***The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?***

My interest in guzheng, known as the Chinese harp, which I frequently saw in my grandma's Chinese drama, started during the instrument exhibition at my school. From the right hand's string-plucking to the left hand's pushing of the string to alter the pitch and generate vibrato, everything about how it was performed screamed elegance. I daydreamed of playing this instrument, pleasing my grandmother, and perhaps becoming as pretty as the lady in the drama.

Of course, learning new things isn’t easy, especially when your teacher doesn’t speak your language. Gui Lao Shi would simply move my hands to match the techniques and correct my form, allowing me to be part of the Chinese orchestra. The fact that I could play this instrument, as well as be able to play some of my favourite songs on it, made me feel ecstatic.

Just as everything seemed to be going smoothly, COVID-19 happened. Suddenly, I couldn't grasp any of the new techniques being taught through Zoom. Music class became my dreaded weekly lesson, where all of my frustrations would coalesce and my motivation to perform well would vanish. I came to believe guzheng was a waste of time and considered giving up.

At this point, my life skills teacher introduced me to the Gibbs Reflective Cycle, a framework that assists individuals in identifying their areas of improvement, and actions they can take to learn from their experiences.

“If language barrier is the main issue,” I thought, “isn't it something that I can overcome? Can't I just put in more effort and devote more time to learning Chinese and practising instead of complaining about my situation? Am I really going to give up now that I've come this far and throw away all the hard work I've put in over the years?” I asked myself. My reflection sessions provided me with the motivation I needed to practice harder despite underlying barriers.

Ever since then, I resolved to devote more time and effort into learning the instrument. I also put in hours and hours of hard work into learning Chinese textbooks and flashcards to understand my instructor, specific guzheng terminology, and increasing my practice time. The path was not always smooth, but I believed that the sense of accomplishment to come would make all the effort worthwhile.

Two years later, I managed to get a solo performance. I was on cloud nine: I immediately called my grandparents and invited them to come watch my solo performance.

On D-day, I walked out and stood in the middle of the humongous stage with that fluttery nervous stomach feeling. In the corner of my eyes, I saw my grandparents cheering me on, which calmed me down. I plucked my first note, and the sound echoed throughout the concert hall. The rest of the song went off without a hitch, with no major blunders or nerve-racking moments.

At the end of the day, seeing my grandparents smiling, clapping, and being proud of me was worth all my tears and effort . My grandmother is not a very expressive person, so the moment she said, "I'm really impressed with you," and proceeded to prepare her specialty dish, mishua, is one that will always hold a special place in my heart.

Throughout my guzheng journey, I realised that challenges come pre-packaged with life lessons. I need to recognize the value in setbacks, learn from them, and have a positive outlook. When I’m faced with challenging situations, I don’t simply give up. I ask for help, I try harder. I persevere.

Dear Victoria:

Great story and reflection!

My suggestion would be to go over the grammar once again and use more concise wording where possible. To stick with word count, pay attention to redundancies in word choice, avoid excessive use of prepositions, and combine sentences with similar meanings.

Overall your essay is near good-to-go, structure wise it is clear; each paragraph conveys what you intend to.

All the best!

Thalia

Hi Vicky!

I cut a couple more sentences after Thalia’s edit, but the more important edit I made is at the end. I removed your sentences about the Leo club, because I felt that it was too abrupt to mention another of your activities so close to the end. I ended up replacing that with a couple of dramatic sentences that I feel represents your approach + also ends the essay in a way that feels satisfactory (to me, at least!). Feel free to change it again if you’re not into it!

Chiara