Life of an International Student

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When I was 1-year-oldWhen I was 1 year old, my family moved to Philadelphia for my dad's MBA program at Whatron School, UPenn. Although dad had a superb score in his TOEIC exam, he told me he struggled a lot in understanding school materials and communicating with foreigners in different language. However, he was never frustrated and worked even harder. Eventually, dad was honored with Cum Laude when he graduated. My family moved back to Korea after his graduation.

After I came back to Korea, I went to a public school in Korea until 8th grade. My mom sent me to private English academy for years because she believed speaking English is essential to make me successful. Although I only have a short memory of my youth life in Philadelphia, I've always dreamed of going to a college in the United States. Also our family went trip to foreign countries every year, and I grew my dream of working in International organization so I continue enjoying traveling around the world. I decided to move to American high school to achieve my dream. At first time, my parents were reluctant to send me to the United States because I'm the only child in family. I succeeded in persuading my parents and started to research private boarding schools. Although I was passionate preparing high school applications, I was not accepted to all the schools I applied. Among schools that accepted me, my parents decided to send me to Trinity-Pawling School in Pawling, NY. At first time, I was not very happy to go to that school because TP is all boys’ school and located in countryside.

Like my father did, I struggled to get used to American high school. The education system of Korea and American boarding school was different. In Korean school, I could get good grades if I just perform well in Final exams. However at TP (Trinity-Pawling), I was obliged to play sports every seasons, and there was a huge amount of daily study loads including essays, quizzes, tests and exams. Making American friends also took me some time. When my class and dorm mates made fun of my culture and accents, I took those jokes way to seriously. My English was considered to be relatively good when I attended Korean school, but it turned out to be not that excellent when I faced real foreigners in America. I repeatedly watched American TV shows to practice changing my Korean accents, and when to extra helps regularly to catch up what I missed during classes.

Through the harsh times of adjustment, the electronic dictionary that I brought from Korea helped me significantly. When my teacher spoke a word that I did not know, I looked it up on this device instead of interrupting class. There were many new words I had to find daily. I wrote new words that I found on the notes and memorized them before I go to sleep everyday. The habit assisted me significantly in improving my English. As time passed, new words written on my notes started to decrease. When I went to SAT Academy since junior summer, the device also helped me a lot looking up SAT words that I have never used in my life. Thanks to the device and my effort, my reading score improved a lot in practice and real SAT test. These days, almost nobody uses electronic dictionary due to the presence of smartphones. However, it is a truly meaningful device that helped me a lot in the early years of my high school life in America.

After a year, my English improved significantly in a level that I could understand and make jokes in English. However, my Korean accent was never erased completely. However, I really did not care anymore when some of my peers still made fun of my accent because I realized accent did not really matter. One day, I saw the current Secretary of General of United Nations, Ki-Mun Ban giving speech on TV. Despite his thick Korean accent, people over the world listened to it earnestly. As a member of international club for four years at TP, I realized being international does not mean every people have to be same and agree on same ideas. Being international means acknowledging and understanding difference. The true important thing is being a worthy member of community that I belonged to. My classmates did not make fun of me anymore as they became more mature and see me working hard during sports practices and competitions with other schools.

In my senior winter, I was accepted to Emory University in early decision. Through the great happiness, my dynamic times in America passed through my head. In my freshman year, there were multiple moments I felt so homesick and wanted to go back to Korea where my family and old friends were there. As a reward for overcoming such hard times, I was accepted to my first choice college.

At Emory, I met many international students who went through similar experiences like I did. I have interviewed my roommate Sean and classmate who also went to high school in America. There were some similarities and differences in his experiences compared to mine. I also interviewed Hyunkyu who started foreign life in early age in Palau Island. Lastly, I interviewed Mr. Robinson who had been my advisor for three years.

I met my first interviewee Sean in SAT academy in Korea during the junior summer. At there we both studied hard to improve our SAT scores. The first interview with my roommate Sean was the most agreeable one because we shared similar experiences at American boarding school. However there were still some differences. Sean went to an international school in Korea from 9th grade to 10th grade. Although there were teachers from foreign countries, the 95 percent of student body was consisted of Korean students. During the summer, Sean decided to move to America and he got into WMA Academy in Massachusetts. It also took him months to get fit into the new school system. However, his hardest time in America was not being homesick and stress coming from speaking fluent English. Sean took an SAT test in his freshman year because his school instructed him to do so. He got a low score because he was so experienced. Because his scored jumped more than by 500 points at his senior year, Sean’s score was flagged and investigated. Poor Sean was not able to sent his score until the beginning of December. Sean told me he almost gave up on getting into early decision schools, and he almost lost hope in getting into decent colleges for the two months until his score was finally showed up. His favorite moment was same as mine. The acceptance to Emory!

The second interview with Hyunkyu was entertaining and interesting. Hyunkyu moved to an island near Philippine called Palau when he was seven. Hyunkyu was terrified when he first met new friends who speak different language in American school. He was welcomed with young classmates. However, when he jumped to third grade from first one, new classmates were not that nice. Hyunkyu experienced racism for being different. However, as he accepted the fact that he is different, Hyunkyu became obsolete of those accusations and made nice new friends. Hyunkyu understood that the true meaning of being international means accepting difference in his third grade (Which I realized in 10th grade). When Hyunkyu moved back to Korea in 6th grade, he again had hard time adjusting into Korean school system. Compared to former school he had attended, Korean school focused way too much on studying only. Therefore, he moved to international school in Seoul, which was American style.

My last interview with Mr. Robinson is my favorite. Mr. Robinson is a dean of admissions at Trinity-Pawling School. He had been my advisor for two years. Mr. Robinson always pays close attention to international students and I was one of them. He thought I was a troublemaker when I was freshman. My reputation among teachers was not so good due to my lack of participation during classes and continuous absence in chapel assemblies. However, from middle semester of sophomore year (when I became obsolete about the fact I’m different and when I gained confidence) he noticed my improvement in grades and school life. Mr. Robinson said he was proud of me when I was elected as a president of International Club. Mr. Robinson is amazed how many international students do excellent job in both sports and academics in a total different environment from where they came from. “International students are essential members of Trinity-Pawling community, they always work hard”. Thankfully, Mr. Robinson contributed significantly to my acceptance to Emory because he wrote me a nice college recommendation. Mr. Robinson is still struggling to help international students adjusting to foreign school life.

The autoethnography project was a great opportunity for me to reflect my 5-year foreign life at United States. At first time, it was very different with my expectations. Before I moved to America, I had never thought of struggles I would have to face. It took me a year for adjusting into totally different environment and different school system. Although there were some moments I wanted to go back to Korea, thanks to the help from my artifact electronic dictionary, other international upperclassmen, and my advisor Mr. Robinson, I could successfully become a good member of Trinity-Pawling School community. It was quite a journey. I hope to do well also at Emory. At Emory, I met several people who had similar experiences with mine. Sean overcame his tough situation with his SAT score during his senior year. Unlike Sean and me, Hyunkyu struggled twice when he first went to American school and when came back to Korea after his youth life at Palau Island. However, there were always people ready to help us. I think we have to thank our parents who made significant financial sacrifice for us and helped us being stronger people. I hope other international students realize the true definition of being international is accepting difference, not being same type of person in the environment. The person who can understand others’ difference is a truly international person.