

Life Story of a Language Learner from Ghana

Nazira Kazakbhaeva

My name is Austin and my middle name is Oloyede. I was born in Ghana but my parents are originally from Nigeria. Both of my parents are from Nigeria. Both of them are Euro bales. I was born there, and then I went back to school in Ghana. Before passing away, my father was a good merchant and my mother was and still is a trader. However, when I was 6, I lost my dad, so we had to leave Ghana and return to Nigeria. I have received some education in Ghana before we moved to Nigeria. That is why I have completed both my elementary and secondary education in Nigeria. I also went to university there.



I would like to give a short excerpt about my parents. My mom is from a little town back in my country Oyan and my dad is from Inisha. They both had the same local governments, so they shared the same cultural background together, like marriage. They had the same thoughts about marriage, like having a traditional one. They also shared common religious beliefs. Both of my parents are Christian. They are Catholic and they respect all aspects of their beliefs.

I remember my father very well from my childhood. My mother told me a lot of good things about him and how he played games with me. She also told me a lot of interesting and funny stories about the first year of my life. I do not remember my childhood very well, according to my mother's stories. I can imagine my childhood and remember some vague moments from that time. I cannot say exactly, maybe when I became older; my mother told me the funny story of the way I used to behave when I was a little child. It was really very interesting to listen to my mom's stories, especially when she talked about the way I used to cry for food.

So, I told you earlier about my mother's story about my childhood. When she is in a good mood or maybe when my friends are around, she makes some jokes about me. She says "Oh, when Austin was a baby, he doesn't play with breast milk. When he came to breast feeding, my son will never play with it. He doesn't play with anybody when it came to breast feeding." When my mother did not give me breast milk on time, I usually cried very bad and a pain in my head would arise. My voice could be heard by everybody because of my loud crying. The neighbors were asking my mother such questions like "Is your son fine? What's going on? Why he is crying?" My mother's response for these questions usually was that I was in a bad mood because of breast milk. If she did not give any food I was depressed. As a matter of fact, she nurtured me with breast milk for more than 2 years. I think that is why I am strong today.

Another interesting fact about my childhood is my first date. My first date was back in my home in Nigeria. It was when I was in secondary school. I met the girl in my class, and I liked her very much. I fell in love with her. I really had a crush on her. I do not think that was love, but it was just a crush on her. One day, I invited her for an outing. We just kept playing some games together. It was just children's love and nothing serious. Sometimes we went out for a drink, of course not for a strong drink and just for soft one, and exchanged some talk. I cannot remember very well that time and our conversation, but I suppose it was

just friends' conversation. We did not even kiss. I remember my first kiss was not with that young girl. It was with another one. I don't think I can remember that kiss now. Usually first kiss people never forget, but in my case, I do not even remember her face. I think it was because I had kissed her, maybe somehow but I remember that I kissed her a lot. She was my first girlfriend when I was in high school. We call it secondary school in Nigeria. So, I think I was not so serious about her because she was my first girlfriend and I was so young to think about some serious things.

When I was a teenager, I had a lot of friends. I could make friends so easily. I did not find it so difficult because I enjoyed talking with people and I got along with people so easily. But, one little thing is that I make friends easier with ladies more than the way I make friends with guys. Basically, I can make friends with sexes, males and females. Making friends with ladies doesn't mean that I might have a lot of girlfriends, but I just enjoy to be surrounded by them. Maybe the reasons why I prefer the ladies' company more is because of my family. When I mean my family, I'm talking about my mother because I came from a polygamist family. I have five brothers and only one sister. So, I lived most of my life with men. This fact has a great influence in the interaction with ladies. When I'm talking with men, I do not enjoy it as much as I enjoy talking to ladies.

I would like to tell you about some cultural facts back in my country. I would like to mention about it because our culture is very rich and interesting for the people from other cultural backgrounds, especially the wedding ceremony and marriage in general.

