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Learning English as a Second Language

Kimmom Pech (student)

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Kimmom Pech has a dream to become educated and learn as much as she can so that she can help her native country, Cambodia. In her essay, she writes about the challenges she faces and the strategies she employs to learn English. As you read, consider your own journey in learning to read and write. What advice would you give Ms. Pech about how to succeed as a writer, and what can you learn from her experiences?

- 1 **B**ecause I am starting a new life in the United States, I have to learn English although I have some basics of English knowledge from my native country, Cambodia. When I entered this new land, everything looked strange to me. The language, culture, and environment are completely different from my country. I have had to overcome many obstacles, especially in language, to make my life stable in this new world. Learning English as a second language is very hard for me as an immigrant in the United States.
- 2 One of my difficulties in studying English is pronunciation. It is hard for me to pronounce American English because I used to learn British English in my country. There are a lot of words that have different sounds as well as spellings in American English. The verb tenses also have some different usages and spellings between British English and American English such as "learn-learnt-learnt" and "learn-learned-learned." I feel shy and scared of making mistakes every time I have to talk to American people. I used to work in a factory in Plymouth, MA, last year where I had some bad experiences with some of my young American co-workers. They teased me about my different English pronunciation. Most of the time I heard the words "What did you say?" or "Can you say that again?" Then they copied my strange English pronunciation and laughed. I felt so embarrassed when I heard their laughter after my words. Now I always feel afraid and hesitate to make any conversation. However, those embarrassing experiences pushed me to put strong efforts into improving my English especially my communication skills. I want to pronounce words as an American; therefore, I have been trying to

listen to the news and to watch movies and then try to emulate the speakers' or actors' sounds.

- 3 Reading is another difficulty for me in learning English. I realized that there are a lot of useful and interesting books on almost every single subject available in the United States. I really want to read as many books as I can, but my English problem has distracted me from reading those books. Every time I read, I have to keep a big dictionary next to me because most of the words seem new to me. I can barely understand any texts I read, as I need to check the meaning of words in almost every single sentence. I have been trying to remember the vocabulary, but it seems to never stay in my head. I made vocabulary index cards, repeated words many times, wrote them down on paper, and tried to use them in sentences. Nevertheless, the results are still not good because I always forget those words.
- 4 Writing in English is the major problem in my studying. Most of the time, I make mistakes with grammar, usage, and verb tenses. Although I have gone through grammar classes, it is still complicated for me to use correct grammar in my writing. Every time I write, I have to take time to make a decision whether I should use this word or that word, and which one is the correct verb tense for this sentence. The grammar usage and structures are totally different from my native language. Almost every sentence and structure is opposite from my native language. In Cambodian, we don't have verb tenses because all verbs do not change. We use short phrases which normally appear right before verbs to emphasize the different times of actions. Therefore, it is hard for me to adopt those English structures. Spelling is also a problem, as I have to memorize each word because there is no specific spelling formula. I feel so frustrated whenever I realize that I made mistakes with my writing. I feel embarrassed to let teachers or anyone else read my writing or when I find a lot of mistakes after the teacher's corrections, especially repeated mistakes.
- 5 It is not easy to learn a second language rather than your native language. However, since I am here, in the United States, I have to be able to communicate and write in English because I don't want to become a silent stranger in the country. Today, despite the fact that I have just gone through some ESL reading and writing classes successfully, I am still having troubles understanding and using correct English.

EXPLORING THE READING THROUGH DISCUSSION

1. What strategies for learning another language does the author present in her essay? Do you think these are effective?
2. For this author, what are the effects of not being fluent in English? Can you think of others? Why is it important to her that she learn English?
3. Kimmom Pech doesn't want to "become a silent stranger in the country." What do you think she means by this comment?
4. What is difficult for this author about reading and writing in English? Do you face similar challenges?

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