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### Interminable English Journey

“Turning back, the hometown scenery is a thousand miles away; to whom can I express the feelings of parting?” This poem was written by the Chinese Song Dynasty poet Yang Hui-zhi to express his sense of loneliness while being alone in a foreign land. This poem also perfectly expresses my emotions when I first came to the United States. In 2017, I came to Ojai, California alone and started my study abroad journey at Oak Grove High School. I still remember the scene when I first walked into the school gate. Through an old iron gate, a broad soccer field came into view. The grass on the field was not just a single shade of green but dotted with some autumnal yellows. Walking along the path beside the field, there was often a wind blowing by, bringing not only the rustling sound of the grass, but also the breath of nature. Some people may not understand what the breath of nature is. I think it's a fragrance that cannot be expressed in words. However, if you close your eyes, you can feel a refreshing scent mixed with the aroma of soil and vegetation. No matter where you are in the world, it smells simultaneously like home and the start of a new journey.

In the first half month, the novelty of being in the United States made me temporarily forget homesickness. However, as the novelty passed, my mind was gradually filled with a sense of discomfort. This discomfort arose not only from homesickness, but also from my incompatibility with American high schools. To be more precise, at that time, my English skills seemed quite inadequate when dealing with American high schools' reading and writing

assignments. One time, our English teacher asked us to read a short article within ten minutes and then share our thoughts one by one. However, what seemed like a simple task to others felt as hard as climbing the highest mountain for me. After ten minutes, I had only completed 70~80% of the reading, and much of the content was incomprehensible to me. When it was my turn, I could only awkwardly stand up, unable to say a word.

I think the main reason for this problem is that the focus of English education in Chinese schools is different. English curriculum in China is more about preparing for exams rather than improving reading and writing skills. During the process of learning English, we usually tend to focus more on memorizing vocabulary and question types. This means that even though I have mastered a large amount of vocabulary, I still struggle to transfer them into English reading and writing contexts. Such shortcomings made me feel quite awkward when facing English classes in high school because my English teachers often assigned heavy reading paired with 800-word book review essays, which I found challenging. Since my reading speed is much slower than native English speakers, I usually need to spend half the night completing reading assignments that others can finish in just one hour. Additionally, my book review essays received unsatisfactory scores because my limited reading ability prevents me from fully understanding the meaning of the books. Fortunately, during my toughest times, my ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher Nancy recognized my problem. She helped me practice my reading and writing abilities throughout my time in high school. Her efforts finally shaped who I am today: a qualified writer who can handle any reading or writing assignment.

I still remember the first day I met Nancy. When I walked into her classroom, the entire room was very quiet, with only Nancy sitting behind her desk. She was a middle-aged woman with golden, curly hair wearing a pair of black-framed glasses. She did not greet me immediately

but stared intently at her computer screen. Her expression was so serious that the wrinkles on her face seemed to be tightly knitted together. Seeing such an "odd" teacher, I dared not even breathe loudly and carefully found a seat. Fortunately, this tense atmosphere only lasted for half a minute. When Nancy finished reviewing the material in front of her, she greeted me warmly and apologized for her earlier coldness. Afterward, we had a cheerful introduction and conversation. We discussed our hometowns and favorite foods, and we found out what we have in common, such as our favorite movie: *The Lord of the Rings*. In addition to that, Nancy generously shared some cookies she had baked for our class. Looking back, I can say that this was one of the most relaxing and enjoyable classes I had during my high school period.

Nancy first became aware of my difficulties through complaints from my English teacher. After knowing my situation, she found me in her ESL class and had a conversation with me. To gauge my learning needs, Nancy simply asked me a few very simple questions, such as how much time I needed to spend reading one page of writing, whether I felt drowsy while reading, and so on. These might seem like forgettable details. However, looking back now, I can't help but marvel at Nancy's prowess as an ESL teacher. Her long-term experience working with international students enabled her to immediately find ways to improve my English reading and writing skills. She believed that the key reason for my current lack of English skills was that I didn't practice good reading habits. In other words, I hadn't yet developed an interest in English reading and writing. To cultivate this interest, Nancy asked about the types of books I like and made a reading list. It included *Night* and *1984*, among others. The difficulty level was suitable for me. All I needed to do was choose a book to read during ESL class and tell Nancy after class about my progress in reading and the general content of the book. Additionally, if I encountered

any unfamiliar words or sentences during my reading, Nancy encouraged me to ask her rather than relying on a translation tool.