According to my culture, in the olden days our parents believed in choosing marriage for their children. Parents could choose, for example, if I am girl my dad has to choose for me a man for marriage, or if I am a man my parents have to look for a wife for me to marry. I cannot choose by myself the person that I am going to marry. Thank God it was a long time ago. Now-a-days, things have changed and children can do whatever they like to do. We can

marry outside the culture but in the olden days we could not do it. That time we had to marry according to the culture. The reason for it was that parents believed in culture and the importance of their tradition. Parents liked and enjoyed and respected their culture and tradition. They believed that their children, who are married to the person from another culture, will never be happy and never enjoy the marriage and their life. It was considered that if a wife and a husband are from the same cultural background, they will be happy and enjoy their life. That is why most of the parents preferred their children to marry from the same tribe. Sometimes, one of the children could marry out of their culture even if the parents did not allow them to do it. If it's happened it means that their children will be called outcasts, they will not give that child any respect, and the family would not even allow him to see any member of family. So, that was in the olden days, but in the present day everything changed due to civilization and education. Now, any child can marry out of their culture and from another country as they prefer.

Also, I would like to mention one interesting fact about marriage. In my country, men can marry several times if he can support his wives. Even my father had four wives because he was from a polygamous family. My dad had four wives and my mom used to be the last wife of my father. So, the reason why I think our parents did this stuff in the olden days was in order to have a lot of babies, but not everybody could do it. According to the culture, if you have a lot of money you can marry several times. You cannot marry if you cannot support your family.

My daddy was a good merchant and he had a lot of businesses and he never believed in employing outside of family for his business. My father believed that if he married many wives, they will have many children and it would help him in his businesses. His wives would be supporting them and he put his trust in them. It was the main excuse of polygamy. With many wives, your business would progress. But, now we have no ideas of polygamy

because according to religion we cannot do it. Time has changed everything because people don't marry as many as before because of religion or because of education and civilization. In our time, people value and prefer to marry one person, because they believe in one big family with only one husband and one wife.

I remember the time when I was a schoolboy. It was a good time for me; I think my elementary school was somehow interesting back in Ghana. I had my first elementary school in Ghana. You know, one interesting thing about going to school as a young child is that the children should put their hand on their ear, for instance their right hand reaches the opposite ear. If they can do it, they can go to school. The parents do not count the age of the children. The fact is that they ask their child to put their hands on their ears; if this child touched his/her ear it means that he/she are mature enough to go to the elementary school. So, once you can do that you will be happy to join your mates in school. There are lots of children that are somehow short or maybe they don't grow up very well, so they find it difficult to gain admission to school and start to study. So, one time I remember when I came to the interview, or I don't know what it is called, one lady asked me to do the same thing and when I could touch my ear, I was very happy because I could start to go to school. The other thing of my happiness was that my parents bought books for me. Also, they bought me a lot of stuff for school, that time I used to value it a lot. When I went to school, they put food in my flask; they kindly put in a lot of things for me to eat. I started elementary school when I was at the age of five. I think I really liked my childhood and I liked my elementary school. I really enjoyed each time I remember when was in elementary school. I used to be very happy because I really enjoyed my family taking care of me and they gave me what I needed that time for school.

After graduating school, I applied to study abroad. Fortunately, I was accepted to IUP. I am a double major student. I major in nursing and psychology. Well, I like what I'm doing as a nursing student. I really like taking care of people because I like to interact with people, to be

sociable is a main thing for me. I have to be communicative because of my future work. If somebody asks me about my choice maybe my answer would be the same, but I have another reason for my choice. I can tell you that I am a man and I have to help my family in everything, I have to support them that is why I chose nursing. Everybody knows that this job is one of the good paying jobs in America.

I like my major very much. I have a lot of interesting subjects in this department. I don't think that I have any particular subjects I like more, but I think I am doing my best in all of my subjects. I am just enjoying what I am doing as a nursing student at IUP. I like to visit my classes, especially philosophy, because I enjoy taking care of people. I like being around people, so that is why I chose this profession. The philosophy makes me able to reason very well and to know how people think. I think it makes me able to understand people better, that is why I decided to be a philosophy major as well.

Sometimes I am proud of myself, because I am doing very well in my education. This educational experience gave me a lot of good things already. I can communicate with people from different countries, because I speak at least three languages, of which the English language is my primary language or I call it my official language. The urban language is my travel language. That is the language we speak for my tradition back in my country in Nigeria. The third language is Ghanaian; this has to be Twine, and we call it Twine language. I was born in Ghana, as I told earlier. I went to the elementary school in Ghana, so I learned this language because I was born and I went to the school there. That is why I can speak this language fluently and I can even write it. So, when I came to Nigeria, the place where my parents came from, I started to learn the Nigerian language: the Yoruba language. So, I can speak this language as well as others. In both countries I lived in, Ghana and Nigeria, English is an official language. That is why I have no problem with English because that is the language we speak as my L1 back home in Africa, in Nigeria and Ghana.

