to figure out what the problem means. However, it wasn't and it actually did work pretty well. What made it possible I can only assume, is partially because of ESL teachers' competence, which proved to be well organized yet putting an emphasis on individuals, and is partially due to the same purpose that we had had, that is, to be skilled at English. The same went for a writing class that I attended subsequently.

The man from Burkina Faso, whose name is Duraman, was my first friend I got along with in the U.S. He is a tall, bony and black guy in his mid-twenties. His feature somewhat reminded me of a standing buffalo. Yet he walked softly with great composure and had a big smile like a child when he talked. I suppose that that encouraged me to talk to him and we soon started to hang out together. Although he never came on time to the places we arranged to meet and always said some excuses for his delay, he was a really good fellow and I liked to go out and talk with him. That I had a friend like him made me happy because I had been looking for someone to talk to. After arriving in Milwaukee, I stayed for a couple of days in a hotel nearby downtown, then, moved to the dormitory's room for which I had made a contract previously. I was hoping to have an American roommate so that I could talk with him for my speaking practice, but conversely, a single room was assigned to me. So it was then hard to get a chance to talk to somebody in English. In fact, I had two American students next door and since we were living in the same suite, divided into three rooms, I sometimes met them in a shared bathroom and had some talk. However, I found it difficult to talk to them because they spoke so fast that I had hardly caught any words of them. I even thought that they were speaking not English but some language I never heard of. Thinking it almost impossible to understand them, I felt apprehensive to talk to them and wanted to talk to someone with whom I could communicate without hesitation. That's why it was the first progress to me in Milwaukee that I made friends with Duraman and that I could talk to him freely.

During my first month in Milwaukee, I had hardly got an opportunity to talk to people in English. Meanwhile, I had spent not a few days with Japanese people. As mentioned before, there were three Japanese students in my class and one of them often invited me to his house for dinner. He had been a musical teacher of elementary school in Japan and was studying English in ESL to pursue his master degree in graduate school of music. He was so kind as to cook some delicious

Japanese food for me that I was badly longing to eat, though, at that time, I just left Japan a few weeks before. To my delight, I could question him about anything that I couldn't figure out by then, feeling free to ask. What's more, the thought that I could speak Japanese without being distracted by difficulties of vocabulary and grammar made me feel utterly good. He also had a party sometimes and gathered up Japanese people living in Milwaukee, where I got acquainted with them, surprised at the large number of Japanese people living in such a relatively small city. As I mingled with them, on the other hand, I didn't feel comfortable to be with Japanese people. This might be due to some advice that I was told. I had been told before I left Japan that I had better not get along with Japanese people closely, which is partly why I chose Milwaukee to come to. Initially, I heard the city would be of few Japanese people. It is a well-known fact that to learn languages somewhat requires necessities to use the language that one has been learning. In other words, it is hard to keep studying languages without any purposes. I thought if I spent much time with them any longer, I would rely on these kind people throughout my stay in the U.S., feeling free of difficulties such as speaking, having a life in the U.S. and so on, for they were much more capable of them than I was. However, this wasn't what I had expected. I regarded these difficulties as my challenges and what should be dealt with on my own. I also thought that challenges would enable me to keep on studying in order to get over them after many error and trial. Later, I was delighted to see every time I tried doing something new like shopping or going to the movie theater, I felt as if my world expanded greatly. Moreover, the fact that I was unable to make friends with people other than Japanese people frustrated me. Consequently it became another challenge of mine to be coped with. Of course, I was willing to go to the musical teacher's house at his invitation for delicious dinner.

So my first concern since the classes began was how to force myself to speak English. During the class, it was O.K. because we had many chances to talk. But after it finished, I often spent the rest of time doing homework at the library. Therefore I had fewer opportunities to talk to people. Furthermore, ESL students were given no time to talk to native English speakers except ESL teachers. So unless we tried to speak English outside classes intentionally, the chances to talk to American people almost never came to us. It can mean, in other words, that we can go without speaking English in the U.S. As soon as I realized this, I got frightened and felt that I must speak English by all means, making use of anything available to me. What I did for it first was to take a university class. Fortunately, our ESL program is one of the Institutes run by University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee (UWM in short) and taking place in one of the buildings in a campus of UWM. The dormitories that I lived in is located near the campus and, therefore, basically for UWM students like my two suitemates. Although getting permission from a professor is necessary to audit a class, it is not so hard to do so for ESL students if one wants. I audited the Korean class. This choice was made partly because Korean people had then occupied almost half of ESL students and, naturally, I had many Korean friends. But a prime reason was that a Japanese student of UWM whom I got along with recommended me to take the class. In the Korean class, I was flattered about my Korean pronunciation, which seems the most annoying matter to American students. Thanks to a kind Korean teacher, I took the class until that semester

ended and had some American friends there. What I learned and how I was delighted through the conversations with them is beyond description. With every single conversation that we had I was amazed, puzzled and convinced. As I conversed with them, I got confident speaking and that made me feel like talking more. Besides the Korean class, I took part in an English conversation table at the public library, which is designed for people living in Milwaukee, whose mother tongue is not English. I also played a role in an act that was held as a finale of the ESL party at the end of the semester. In summer, I volunteered at the renowned Milwaukee summer festival at the information center with generous mid-aged American couple. All these events did bring me a lot of favor and became a firm base of my life in Milwaukee.

