I still remember the exact moment I realized I was a stranger in a strange land. It wasn't a grand culture shock, but a quiet moment standing in a crowded campus dining hall. Staring at the menu, I felt my carefully constructed English vocabulary evaporate. The words were familiar, but the combinations were strange. What was the polite way to order? Should I say "I want this," or "May I have this"? That small moment of confusion set the tone for my first few weeks at the University of Delaware: I was physically present, but socially and academically adrift.

The challenges quickly compounded in the classroom. During my early group discussions, I felt like an outsider. My American peers spoke rapidly, tossing idioms and cultural references back and forth. I often found myself understanding the individual words but completely losing the thread of the conversation. To make matters worse, I was terrible at remembering names. Every time a classmate introduced themselves, their name would slip through my brain like water, leaving me too embarrassed to ask for it again. I retreated into my shell, defaulting to silence. I didn't want to embarrass myself, so I chose to just listen.

The turning point came during a LEAD 101-200 course. It was there that I finally unlocked the "secret code" of American social dynamics. I learned a fascinating concept: Americans fear the conversation may "drop" —that is, they feel a constant pressure to keep the conversational ball in the air by constantly bringing up new topics. In contrast, my Chinese cultural upbringing taught me to regard attentive listening as the ultimate form of respect. Unless they asked questions, I believed my role was to be a quiet, engaged audience.

This realization really shocked me. I suddenly understood why my American peers sometimes looked at me strangely during discussions. They weren't being rude; they were interpreting my silence as disinterest or lack of preparation. My culture taught me that listening is respectful, but theirs culture believes that interaction and sharing are the truest forms of engagement. I realized that if I wanted to be part of the team, I had to learn to catch the falling conversation.

With this newfound understanding, I decided to change my approach. I stopped waiting for the perfect moment to speak and started throwing small conversational "balls" back. It started small —by saying, "That's interesting, I think..." during group work, even if my heart was pounding. I also decided to tackle my fear of names head-on. I began honestly saying, "I'm so sorry, could you remind me of your name? I have a terrible memory." To my surprise, no one was offended; they were just happy I cared enough to ask.

My academic adviser at UD played a monumental role in this journey. When I felt overwhelmed by the academic culture, my adviser always gave me support. Whether explaining the nuances of a syllabus, assuring me it was okay to visit during office hours just to chat, or simply validating my feelings of homesickness, my adviser helped me bridge the gap between my expectations and reality. They showed me that navigating a new culture is not a solitary battle.

If I could offer advice to future or newly arrived international students at UD, it would be this: Accept that your first few months might be filled with menu-pointing and nodding along to conversations you don't quite understand —and that is perfectly okay. Don't be afraid to ask

questions, be honest about your confusion, and take advantage of the incredible support system here. Most importantly, keep your ears open not only to the language, but also to the culture. Embrace your own listening culture, but learn to play by the new rules of engagement, because that is where true connection happens.