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# Moving up the Ladder

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## Moving up the Ladder

Sami Issa

Communicating with people sometimes is difficult, especially if we have to communicate with them in our non-native language. I arrived in the United States in 2013 to visit my sister, who had been living in the USA for over ten years. My English was terrible at that point. I learned some academic English in my home country, Syria, but it was not enough to interact with American speakers in a basic daily conversation. I could not understand American speakers' pronunciation, though I would comprehend it if it was written rather than spoken. Although my comprehension while listening was not good at all, I did not find any difficulty in the U.S., at first, since my sister was with me anywhere I went. A couple of months later, everything changed. The civil war in Syria reached Damascus, the city where I lived, and it became an extremely dangerous place to go back to. Therefore, I had no other choice but to stay in the States with no clue when I am going back. Since the United States has become my temporary country, I decided to take advantage of the time I'm here and grow my skills, such as social, musical, and technological. Also, I decided to find a job, learn from the American culture, then add all these experiences to my future resume. But unfortunately, learning all those skills requires a person to understand the native speakers' accent, which I really struggled with. Even though my English was preventing me from achieving all that I wanted, my ability to understand American speakers has grown little by little since I started working.

Understanding my co-workers' accent was hard, but it improved once I had confidence. I was hired as a bus boy in a restaurant called Ted's Bulletin in Washington, DC. At the beginning, I thought it was going to be easy since bus boys' main job is cleaning and re-setting tables,

rarely talking to customers. Indeed, I did not have to be in touch with guests, but I had to understand what my managers and co-workers were saying, and that put me in a lot of trouble and embarrassing situations. For instance, my manager once asked me to keep my eyes on a certain section of tables for the entire shift, but I did not quite understand what she said. Instead of politely telling her to repeat what she asked me to do, I felt shy and just nodded my head. Later during the shift, my section was a mess because I was taking care of different tables, which I was not supposed to do at that time. I was blamed for what happened, with no valid excuse. However, I told this story to my American co-worker, Stephon, and he said, "It's your fault brother! Never be afraid to ask anyone to repeat." I have never thought that having confidence to ask my managers to repeat what they say can help me to understand their accent better. In fact, I tried to have more confidence, and I was surprised by the result. All my co-workers and managers were very patient. They did not mind repeating, slowing down, or even changing the whole structure of the sentence so I could understand it. Day after day, my brain started to catch words faster and soon I rarely needed to ask my staff for a clarification of what they were saying. My listening ability was improved by simply not being ashamed to express out loud the confusions or uncertainty that I had in my mind.

Furthermore, my fear of answering the phone eventually disappeared once I felt that someone was holding my back. A few months later, I was promoted to work as a barista. I was very excited about my new position since I was going to gain an experience with making hot drinks, mixing milkshakes, and preparing desserts. Everything was going great until I found out that my new position required me to take to-go orders over the phone. At that point, answering the phone was a nightmare for me. I was afraid of not understanding the speakers' accent,

especially because voices over the phone are not always clear. I was excessively nervous. Every time the phone rang, I acted like I was busy with something else so that perhaps some other co-worker would respond. This trick worked perfectly in my training days, but I knew that I would have to answer the phone eventually. Thus, I had to find a way to defeat my fear. Suddenly, it dawned on me the earlier conversation that I had with Stephon when I struggled with understanding my managers' accent. I thought having confidence may solve the problem again. The next day I worked, I asked Stephon to stand close to me during the first couple of times the phone rings. In case if I didn't understand the caller, I would put them on hold and pass the phone to Stephon. In fact, I did not even need any help from any co-worker, and I hardly ever asked the caller to repeat what they said. Again, confidence was my key to cross this barrier and improve my listening ability for the better.

Although confidence helped me improve quite a bit, watching videos about food and imitating our customers' pronunciation were even more helpful ways to improve my listening skills. Later during my career, I started to feel bored by repeating the same job every day. It was almost like a blessing and a curse. It was useful to improve my listening skills with co-workers and random customers. On the other hand, it limited my ability to learn more since every day I was hearing the same conversations in different ways. Therefore, I told my general manager that I wanted to work as a server. I thought keeping directly in touch with customers could allow me to have varied discussions and eventually improve my listening skills. A few days later, I finished my training as a server, and I had my own section. The first couple of weeks were terrifying because I messed up a lot of orders. For example, sometimes customers asked me for a certain drink, but I brought them different things because I misunderstood their

pronunciation. Similarly, I put an order as a burger instead of veggie burger because I could not hear the 'veggie' part. Overall, it was a tremendously difficult job; every time I had a new table, I had a new headache. I thought a lot about improving my listening skills, and I came up with two methods. First one, I started watching random videos with American people talking about food and drinks to train my ear to recognize these vocabularies. Second, when our costumers said something I didn't understand, I memorized the pronunciation, and then I tried to imitate it by saying it out loud in front of any co-worker I saw so that perhaps they could figure out what it meant. Those two ways worked great for me, and I started to realize an obvious improvement over time. Later, I was very comfortable in my position, and my concern of not understanding our guests' accent was diminished in a noticeable way.

A year later, I noticed that my listening skills had grown in a terrific way compared to the past. Furthermore, I was promoted to be one of the training leaders in the restaurant. Being not afraid of making mistakes and learning from my previous experiences were the key to being where I am right now. I have never imagined that I could start from the bottom, then jump to the top in a short period. In brief, barriers will chase us every day, and it is always better to look at the problem as an opportunity to learn. Confidence and some learning techniques I developed helped me to achieve each higher position in the restaurant industry. So, if I use these techniques in my other life situations, will they work the same? That is what I am going to do next to find out.