However, many lessons from which I learned here can be attributed not only to these events but also to unintentional happenings. One of them was soon after my first term test in the reading class. I have confessed my agitation to Duraman, my first friend. It was about my progression to an upper-level class. I was then so eager to move up to the highest class as soon as possible, but the test didn't allow me to think so. He then answered to this. "Takuro," said he slowly with his calm voice as usual, "I do not want to go to the upper-class. Learning English is not a race." This remark was very sensational to me. At the moment, if my sense of worth or what I had believed in by then had possibly any sound, I might have heard it crumbling into fraction with devastating noise. I couldn't help being convinced by this because I found no reason at all why I had to rush off to the highest class. I hadn't known until then that each stage of English abilities such as reading, writing and speaking are of great importance independently and none of them should be neglected. I also realized that I had been so blind as to chase off after an idol that has no essence in it, bearing just an overweight vanity, namely, being in the top class. Above all, what made Duraman's remark more persuasive was his background. He once told me that he used to live in France before the U.S. and that he was by then familiar with not only French but also with as many as seven vernacular languages of Africa. In short, he is an expert of languages. Then I moved up to the writing class and stayed there for two terms to reinforce my writing skills.

This is also what happened to me. It was when I was about to step up to the advanced class on some warm day in June. I was taking a walk on a path leading to a main street on which many shops are crowded. Next to me was a huge hospital whose cafeteria was designed for patients and doctors and which I often took advantage of. Then a car was approaching me and I saw the male driver presumably in his early thirties and a woman sitting on the passenger seat next to him. Since the woman appeared much older than him, I suppose she was his mother. At once I sensed that he was going to ask me something. So I tried myself to get ready for it and tightened my body up. At around that time, I had few experiences to be asked directions or something abruptly and, if anything, I wasn't so confident that I could answer to it properly. As I had anticipated, he asked me where the St. Columbia hospital was. I soon found he wasn't a native English speaker by his strong accent. At the same time, his question made me puzzled a little bit because with its distinct sign and the huge feature of a building, the hospital right behind me was indeed the St. Columbia hospital itself. Feeling that he must have seen the sign on his way where we were, I told him where the hospital was. Then he said something to me quickly and I couldn't get it. I said the same

thing again and even indicated to him a parking lot at the corner right before us just in case. He smiled this time and thanked me as he drove off. Having seen the car reaching the parking lot without incident, I was relieved and felt a bit proud of myself for having completed such a mission. Feeling that there was no use walking any longer because things better than this would never happen that day, as I turned back to return to my room, however, I saw the car moving backward and coming over to me again. Although the car passed by me at the full speed with the roaring noise of an engine, I was frozen by his piercing eyes directly watching me when he passed next to me. In no time, I felt I did something wrong, with my heart squeezing. Then, I remembered that there is another St. Columbia Hospital in Milwaukee a few blocks away and realized that that hospital must have been where he wanted to go. I also realized that his words I hadn't caught were about that hospital. Since I pointed with my finger to where the parking lot was, he might have took it as the parking lot of another hospital and thought that the building was situated nearby. All above was merely my speculation at that time, but I couldn't figure out any other reasons for his anger. I had to admit that this was led by completely miscommunications, which was clearly my fault. The woman next to him might have been sick and in a hurry for some help. This dreadful happening had long stayed in my mind. Since then, I became cautious with one's words more than ever and regretted that if only I had asked him to repeat what he said. None of communications should be made in a manner like this, even if it was in other languages, otherwise, it would be a chunk of remorse in a lifetime.

I was in California and San Francisco over the final week of August 2003. I was on the vacation at that time and the plan during summer to visit Conrad, my enthusiastic English teacher, whose house is in Sacramento, California, had long been one of my pleasures since after I came to the U.S. There he kindly allowed me to join his tour for two days, where I enjoyed traveling around the major sightseeing spots in California and staying in his house with his generous parents at night. After I parted from his tour in San Francisco, I stayed there for three days on my own. San Francisco is to me the city of street-performers. Throughout my wandering around the city, I was often fascinated with their performances of incredibly high qualities such as painting, dancing, juggling and drumming. What attracted me most was a group of jugglers, which was traveling around the world to do their performances. They were by far more skilled than any other juggler groups and indeed so intriguing that I watched their shows for many hours without getting bored at all. That even went on at night despite the breezing coldness. In fact, it gets quite chilly day and night in San Francisco under the influence of a cold current running in the East Pacific Ocean in summer. However, I knew of nothing about it and brought no sweater or jacket with me for this coldness. If Conrad's father hadn't gave me his sweat-shorts on the previous day, my adventurous trait would have never surfaced, yielding to the striking coldness and I would have been jailed in a hotel for over three days of my stay. Well, strictly speaking, it wasn't a hotel that I stayed in at that time. I stayed in a youth hostel, that is, a dormitory where one shares a room with others. While many prefer to have a private room due to a matter of security, not a few people seem to like staying in this sort of dormitories because it's rate is relatively cheap and it is a place