One time, I encountered an unfamiliar word while reading *1984*. It posed a significant obstacle to my comprehension. I asked Nancy for help.

“Nancy, what does ‘interminable’ mean?”

"Interminable is an adjective, meaning having or seeming to have no end," Nancy said to me with a smile. "You can use it in a sentence. For example, the heavy rain outside is interminable."

Her detailed explanations not only helped me understand unfamiliar words more quickly but also taught me how to use them in my daily life. To cultivate my interest in writing, Nancy encouraged me to read movie reviews or book reviews, whether they were articles or videos, and whether Chinese or English. She believed that what I needed to do at that moment was to develop a concept of what high school-level and above articles look like, and then practice my writing skills based on these models.

I have to say, Nancy's method was effective. Although reading English books initially gave me a hard time, the captivating content and relatively simple vocabulary kept me going. As a result, I gradually developed the habit of reading English books. In terms of writing, after reading many reviews, Nancy and I also worked on writing some short or long reviews together. Among the many book reviews I've completed, the one about *1984* left the deepest impression on me. As a book filled with many political allegories, the deeper content of *1984* was beyond my comprehension at the time. Therefore, my first draft of the *1984* book review was merely a simple summary of its content, making the entire article seem dry and boring.

After reading my first draft, Nancy didn't rush to revise my article with me. Instead, she educated me about the background of *1984*'s creation and the author, George Orwell's political stance. Through Nancy's explanation of the book's background, I gradually came to understand the ideas and viewpoints held by the novel's author, and I incorporated all of these into my book review. This ultimately resulted in my book review not only including the surface-level story content, but also my personal analysis and associations between the Cold War, totalitarianism, and other political elements within the novel. Moreover, this book review writing experience helped me develop the habit of first understanding a book's historical context before reading it.

After a semester of practice, I was able to integrate into regular English classes at my high school. What prompted this promotion was an exciting change: I could now complete reading assignments and corresponding reflection assignments on time, just like most of my American peers. Later, when I became an upperclassman, I familiarized myself with different writing forms, such as argumentative and research papers. Reading writing across so many genres helped me write across genres, just like Nancy said it would.

It's also worth noting that I reached the highest English achievement of my high school career during my senior year. I independently completed the three required Personal Statements for the University of California applications and received an offer of admission from UC Davis. I immediately shared the news with Nancy, who was proud of my achievement. I still remember while congratulating me, Nancy pulled out the earliest reflection essay I wrote during my freshman year.

"Zijian, look!" Nancy excitedly showed me the paper she was holding. "This is one of your earliest essays, 'Frankenstein Review.' Look at how confusing your grammar used to be.

Now take another look at the personal statement you wrote. It is concise and clear, with a logical structure. What an amazing change in four years!"

I looked at these two essays that I wrote at different times, and the change makes me both surprised at my progress and ashamed of my original writing skills. It's hard to believe how far my English skills have come. Now I'm a student at UC Davis, and my writing journey continues.

As I write this sentence, it's already late at night, and the sound of passing cars outside has gradually faded away, leaving only interminable silence. I began working on this narrative in the afternoon, and it shouldn't have taken me so long to complete a draft. However, enjoying warm memories from the past has consumed much of my time. As I write each paragraph about my experience studying with Nancy, I feel like I can still hear Nancy's guidance.

"Hey, Zijian, pay attention: this word is a verb, you can't use it as a noun."

If Nancy could see the final draft of this paper, she would probably feel proud of me. As I wrote the last sentence of this paper, I couldn't tell from where, but I caught a scent of that breath of nature once again, as if it came from the distant past.