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A TEXAN DATE

Wallet? Check!

Jeans zipper? Check!

Cowboy boots? Uncheck. In Texas, or at least at the country dance club Billy Bob's, women tuck the bottom hem into their boots whereas men wear their boot-cut jeans outside of the shaft. I pulled the leg opening up and stretch it down.

Despite the careful preparation, I was nervous, yet ready, for a date at the biggest "honky-tonk" in the United States with a girl I met at Texas Christian University (TCU).

Prior to my college career at TCU, the idea of asking a Texan out for country dancing seemed cinematic and impractical: I had certainly seen it on the big screen but I never imagined that one day, I would come into contact with the Western cowboy culture of the lone star state. In fact, I did not believe I would ever communicate with other cultures. Because most popular media deliver in English and I had been relative efficiency in English since high school, complacency in limited interaction with the world prevailed. Beyond the scope of my own Vietnamese culture and those depicted by the United States media production, there was little knowledge and little desire to explore.

Knowing a language is key to valuable correspondence among citizens of different countries. However, there exists a large gap between knowing a language and *cultural understanding* because of the constant evolution of a society and its communication tool.

A language encompasses virtually every aspect of a society as it is an important tool with which cultures were born. I agree with Israeli history professor Yuval Noah Harari's explanation of how civilizations rose to their majesty: humankind is the only species that could cooperate flexibly in large numbers. Abstract concepts such as religion, government, currency, and so on, through the power of language, united mankind. Moreover, that tool allows humans to record their history and express their perception of the world through multiple forms of art. Hence, people in different geological and chronicle locations could decipher from these records and art forms the relationship, prosperity and downfall of their distant fellow human beings.

However, competency in using a language differs substantially from competency in navigating in the culture that uses that language. As humans constantly develop new ideas, language evolves to match the communication demand. Furthermore, external environments create countless variations of the same language. It is common to see older generations complain about speaking a different tongue from that of the young because the vocabulary has outgrown their knowledge, or to see travelers fail to make sense of the people they visit despite sharing the same language. The study of a language does not stop as long as humans communicate. Therefore, those who seek to become multilingual need to occupy a recurrent learning process in order to truly master the voice and comprehend the culture.

Starting college in the US, I found myself being able to speak the language, yet distant from connecting to the curriculum and the American people. That fact that my college locates in the South of the US, which takes pride in its distinctive culture that confuses even other US citizens, raised the challenge of changing from Vietnamese and the English I had learned my entire life to Texan English. The transition includes having to learn about country artists, forgetting about travelling on a bike and getting used to

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driving everywhere, accepting the absence of street food and falling in love with sophisticatedly prepared Tex-Mex food, and simply welcoming deserts, endless highways, and sparsely populated towns as the new regular scene instead of tranquil lotus ponds and busy developing urban city.

As I familiarized with Texan English, I realized Vietnamese and US citizens share one large commonality: they all live comfortably within a bubble that allows them to speak their own language without any aspiration to explore the world. At TCU, even when my presence brought in a little part of the outside world, my peers showed little interest in exploring more. Very few students would relinquish Texan English to use regular English for a conversation about other cultures. One could hardly blame them. Any linguist would know the frustration of not speaking one's mother tongue.

While the discrepancy between a language and its authenticity challenges *cultural understanding*, *global citizens* thrive in this area. They do not simply speak multiple languages besides their own, they speak the authentic language of the regions they visit and of the strangers they consider their own fellow citizen. The most important asset resulted from intersections among cultures come not from physical wonders but from the *global trailblazers* who travelled, changed, and united the communities they had passed by.

In recognizing my development as a global citizen, I realized my role in the world and the power of the languages I could speak. Most importantly, people *listen* when I speak their language. My Texan friends would not normally care about Vietnam. The only reason that they do is because I travelled to study in their home state and I showed a great interest in learning more about their traditions, their hobbies and their legacy. One could hardly be more proud of their home than when they introduce it to a guest. As the relationship grows, my friend naturally becomes curious about my culture. In presenting to them, had I not known Texan language, I could not juxtapose the difference in a meaningful context that they can understand ("we can use scooters successfully because the small streets in the city are only as wide as the width of two pickup truck tires" – I explained to the shock of TCU students).