As I told earlier, the English language is an official language back in my country. We were not allowed at the schools to speak any other language besides English. We start to speak in English when ever we got into the school. But, when we get home we speak whatever we spoke at home. When I talk to my relatives or with my brother when we are home, we speak our traditional tribal or other Yoruba languages, too. We are a bilingual family. We can use both the tribal, because it was my father's first language, and Yoruba, which is my mother's first language. I remember that both of my parents addressed me with their own native languages. That did not force us to speak their native languages, but they encouraged us to use English in order to develop our spoken English at home. Our parents normally speak English to us, too. They had to speak the English language with us, but it does not mean that they did not use their native languages less than English. We are a trilingual, not only bilingual, family because we use three languages; Yoruba, tribal and English.

I never had many difficulties with the English language. As I said, the English language used to be my official language back home, but the only problem I had when I came to the United States was that many people used to say I had very strong accent because when I pronounced something; sometimes, they found it difficult to understand me. This is because of my strong accent. However, when it came to writing the English language, I did not have any problem with that because my writing skill was very good, maybe because nobody could say that they cannot understand me because of my accent. My accent was my only one problem I had. I never had any problem with written English. Another reason that I know the English language well is because this year is going to be the 7th year that I have been in the United States. I use English everyday with my friends, but I still have a problem with my accent. People still complain about my accent, but I think that during the 7 years in the United States I improved my accent a little compared with the first time I came here.

All my life I used more than one language, but to be honest, I found my traditional language very interesting because I can express my ideas better in my native language than in English. I think everybody will agree with me. I think that my first language is very rich because we have a good language history from our old generation. Every year, the language changed. We have more new words because of modernization. You know, I noticed one thing; the language changed but the jokes never did. In our days, we have a lot of jokes which are from my parents' time. Though, I can still use these jokes with my friends.

To my mind, every language has their specific feature which makes it interesting. English is a language of travel, business and world communication. It is very good to know more than one language. The more languages you know, the more opportunity you will have in the future. New languages are like a new food that has not been eaten before, but when you try it you can say something about this food or you can even cook the food by yourself. Knowing more languages is always a plus for any person. As a matter of fact, knowing the English language was a plus for me too when I came to the United States, because I discovered that a lot of people who came from different countries have to start learning English as elementary school students. In my case, I was so very happy that I knew this language very well. I think there is not much difference in English where I came from. So, I did not have to start all over again, I just started at the college level English. I see this as an added advantage for me. I spoke the English language from day one in my country. So, the spoken form of English from back home was a plus for me when I came here.

Another advantage of knowing the English language was I just took classes, I did not have to take the TOEFL or any other exams or even take preliminary English classes in college. I just started with English 101, which is English comprehension, and then I did an English research and humanity literature class. I took a total of three English classes when I came to the US.

Those people who just came from France or other non English speaking countries have to start learning English at the beginner level in order to understand the native speakers or to get a good job. I am so happy that I know this language very well because I do not have to spend my time learning English. It was a plus for me when I came to Indiana, too. The English language is the same as it is in US or in Africa, may be a little different in some pronunciations and in dialect, but nothing else. English is English everywhere. The other thing is that English is not the only language they speak in the United States, but it is the number one spoken language in America. There are varieties of different languages in the United States. You can find different nationalities in this place and I think that is one thing that makes the United States a unique place. Another interesting fact is that you can go to different states and hear the numerous languages, but if you know the English language you can communicate with everybody. You can see there are many advantages of knowing the English language.

As I mentioned before, I had a problem with accents when I came to America, but sometimes I was faced with other difficulties such as understanding some native speakers or Americanized black people, for instance, maybe from Philadelphia. When I came to the United States, I stopped in my brother's place. At that time he lived in Philadelphia. Philadelphian spoken English is different from someone who came from Alabama. It is the same English, but the way they speak is different. I noticed that African-American guys have their own specific English character which makes the English language a little bit different and difficult for people who came to the United State recently. It happened with me too when I came here for the first time, but now I'm able to understand whatever they say, whether they are speaking in American or whatever they speak other than their own English. I think I have the upper hand when it comes to spoken English when compared with others who came from another country; they could not even understand the African-American speakers, as they had to learn how to pronounce the alphabet.

