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Breaking Through the Brick Wall of Language

The first time I stepped onto American soil was in May, 2017. I still remember the feeling of joy and nervousness. Everything seemed new: the buildings, the streets, the people and the language. It seemed like I was living a dream, like I was on a different planet. Although I was happy to be in this new country, the unfamiliar sounds of different languages felt alien to me and made me feel uneasy.

On my very first day of school, as I was entering the classroom, I was curious and nervous. I went to class and sat down on my desk trying to stay invisible as my teacher introduced herself. Her words swirled around me like a jumble of colors. I had no clue what she was saying. Then she turns towards me.

“Can you introduce yourself Ashraful?” she asked.

My heart raced. I looked around the classroom and saw everyone staring at me. I was hoping to understand something, but all I heard was a foreign melody.

“Ugh! Why can’t I get this?” I thought to myself.

Back in Bangladesh I was never this quiet. I had friends, I understood the jokes, joined in

conversation and felt like I belonged. But here in the US, things were different. The students inside the classroom just stared at me like I was some sort of supernatural being. I felt very uncomfortable, I felt like a stranger who nobody had ever seen in this world. This isn't something I was familiar with before coming to America.

The language barrier made it very difficult for someone like me to engage in conversation and make friends. The feeling is very overwhelming and uncomfortable; it makes me feel I don't belong.

The language barrier is like a brick wall between me and everyone else. I wanted to speak, to make friends, to understand. But every time I tried, the brick wall stood in front of me, blocking my voice. This overwhelmed me with anxiety because I didn't know how to break through the brick wall.

At first, I felt like giving up but then I made a decision. I told myself that although this is challenging, it is just a temporary problem that will go away soon.

Little by little, I decided to change things. I tried to learn and it wasn't easy, but with the help of my teacher Mrs. Liato, I began to understand.

Unlike some teachers who expect you to magically understand everything, she was different. She never made me feel dumb or different. In fact, she would take time to help me and explain things in ways I could comprehend. She would often hand out pictures with words below them to help me understand and these visuals would help me connect the meanings of words.

Thanks to her, I began to understand more and more. I also practiced speaking English with my cousins and relatives whenever they visited us. Because of these steps, I started joining

in conversation and made friends in the classroom, the same room that once made me seem like an outsider.

By the end of fifth grade, I was able to learn and speak English. I became the translator in my family, helping my parents when they didn't understand. I went from knowing nothing to becoming a kid who is able to explain things and ask questions.

People no longer saw me as clueless and a stranger. I didn't feel like a "fob" or an invisible person in the classroom. I felt like me, someone who once talked and felt belonged.

Looking back, I realized how powerful language really is. It makes people look down on others and It makes others feel less of themselves just because they can't communicate their thoughts as efficiently. This is an issue that many immigrant children like me face. We come to a new country, unable to engage in school or society because we don't know how to communicate in the English language which becomes an issue that impacts our academic performance and creates a sense of exclusion. In order to solve this issue, schools and communities should take the necessary measures to provide the support for non-native students. For instance, schools can provide bilingual teachers or teachers assistance and tutoring programs that aim to teach English to non-native speakers.

If we as a community fail to provide these resources, many students will be left behind which can have long term impacts on social mobility, equality, and mental health. Providing the necessary support such as bilingual teachers, ESL classes, visual aids with pictures and words, and patient teachers who take the time to explain the concepts clearly. This will help non-native students overcome the issue because I experienced the same and was able to overcome the barriers with support from my teacher Mrs. Liato, who used pictures and visuals to help me

understand new words. Other schools and communities can provide similar support to help students succeed and overcome the language barrier.