Beyond the scope of ordinary everyday relationship, global citizenship brings a great perspective to academic settings with their diverse backgrounds and knowledge of the language. At TCU, an area of study that I particularly appreciate, though it does not belong to the majors I pursue, is Women and Gender Studies. A Western country with progressive changes to social injustice, the United States still lacks gender equality. It is wonderful that many among my peers contribute their time and talents to reducing the prejudice on our college campus and in the nation. However, they do not quite comprehend the situation in other areas of the world. In sharing about the gender inequality in Vietnam to my classmates, I could see their dissatisfaction. The follow-up response was rather vehemently infuriated: my peers demanded me to come up with instant solution to the current problem in my home country. The response to the demand selectively highlighted the prevalence of male dominance in the Vietnamese culture and how changing the entire core values of the culture must be a gradual process. I could have used normal English as my regular tool but I would have failed to connect to my classmates in helping them understand how less liberal societies respond to changes. Instead, I applied Texan English to the conversation. By referring to the traditions that Texas preserves and that are not necessarily approved by other communities (sport game hunting is a good example), I was able to reduce some of the heat that my friends have over the overburden of a Vietnamese woman. Nonetheless, I am a progressive feminist and I do want change in my country. I have been conducting a study with the help of the Women Studies department on the dissimilarities of a Vietnamese woman

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and her American counterpart, the stereotypes the society imposes upon her and how society reacts to their breaking out of those stereotypical boxes. The study, written in Texan English about the Vietnamese culture, also aids US citizens in reflecting on their own discussion about gender and other social inequalities.

Texan English has helped me achieve true cultural understanding. In learning it, I am more than just a visiting student – I have become a Texan and can call Texas my second home. My friends have also benefited in the process as they receive an authentic representation of Vietnamese youth, unabridged by the media or lost in translation by the absence of a common language. In me, they see not a foreigner but a friend with cultural difference. This distinction is extremely important.

In the grand scheme of globalization and the unprecedented level of collaboration between countries, economic and social development could not grow without cultural understanding. Indeed, as governments open up to more trading practices, those who wish to make use of this opportunity need to be extremely considerate in their action. Mankind has almost moved past colonialism in which one country invades and steals natural and human resource from another, yet consequently has moved into neocolonialism in which the exploitation of resource still happens and physical invasions have retired to be replaced by cultural invasions. As a business student, I learned about US corporations and their tactics of moving manufacturers overseas. The fact that the executives of large companies treat Vietnamese workers like numbers that hold as much power as earnings per share or long term investment appalls me. Granted cheap labor in Vietnam appeals to multinational corporations and attracts large flows of investment, it is almost unethical to neglect an employee. If something could defend their decisions, it is the nonexistence of the communication between Vietnamese workers and their foreign managers. However, *global citizens* could fix the issue: they know the language of the Vietnamese workers, they know the language of the executives, they have a unique position to connect the groups and eradicate the long-held misconceptions. *Global citizens* are the solution.

As I hone my skills at the business school at TCU and lead the Entrepreneurship Club with a deeply passionate entrepreneurial spirit, I realize that Vietnam and the United State, especially the state of Texas, have infinite collaborative potential. We simply do not begin enough conversations about our abilities and our inclination to work together. International trade has become the easiest in the history of mankind because nations do not only trade physical commodities but also intellectual property. As contacts increase, *global citizens* lead the wave of change, preserving and promoting their own culture while learning and embracing other values of the world. In working with other countries, citizens are not eroding their own distinctive features; instead, cultures and languages improve in diversity, resulting in an even more distinctive continuity in the living legacy our predecessors had left behind.

Just like my friends who have added to their Texan English vocabulary the descriptions of Vietnam, I have picked up a few more languages from other *global citizens* at TCU. My curiosity has expanded beyond the lone star state, into the savannahs of Africa, the rainforests of South America, the ancient architecture of Europe and the mountains of Asia. No longer the complacent boy I was in Vietnam, I aspire to learn the authentic language, not just from my global friends who use them, but from the communities that use and enrich them every day. Among these groups, I still aspire to learn more about Vietnam and Texas, as I know the authentic language of my two homes would not stop growing and I would be equally eager to master them.

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I put on my cowboy hat. The pickup truck honked. I hopped into the seat next the girl I asked out. It took two years of learning before I could talk to a Texan girl but it only took my true self and my cultural background to impress her and to make us friends. Multilingual unites us in unpredictable yet amazing ways, creating exciting paths for *cultural understanding* and cultural experience. We rode down the highway, deserts on both sides extend to as far as the eye can see.