where one can meet with others beyond a range of nationality and race. My roommate, Joe from Thailand, was a funny guy and surprised me by singing a Japanese song. In three days of my stay in San Francisco, all I did were only to see the street performers, to eat Clam Chowder with which San Francisco is renowned and to talk to Joe at night. But I got tired from none of them and they made my trip absolutely satisfactory and successful one.

On the last day of my travel in San Francisco, I was walking around the Pier-39, which is presumably one of the most popular places there, looking for some action as I did on the previous days. There were three young black men demonstrating Hip-Hop dance with remarkable skills. Surrounding them were many spectators who were giving shouts of astonishment every time one of these dancers did incredible acrobatics. Like everyone else there, I was amazed and gazing at them till the end of their performances, though, like most of the spectators, I successfully escaped from being collected a tip before these dancers were approaching. No sooner I decided to leave that place than one Japanese man seeming as old as I was passed by me. Why I thought him Japanese at that moment I cannot explain well. Later I found out that he was so by seeing him talking to other Japanese travelers, but, at that moment, I just perceived it. Anyway, I left that place and went for a break to a refuge of sea lions inhabiting there and roaring that peculiar cry all day long. After ten minutes or so, I returned to the place where those dancers were and, as I had expected, they were there getting prepared for another performance. This time, however, was different from the former one and there were four of dancers adding one man. To my surprise, the additional man was that Japanese man who had passed by me. He danced pretty well and his dance wasn't inferior to other three dancers. I was very excited by this intercultural battle between Japan and the U.S. going on right in front of me and, of course, willing to give him a tip out of my extremely diminished finance. I didn't know who he was and where he came from, but what he just did was strong enough to strike my right chord. I speculated that he must have come to the U.S. alone and ventured to train his dance skill in the place where Hip-Hop dance occurred. I wondered how he could maintain such a hyperactive attitude and respected him in secret. Conversely, I did not forget to tell myself that I should have as many guts to challenge difficulties as he has.

Since I came back to Milwaukee at the beginning of September up to the end of October, I attended the ESL classes, which were the final term of my study in the U.S. I had moved up to the Immersion class by then. Meanwhile many friends of mine had gone back to their countries or walked on for next careers. Few familiar faces from my initial Reading class could be seen and a melancholic feeling slightly overwhelmed me. Every one who took part in the ESL program seemed to acquire something important to them more or less through attending classes or staying in Milwaukee and flew away with precious experiences of their own. I, on my part, seemed yet to capture what I had got so far. However, I started feeling that whole thing I was doing here was a part of some processes that lead to the future. That is, I started to have some explicit objectives for studying English, to go to a graduate school in the U.S. on a subject of what I have been intrigued in. In fact, although my primary intention of this stay was merely being skilled at English, I began

to be worried at some point if being proficient at English skills does really do any good to me. As it is said, languages are no more than means of communications. What's more, as mentioned before, it is necessarily important to have some purposes to keep studying languages. Therefore, how I could make the most of my English ability had been unclear to me and I was almost suffering with this paradox; I was studying English without knowing what it would be to me. But it was fortunate of me to have found what I want to do using English in an early stage of my stay. Since then, I started reading concerning the discipline in which I was interested at the library day and night. So my final stage of my stay in Milwaukee was devoted to reading books besides participating in the ESL classes. About this time, my life was such busy that my roommate always told me to take a break whenever I met with him in our room. Sure enough, I barely got back home and even though I did, that was around the time after he went to bed. It was often the case that before he woke up in the next morning, I sneaked out and went to a study room where I did my routines: writing a journal and reading. As hectic as it seemed, however, I couldn't stop doing so because I was eager and enthusiastic about learning. I was excited that I could feel every step I was taking to my goals as I went on reading, writing, whatever I did with some certainties. There were not a few nights that I found hard to sleep for the thought of what I would become. Finally, my eight-month stay in Milwaukee bore numerous fruits as a result. Of all I acquired through it, discoveries of my new interests and further challenges would go beyond the others. These will enable me to have an unyielding mindset to accomplish them just as they did when I decided to go to the U.S..

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