

Me vs English Test

My journey to City college started last year. It was a normal morning and the sun was as beautiful as ever. I was sitting in the living room scrolling through memes. That's when I got a call from my friend Mike, whom I haven't talked to for about five weeks, asking me if I am free I could help him book a flight. "If this is a prank, I'm not having a good day, man," I said. But he was deadly serious. I was confused, but I quickly got up, took my bike, and went to meet him at the store. He was standing beside the road chatting. I said "**Amakuru**" (Which means "hi" in Kinyarwanda) and we both laughed. Normally in Rwanda, youth grow up with their afro like a family member no cutting, the only time it gets reorganized is when there is job interview, an application, or traditional ceremony with elders where you could get in trouble. I realized he had a new haircut. I started taking things seriously then. We bought a lot of hoodies and jackets since he was planning to go there during winter. It took us a long time to finish shopping. At the end of the day, I asked him to tell me later how he managed to get that opportunity.

After a week, he took his flight. I FaceTimed him and asked how he got that opportunity because I wanted to try out too. He told me about a company that wanted to help students who just graduated from high school pursue their studies abroad. "They only have to do some English tests," he said. "**ngwiki**," (which means "what?" in Kinyarwanda) I interrupted. He continued. They help students with many applications, and if you succeed, you get a scholarship. Like many students who do not grow up speaking English every day, I immediately felt discouraged because English had never been my strongest subject.

Filled with confusing emotions, I went home and told everyone about that opportunity. My family told me that if I liked it, I should go for it. One thought came to mind "why don't you do it before you change your mind?" Another one said "why are you going through all this? what will you do if it fails after all the effort and time you spend?" I was confused that I didn't even realize when I fell asleep. The first thing in the morning, I applied before the war in my head started

again. I was excited to hear from them. The next day, I was invited to join an orientation meeting. Of course I went there early to be safe. I had feelings I would get lost looking for a place so I left early to be safe. As planned, I didn't miss the place, but I was still the last one to arrive. In the room there were 12 young men sitting and a woman giving a briefing. She said we would take the Duolingo test in the coming month. In the meantime, there would be weekly tests, and if the results are not good, we would be eliminated. Suddenly, my excitement packed its bags and left. I felt scared because one month didn't sound like enough time for me. I knew I had to find other ways to prepare quickly or my second thoughts would win.

I started by creating an account on the Duolingo website (this site helps to improve English skills in listening, reading, speaking for English tests like IELTS, TOEFL or DOULINGO) and watching many videos on YouTube. I also practiced with the sample tests posted on the Duolingo website. Whenever I felt tired, I watched movies like **Konosuba**, which is one of my hobbies, and somehow it made my learning easier. I told myself I was studying, but honestly, it felt like the most enjoyable homework ever.

The first week just went by so quickly that I didn't understand how it was already over. I went to the office for my first test. It was an interview. I was not prepared at all. The interviewer asked me about my current occupation and why I wanted to study in another country. Those were the parts I understood clearly. After that, the interviewer kept talking. I just nodded like I understood, inside my brain was translating at 2% battery, and it was very hard.

That moment made me realize my English skills were not very strong. So I started practicing English every day. I would talk to my brother in English, and before I went to sleep, I would replay my entire day in English in low volume mode. It was me staring at my ceiling, giving a full English presentation to absolutely nobody. I also learned two new vocabulary words daily. Slowly, my English skills improved and I started feeling confident.

I bought the Duolingo test, and I could take it anytime. One evening, I was practicing, got a couple of good scores, and thought, “Tonight’s the night.” so I called my friend Boris.

“Boris. Can I use your PC for the exam? Mine has no power, and if it shuts down mid-test, that’s an instant fail.” He said, “Come over.”

It was a cold evening. I sat on a chair in his living room. White ceiling above me. To my right a door straight ahead to a big, dark garden. Large touchscreen TV on my left. PC in front of me. The room was so quiet. Late night quiet. The kind of quiet where you start hearing your own heartbeat plot against you. I was a little scared.

I turned on the PC, logged into Duolingo, and stared at the “**START TEST**” button like it was a horror movie jump scare I had to click myself. I didn’t blink. I didn’t look left or right. I finally started. For the next hour, I was in what I can only describe as a staring contest with my own future. I finished feeling like I hadn’t breathed once.

Then the real chaos began.

One part of the test required that I describe the picture I saw. Two minutes is a long time until you think about how your vocabulary vanishes the moment the time begins. I looked at the picture and thought to myself, “Okay... There is a man.. He is ... He is doing something... very .. active.”

However, the most difficult part is that the score is based on the use of verbs. My mind suddenly forgot that I knew English except for the two words: “is” and “doing.”

Next came the listening part. I had to listen to a paragraph and answer the questions based on the content of the paragraph. Surprisingly, this part of the test was actually fun. For once, my mind was not buffering as if the internet were slow. I thought to myself, “Wait.. I actually understood that!”

After all that, I finally clicked submit, survived the test, and went home completely exhausted.

Two days later, I got an email stating that I passed the test. I was extremely happy. Then I got a call from my friend, stating that he was in trouble. Duolingo had burned him out and accused him of cheating.

I felt bad for him. What really happened was that he used my account to log in because the day before, I used his computer to take the exam. I realized that it might have been the cause of his failure.

I then decided to write an email to Duolingo explaining to them what really happened. Luckily, they understood the situation. My friend got another chance to retake the exam, and he passed the English test too. When we are talking about that day, I like to tease him, saying that he was so nervous that he forgot that he forgot that the account wasn't even his. That experience taught me that sometimes things might seem impossible, but surviving it might feel amazing.

A few weeks later, I had my visa interview at the embassy. It felt unexpectedly easy after getting through Duolingo. I wasn't having any difficulty answering the visa officer. I passed the interview, got my visa, accepted into CCNY and finally arrived in New York.

Reflecting on my experience now, it turns out that mastering the language went beyond just passing an examination. Speaking with confidence at my visa interview, applying to CCNY, and ultimately relocating to New York with my friend Boris became possible because of the process of learning English. For a non-native English speaking student, becoming fluent was something that was supposed to belong to others, but little by little and despite occasional awkwardness and late night classes and even mistakes helped me to improve. Now, whenever I meet someone struggling with English, I remember that progress often starts with feeling uncomfortable first.