Anyone who launches a life in a whole new culture must create some personal language jokes.

Here is one of mine:

“Hey, Rachel! Did you hear that the former president...” I was trying to tell her the guy who committed massive fraud is now in jail, but I suddenly cannot remember the word I wanted to say. I blurted out: “He is now in the ‘hell’!”

“Did I say something wrong?” I thought. I hurriedly checked my dictionary, and found it should be “jail”! I explained my misuse with embarrassment; however, my dear friend Rachel did not say anything to correct me.

“I was thinking how you knew that,” she said, “hmm...jail is better!”

I have to say, this is the most hilarious joke of my first year studying at MSU. When I heard Rachel’s response, I just could not stop laughing!

Sometimes people make language jokes due to unfamiliarity of the common language rules. I still remember that three years ago, I asked my academic advisor whether he has tried “bobble tea,” a representative beverage in Taiwan. He answered:

“Yes, my students bring me one at times.” Then, he looked at me with smile: “Hint, hint!”

“I know what ‘hint’ means, but why did he say that?” I thought, and then I asked him seriously: “What is the relationship between hint and bobble tea?” “Good question!” my professor burst into laughter and said, “let me tell you—bring me a cup of bobble tea next week. Do you understand now?”

I cannot believe how silly I was, but who knew that one word could carry so much meaning in English?
Although these kinds of little funny stories still emerge in my life, I am grateful to have some close friends and considerate teachers who help me greatly while encountering cultural shock. One of them is my piano professor, Dr. Polischuk.

As a piano major in Taiwan, getting along well with my piano professor in lessons was a big challenge for me. Thus, when I was going to study music here, the language barrier made me especially worried. At my first lesson with Dr. Polischuk, I nervously told him that my English is not very good. To my surprise, he responded, “No need to be nervous, my Chinese must be worse than yours!”

Later on, through our interaction, surprises came one after another. In my lessons, we not only discuss how to make my music better, but also explore how to make my life better. When I had frustrations and said my life is difficult, Dr. Polischuk replied: “we will make it better!” When I had a technique problem and felt anxious, he said: “we will work on it!” Even when I mentioned that I have no confidence, he reacted: “we will build it up!” Nothing is impossible in his eyes. His optimism is like sunshine going forward with me. I know he will always be there providing me back-up.

It is amazing that in US, students are encouraged to express their opinions. In my previous piano lessons in Taiwan, I was always scared into silence, but here in my lesson, I can tell Dr. Polischuk anything! This complete freedom of discussion opens my eyes. His support dissolves my worries, and his positive attitude influences the way I look at this world. It is Dr. Polischuk who has changed my entire life’s perspective on learning. If he had not pushed me, I would not trust my ability of studying at the highest musical level.

Another amazing feature of American education, which impresses me a lot, is the habit of giving compliments when providing feedback. In our studio class or performance class, all students and faculty give comments to performers, and they must begin with compliments. In their comments, like a sandwich, only the middle part is different: “I have just one little suggestion...” and then the compliments come out again: “You did a great job. Fantastic...beautiful performance! Thank you!”
I was surprised when I heard these kinds of comments for the first time. I have never received so many compliments in Taiwan! Gradually, I learned that Americans are used to being polite. They open doors for people behind them, always say “excuse me”, and do their best to avoid hurting your feelings. Here, for students, mistakes are not inexcusable, and you are always allowed time to improve.

“She is a talented pianist!” my landlord Mary always exclaims when introducing me. “We could not do it without our pianist!” my employer Sue always thanks me sincerely. I feel lots of love in this unfamiliar environment and appreciate all the encouragement I receive, including that expressed through hugs.

I once asked my friend Rachel: “When do Americans hug?” It is interesting to me because in my family, following the traditional culture in Taiwan, hugging almost never happens. Therefore, I cannot catch “the cue of hug” when people opened arms wide to me without a word…”What does that mean?” Most of the time, I cannot understand immediately, and did nothing until they said: “give me a hug.”

After a couple of years, I understand that when I am departing at the airport, no matter how flustered I am with luggage and security, I must hug those who come to see me off. When I exchange presents with someone, we are supposed to hug each other. But my favorite hugs are those of congratulation, especially those I receive after performing. These hugs make me feel that my efforts are seen and appreciated. It is such a wonderful new experience that I have never had in Taiwan, since now I understand that the meaning of a hug is huge, and not replaceable by words.

My unpredictable and exciting adventures are still going on. I cherish the time I have at MSU, and wonder to myself: “How many more years can I welcome a new year with snow?” (I have never touched snow until I came here!) Although the bitterly cold weather of Michigan chills my bones, my friends and teachers at MSU are like furnaces in the winter: they provide the warmth in my life, saving me from confusion and loneliness. With their encouragement and assistance, I am brave to face all challenges.