

B-17

A Bridge to Everyone (Even Me)

Good morning gentlemen and lady. Oh, that's not right! Good morning lady and gentlemen. Wait... Did I just use the singular 'lady' instead of the plural? That's it, I'm done. I'm cooked. I should just give up, right?

Of course, not. You're not getting rid of me so easily. And I don't give up, either. Anyway, language is so much more than a collection of grammar rules. Language is a bridge between people, isn't it.

This one time, I visited the United States with my grandmother. At that time, English was something I could hear but not truly use. We were invited to a dinner party and I met Maggie. She was older than me, but she looked just like she had stepped out of a Disney Original Movie. Like Gabriela from High School Musical or Mitchie from Camp Rock. I was kind of star-struck. So I went right up to her. Looked her in the eye wanting to say how cute I thought she was.

"Do you think you are cute?"

That's what came out! I could have crawled under a rock for the rest of the trip. But actually, Maggie and I are still friends.

As I have grown, I realized that my experience with language was not just something I alone experienced. Research shows that in general, speaking more than one language gives people the power to be more empathetic and nuanced in understanding their own emotions. Bilinguals are also more likely speak up when meeting someone for the first time.

In Japan, English is everywhere. Yet somehow, opportunities to actually speak English are surprisingly rare. According to the EF English Proficiency Index, Japan ranked 92nd out of 116 countries in 2024. At first, I wondered why. Then I looked at countries with the highest English proficiency, such as the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. They don't simply study English. They live with it. They watch English media. They communicate with people from around the world. They use English outside the classroom, not just inside it.

Research in second language acquisition supports this idea. The linguist Merrill Swain explains through the Output Hypothesis that learners improve not only by understanding a language, but by producing it. When we try to express our ideas, notice our mistakes, receive feedback, and try again, our language skills continue to grow.

In that way, English is not just a bridge to others, but also a pathway to understanding ourselves. For a long time, I believed becoming better at English meant getting better test scores. But I was wrong. I decided to stop waiting until my English became "good enough." Instead, I started looking for places where I could actually use it. I joined Model United Nations. I challenged myself in the World Scholar's Cup. I participated in debate, essay competitions, interpretation activities, and online English learning.

At first, I was nervous every single time I opened my mouth. I couldn't always find the right words. Sometimes I made mistakes. Sometimes I felt embarrassed. But every challenge taught me something that no textbook ever could. Little by little, English stopped feeling like a school subject and I could begin to see new parts of myself. Today, I am here, speaking with you!

So today, I want to leave you with one challenge. Don't let your English stay inside your notebook. Use it. Speak to someone. Join an English club. Participate in debate. Challenge yourself through Model United Nations, the World Scholar's Cup, or any opportunity that lets you communicate with others.

Your English doesn't have to be perfect. You don't have to know every word. You only have to be willing to begin to cross the bridge.