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Literacy Narrative

Odd One Out

"How is your English so good if you're from Taiwan?" is the phrase I hear the most after coming to college. It was mind-boggling for the people that I met since I spoke English without an “Asian” accent. They thought that it was a taboo for someone not from America to have perfect English. Little did they know that it is actually very possible and is pretty common for some Taiwanese people, though my situation is more unique than other people’s. While many of my peers in Taiwan would excel in both English and Mandarin, I would only excel in one language. My literacy fate was completely changed by my father’s decision: my daughter must learn perfect English. My father also learned English at a young age. However, he can neither speak without an accent nor write grammatically correct sentences. Thus, he wanted me to be what he never can be.

When I was the suitable age for kindergarten, my dad dropped me off at an English teaching school and that was how I first encountered English. The school was basically a failed attempt at an international school. Though most of the teachers were American, they didn’t know how to speak Mandarin well, so my classmates and I couldn’t understand much of what the teachers were saying. In my two years at that school, I learned a few simple vocabulary words such as dog, cat, and other three letter words. I also learned how to read simple children’s story books. Despite these new skills, my pronunciation was still very “Asian”. Because of this, my dad decided to enroll me in an European school in Taiwan.

With slightly better English, I was able to understand the teachers. However, I still wasn’t very comfortable with speaking English because I couldn’t form proper sentences in my head. During this time period, Mandarin was considered my mother tongue as it was what I spoke with my parents and what I learned first. Just as my English was slowly improving (it was improving as fast as a snail could go), my dad decided to pack up the family and fly to America as a way to immerse me in American culture, where I somehow survived in school despite my terrible English.

Life in America wasn’t that great, which was expected, thanks to my horrible English skills. My teachers would have parent meetings and complain to my parents how I couldn’t keep up in class since I barely understood English. Not only was I struggling academically, I was also struggling socially. I couldn’t fit in with the kids as most of them spoke perfect English. I was an outcast. There were times where I almost made a new friend but scared them away after accidentally blurting a phrase in Mandarin. I felt hopeless and didn’t think I would ever speak fluently. Even though my dad witnessed all of my struggles, he never gave up the hope that I would become a perfect, native English speaker.

When I returned to Taiwan, my dad put me in an American international school, where only people with a non-Taiwanese passport can enroll. Because of this rule, I was surrounded by a lot of students that were relatively fluent in English as well as Mandarin. This made me more comfortable with speaking English as I was also able to communicate in Mandarin if I didn’t know how to say something. It was the six or so years of being in that American school that helped my English skills improve so much. I felt more and more confident with talking in English and slowly weaned off of using Mandarin as my main form of communication. Because of this, English slowly replaced Mandarin as my mother tongue.

It seemed that everything was going well for me. However, in the midst of focusing on learning English, I never fully learned how to speak Mandarin properly, nor did I know how to read or write most of the characters in the Chinese language. Because my dad insisted that I always attend an international school, I never got the local education most of my friends in my American international school did. It was common to attend a local Taiwanese school for elementary school to improve their Mandarin as well as having an English tutor. This decision impacted me greatly; I didn’t have a solid foundation of the Chinese language and struggled to learn how to use it intelligently.

In the beginning, Mandarin was my safety blanket since it was what I used at home with my family. Even though I was comfortable speaking it, I still felt like I wasn’t that great at it because my speaking skills remained that of a third or fourth grader. My speaking skills were subpar but my writing and reading was a whole different level of low. My dad focused too much on helping me perfect my English and he forget about my mother tongue.

As my English flourished, my Mandarin withered. I started to despise Mandarin because of all the different characters and how difficult it was to memorize them. My dad suggested that I take some Mandarin classes in middle and high school to help, but I was no longer confident with using it. I started detesting going to class and absolutely dreaded being called on to read long paragraphs. A lot of the characters were like hieroglyphics to me and I would always mumble through the words I didn’t know. That was how I survived through my Mandarin classes. I didn’t think that I would fear the language I grew up with.

Although I did learn new characters here and there, it still wasn’t good enough for me to read parts of a book fluently. I discussed this issue with my dad (though his response wasn’t as helpful as I thought). He suggested I attempt to define the characters I didn’t know through the context. From his suggestion, I developed a new way of approaching a piece of reading. I would scan through a passage and identify words that I definitely didn’t know and words that I was iffy about. From that, I slowly deciphered the hieroglyphics until I could fully understand what I was reading. Even though this technique didn’t teach me how to pronounce the words, it did help me understand the reading more.

As I continue to grow older and mature, my English skills will also continue to improve through the classes I take in college. However, my Mandarin skills will sadly remain the same no matter how hard I try. Without a solid foundation in such a tough language, I will always continue to struggle with it. My dad’s decision to build the foundation in English drastically impacted me and my speaking ability in both languages. Though I will continue to learn Mandarin on my own through reading articles, I will continue to be the odd one out in that aspect and the odd one out in the way I grew to perfect my English.