When I came to the United States for the first time, I had some knowledge of the English language. I could understand a lot of American jokes or other things, but sometimes it was difficult for me to recognize some sentences which were said by native speakers. I would like to give you an example like [uatz up], I did not know what they meant by [uatz up]. It means “what are you up to?” When somebody used this sentence with me for the first time, I would say “what are you talking about?” But now I can understand and even use this sentence with the same pronunciation. I think some of American spoken English is the same as my Pidgin English in my country; for example, like [wetin you dey do there?], it means— what are you doing there? If I use the Pidgin English with other people, they will look at me and ask “what exactly do you mean? What are you talking about?” I can use this kind of English with people from my country because the Americans cannot get what I am talking about. That is why most of the time when I see people from my country or from Africa, I came from Nigeria, I can make a joke with them. Sometimes my friends and I use the Pidgin English to remind us about home and we find it so interesting when we are speaking those languages. Using those words make us feel happy and make us feel at home.

Sometimes because of misunderstandings of meanings, words create an interesting and funny language story. I have a lot of language stories from the seven years I have been in America. I would like to tell you one of them. So, when I came to the United States, I stopped at my brother’s place and, as I mentioned before, he lived in Philadelphia. One day, I decided to walk around the street in order to see some new places where I have never been before. So, I was walking by myself. I think it was my second week in America. I was walking down the street and I saw some black guys; they just were talking to each other among themselves. I did not know what they were talking about, but I just heard one sentence that they used in their conversation very clearly. It sounded like, “*Hey mother fucker we get a fucking out of my face*”. I found the way they used this sentence very funny and it sounded very interesting to

me. I just memorized it, but I did not know the meaning of the words. I was thinking that this English is usually what American people use when they met each other. I really wanted to surprise my brother learning so quickly the American English. At that time my brother was out of Philadelphia and I was waiting for him without patience. After several days my brother came back to his house. So, as soon as I saw him, I told myself "it's ok let me use the American English for this guy and make him surprised". So, as soon as he came I said, "*hey mother fucker how long you get a fucking out of my face*". As soon as I said it, my brother was so mad at me because I used bad language. When I said it, I understood that something was wrong because I saw the expression of his face. I asked him whether I did something wrong. He explained everything to me. He understood that I did not know what I was saying, I did not know what I meant by it then. I was so sorry about it, and I was so shy I could not even look in his eyes.

Language, for me, means a lot of good things which changed my life in general. I can say language is my life and it makes a human being and what we are today. Without language we would never accomplish many things, like communication. For me, language, in particular, means: interaction and getting the knowledge. Language is an important part of my life because without language I could not communicate with people; I cannot communicate to the outside world and I can not even gain anything from anybody. If you do not know language you become a cave man who never understood the value of language. I do not want to be a man who uses language and does not even understand the importance of using it.

Language created this world and created my own small world, but at the same times a very valuable world for me. Due to language, I can get a good education, I can negotiate and I have a lot of friends. So, I see language as a key factor, as an important factor of our lives. Knowing many languages helps people a lot in their life. It helps me a lot too, in particular, in my education. The knowing of two foreign languages made my life easier because in school,

my department required the students to take one foreign language as a part of their elective course, but in my case I had an advantage of media spoken in three different languages, they told me “Ok Austin, you speak three different languages you don’t have to take any foreign languages”. So, they gave me another subject instead of taking other foreign languages. So, I was just happy that the knowledge of different languages helped me to do a lot of things very successfully, and it still helps me to achieve other goals.

All my life language was with me everywhere. Language changed my life in a good way. The ability to speak English helped me to come to the United State of America. It helps me with my study and I did and will do my best in the classes because of knowing the English language. I want to point out that not only the English language had a great influence in my life story, but another two languages, Nigerian and Ghanaian, also changed my life in a good way. These two languages gave me a lot of advantages, like being in Ghana and not having any communication problems. If I could not speak English, I could communicate using my first language. To communicate with people means to be a socialized person and knowing different languages means to be more knowledgeable. You can open a world of different opportunities if you know languages. I hope that I will achieve a lot of achievement in the future because of knowing different languages and because language and man is one part of the world.