

...and all of a sudden I'm back in 2010

I am in my 9 year-old body, in the Dominican Republic

Light brown pigtails, curious green-bluish eyes that are the projectors of my feelings, crooked teeth that- regardless of the fact that they were an eternal embarrassment- didn't stop me from speaking my mind.

*Papi* had just enrolled me in the best English school in the province, the one that my sister Leenette had been attending for 2 years before my start. I was so excited to start, ready to learn how to speak English, ready to *Americanize* myself. It was almost as if being in English school was a magic trick in which I became a couple shades lighter, my hair would go from a kinky mess to a glossy mane of straight hair, and a little American flag would get stamped on my watermelon sized forehead.

I used to think that English school would not only teach me basic English but I would become fluent in 3 to 5 business days. Little did I know it would take me 3 to 5 years to become comfortable in my second language.

In all reality, English school taught me plenty of things, like a starter pack consisting of words, verbs and pronouns. However, English turned out to be like rehearsal to a performance, me an amateur performer, and coming to the United States was opening day. I froze up when it came to communicating, I forgot almost everything I had learned. What I remembered was the words that my mother had taught me through Skype. In my new starter starter pack was: "hello", "how are you?" "okay (but saying it like the American tone, excitement sold separately)", "thank you", "you're welcome" etc.

So now you're probably wondering, how did I learn English, how did I become fluent, why am I borderline cocky with my English.

I fast forward into August of 2011, Chula Vista, CA

Well it wasn't the dark early mornings sitting in the cold computer lab at 6:30am in ELD (English Language Development). It wasn't sitting in the portable classroom where I stared at my teacher and nodded, pretending that I completely understood the words and phrases that were firing so rapidly out of her mouth. It was most definitely not the dispute with the district on whether I deserved to move up to 6th grade because of my language barrier. None of those motivated me to learn the language of the world.

Struggle was literally the name of my English learning journey

My biggest struggle? Finding *la biblioteca* because "*bibliotec*" was most definitely not library in English. How I found it? I didn't. It was the day of my very first book fair that I found out about the grimy cream colored building past the trees by the playground which fit too perfectly into the school and had no actual "Library" signs. It was during that book fair that I picked up a catalog

and skimmed through it until a set of books being advertised with a charm bracelet caught my childish attention.

That same day, I went home and told *mami* I “needed” a collection of books, and proceeded to tell my single parent with financial struggles to hand me a whole forty dollars. The “Goddess Girls” collection was soon in my hands. I was unable to understand them for a while so they ended up in my bookshelf collecting dust for about a year.

I returned to the library, and it soon became my safe space during lunch as I was the socially awkward new girl that didn’t speak English. It was in that library I met Junie B Jones, the little girl who had a semi grown attitude and enough books in her series to keep me entertained and learning. It was that library that became my real classroom as I began to understand English and store words into my brain. I became obsessed with books and was soon collecting gold stars on the wall showing my AR scores raising and making my way out of ELD.

I learned how to *understand* English, but when it came to talking, to matching my words with non-verbal cues I truly found myself stuck. Everything that came out of my mouth sounded and looked like a question on my face because I was so insecure. When my teacher would ask a question like “what do you think about this text”, I would know what I thought about the text but my answer would not sound like I actually knew.

August of 2012, I started middle school, and unfortunately for my social standing, those light brown pigtails and crooked teeth were still present.

Although, ELD had deemed me as fluent, I still told myself I didn’t speak English and it wasn’t because I didn’t know the words, it was because I found my accent sickening enough to dismiss my knowledge. My damning word? Trying to say three but instead saying *tree* and being completely conscious of it.

*Mami* had put me in a before and after school program, FUSE. FUSE felt more like a pre-teen daycare where there would be playing, food and then 30 minutes of academic work (more like quiet time really). There, I met Sam (Samantha); little did I know the blonde girl with huge eyes, thick glasses and constant knee injuries would become my best friend.

I met Sam while sitting in a corner, my anti-social corner of the room to be exact. For a while, we didn’t talk, we just played Mario Kart on the Wii in silence until one day she spoke to me and I answered back, thick accent and all, and the way she looked at me, as if the accent was nonexistent, made it so easy to talk to her. After that day, I stopped caring about my accent and started talking, and I talked a lot. If I didn’t know a word, I would describe it with words that I did know and my hands and she would try to guess the words, and if she didn’t, she would let me look it up in Spanish in her brand new blue iPod touch and I would slowly learn new words.

Aside from Sam, I was still reading and, because we had a period of reading during school, I eventually got around to reading the Goddess Girls series which I immediately fell in love with while unknowingly learning about Greek Mythology. The Goddess Girls were fun, brave, and they were what I thought was friendship goals. They kept me on my toes, kept me reading and

they allowed me to learn without feeling forced, without the pressures from the outside world. In fact, every time I opened any of the books from the series, I would enter a mythical world that allowed me to feel comfortable. I even found the library within the first week.

In 2014, we moved to the Inland Empire and I had to say goodbye to San Diego and Sam, but those three years that changed me and taught me remain with me. I learned how to hustle for my progress, how to continue to improve me, and Sam taught me how to be unapologetic for being me and for being different.

Through this narrative I realized the development of my literacy is still in progress but those years defined and birthed my love for learning and improving both in English and in Spanish. I was ashamed of who I was and my roots that separated me from the rest, but now every time I speak and my accent becomes prominent, I smile and flash back to those struggles that were not only related to learning but related to my character.