

What I like most is the way we can all come together and discuss a question and think about other people's opinions. We can hear each other out even if we disagree and always have interesting conversations about what we're reading. I feel like we're learning important skills we can use now and in the future.

## Junior Great Books 6

Now the word *creative* means thinking outside the box and using my imagination to help see others' views.

Our discussions teach me how to talk to people and how other people are dealing with stuff and how I can be a better person by helping them get through that stuff. I realized how much difference I can make in my community.

When I get to share my thoughts with the whole class. It makes me feel good because everyone pays attention. I like being respected and you get to hear the same thing for other people.

I like listening to other people's ideas. Sometimes I hear things I would never have thought of myself!

The conversations are interesting because people might say ideas that you haven't thought of and you might think differently than you did before because of what people are saying. You can explain more about what you're trying to say so that people might understand.

In our discussions, we get to know each other better and understand what we read.

Learning has made me more open-minded, and learning to collaborate has made me a better leader on my team. A leader must be able to listen to what they are thinking fully so that

When you know there is more than one good answer, you're not afraid of being wrong. It makes it easier to think about different possibilities, and the discussions are more interesting when we explore those possibilities.

## CHRISTINA TANG-BERNAS

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"\`in-glish\" was first published in *Brevity* in 2016 as part of the magazine's special issue on race, racism, and racialization. It is a reflection on the experience of growing up Asian American with immigrant parents and how language is so closely tied to the feeling of belonging.

# \IN-GLISH\

*Christina Tang-Bernas*

I learned to speak English in preschool, at two and a half years old, still young enough to do away with any lingering Chinese accent. Though, sometimes, I wonder if every trace had been scrubbed away, listening intently to my own voice rattling around in my skull for signs of foreignness.

The cheery teachers sang little songs about teapots and taught us how to read, painstakingly, letter by letter.

The real instructors, though, were the kids on the playground. “Did you hear that?” a boy once said about me. “She said, ‘I axed you a question.’” They laughed, and I pocketed that piece of knowledge away, determined never to make the same mistake.

“How high are you?” I asked in primary school. One of the kids climbed up the jungle gym. “I’m this high,” she laughed. I smiled, playing along. But inside was a mass of frustration. “Tall,” I told myself. “It’s how tall you are. Stupid.”

More rules to memorize. “Saaa-mon,” I repeated to myself. “Not salmon.”

“I-earn,” not “I-ron.”

But these verbal pitfalls popped up everywhere. And soon it became easier not to say too much to start with.

“I remember when we were in first grade together,” a friend from high school told me much later. “I don’t think you said anything at all.”

We used to spend Thanksgiving at my uncle’s house, my mother’s brother.

“Say *boat*, Mom,” my cousin goaded, one year. “Say it. Say *boat*.”

My aunt sighed, put upon in a practiced sort of way. “Boat,” she said.

My cousin turned triumphant, “Didn’t I tell you? She said *butt*.” My sisters and I giggled. “Butt,” he repeated, as if he couldn’t get over how hilarious it was. “Mom, say *ship*. *Ship*.” My aunt walked away from our laughter.

“Boat,” I pronounced carefully once we’d returned home, under my breath, alone in the bathroom. “Ship.”

At sixteen, I decided to take a college-level calculus class during the summer.

When I walked into the community college testing center, the bored boy manning the front desk looked up at me. I swallowed and approached him. “I’m here to take the placement exams, math and English.”

“ESL, then?”

“No,” I said, noticing he hadn’t asked about my math aptitude, only my language. And why did he assume ESL? Was it the way I looked? Or the way I’d said the earlier sentence? “I think I’ll try the regular English exam.”

When I received my results, college-level placement, I felt no satisfaction, only vindication.

One of my managers once asked me, “Why don’t you give them a call? It’s harder for them to ignore a direct phone call than all the emails you keep sending.”

I didn’t know how to explain to her that emails are easier. Emails can be edited, spell-checked, and proofread. The moment I dial a phone number, anxiety swamps every available brain cell as I frantically try to pull together my hard-learned scripts.

“Hello.”

“Hello, how are you?” I asked.

“Good. How are you?”

“Good,” I said, automatic, “how are you?”

I cringed, knowing I was going to be replaying that mistake over and over again that night.

The therapist was kind, young, earnest, and white.

“Social anxiety,” she said, “comes from our mind sending out a constant series of false alarms.” She leaned closer, “What you have to realize is that people tend to focus only on themselves. Most of the time they’re not paying attention to what you say and do. And if you make a small mistake, or even what to you seems like a big mistake, they likely won’t even notice, much less mock you for it.”

I wanted to disagree with her. But I couldn’t find the right words, and it would’ve looked silly writing it down, so instead I nodded.

Much easier this way.