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***Language and Culture***

A long time ago, I stayed in Washington D.C. with my colleagues to receive on-job training. One day, we were invited to the home of a well-educated American friend. As we were shown around the house, we politely gave our compliment and said, “You have a very nice home. It’s so wonderful!” Immediately, the hostess smiled with obvious pleasure and replied in good American fashion, “Thank you!” This response, however, surprised some of our colleagues.

Later, at the dinner table, while conversing with one of my colleagues, a young girl who had just graduated recently from a renowned university in Taiwan, the host said, “Your English is excellent. You speak really fluent English.” In face of his praise, she demurred, “No. No. My English is very poor.” Apparently, this is a reply that the host had not expected, and there was an obvious embarrassment on both sides.

The above example shows the common difficulty Chinese speakers need to overcome in learning English: It is important to know the many Do’s and Don’ts in a foreign culture before one can master its language.