

# Learning the Language

Category: Immigrants

written by Emily Liu | May 3, 2025

In college, my friend used to joke that my roommates and I were like the United Nations. One was Russian and born in Canada, another was Indian, and another was half Vietnamese and half Caucasian. I'm Chinese. We were sitting in our living room one evening, and I was desperately trying to teach them, "你好, 我叫Emily" or "Hello my name is." I couldn't help but laugh at their distorted intonations and jumbled order. Until it was my turn to stumble through Russian: "привет меня зовут Emily." Attempt Hindi: "नमस्ते Emily." And then Vietnamese: "Xin chào, tên tôi là Emily."

Eventually, I could introduce myself in their languages, say "purple" and "red" in Russian, and count to ten in Vietnamese. In Chinese, my friend could now say her favorite meal was rice, chicken and vegetables, and ask if you had had water today. By the time our impromptu quadrilingual course concluded, it was 4 a.m. and even English was beginning to feel like a new language!

Teaching each other how to say our names in our family's language was an act of mutual inheritance. We traded greeting phrases and common words, but they were also the sounds of family kitchens, lullabies and long-distance phone calls. Pieces of our childhood and parts of ourselves.

On Thanksgiving, I volunteered at a homeless shelter. I was taking vitals for a patient, when he told me that I reminded him of his daughter, and he began to cry. He hadn't seen her in the years since he had come to America.

Much of the sentiment towards immigrants is bitter, predicated on the belief that imaginary lines drawn on a map can tell us who we are or what we deserve. This illusion has fostered overwhelming division and hatred.

My parents are immigrants, so was my Spanish professor, our family physician, and the janitor who taught me card tricks. I was raised surrounded by a variety of traditions, foods, languages, and people. That has made it easy for me to see that my world is not the only one. The more people I meet from different parts of the world, the more I understand how insular my view would be without them. A lack of diverse perspectives leads us to share the same blind spots and biases as one another. Learning languages with my roommates was proof to me that people can belong in more than one place at once. And holding a man's hand as he missed the home he left behind, for a moment, removed the distance between us.

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