

My Life's Metamorphosis: Becoming Bilingual

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Greatness Starts with Sadness

Every time I think back to my journey of becoming bilingual in the United States, the first emotion I feel is sadness. Arriving in the United States at the age of 16, almost 17, not knowing how to say a word in English was a traumatic experience. Although I was living in Miami, Florida and attending Hialeah Senior High with a large population of Latinx students, being an English learner made me feel unsure of my worth at times. “*Balsero*,” or rafter, was a common derogatory term yelled out by bilingual students; not many from the bilingual community wanted to associate with us, English learners. Every time I think back to my time in high school, a feeling of melancholy takes over; I cannot help it.

Evelyn (classmate) and I were practicing in English the new vocabulary words we had just learned while Mrs. R., our English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, talked to a colleague. Mrs. R. stopped talking to her colleague and yelled at Evelyn and me, “what are you two doing?!” “Ms., we are practicing English,” I shyly replied while Evelyn proudly smiled in agreement. Mrs. R. laughed out loud in front of the class and exclaimed “Yeah right!”, giving us a contemptuous look. My heart sank in uneasiness and disappointment; Evelyn’s smile withdrew for the remainder of the school year at Mrs. R.’s class.

Most of my memories from high school have faded away; perhaps in an unconscious effort to stop my memory from letting me relive those emotions once again. However, I do remember, vividly, that event at Mrs. R.’s class; it was the first moment in my life where my inability to speak a language made me feel less than, unworthy, unappreciated, untrustworthy, unwelcomed; *a foreigner*.

Greatness Starts with Self

Because I had completed many graduation requirements in Cuba, my native country, I was allowed to graduate from Hialeah Senior High in just two years.

Right after graduation, I joined the United States Marine Corps thinking the little English I had mastered made me an expert; *“ya hablo inglés perfecto”* (I already speak perfect English), I mistakenly used to tell my friends and family so. In hindsight, I believe this idea of being proficient in English was developed in my mind as a result of the pressure and expectations of adults around me. *“Los muchachos aprenden inglés rápido”* (youngsters learn English faster), my dad’s friends and neighbors used to assure us often in our conversations. However, as soon as I joined the military I realized how limited my English language was; it was painfully limited.

The first night I arrived at Parris Island, South Carolina (boot camp for the United States Marine Corps), I thought that moment was going to be my last. Drill instructors were yelling left and right, loud screams followed by chaotic and aggressive movements from all recruits. I remember standing at attention on top of those yellow footprints while listening to the cacophony of blasts created by the drill instructors’ voices, watching recruits run around and lining up on the yellow footprints and thinking/praying inside my head to my God—whom I call Shangó—*“¿Ay Shangó, mi padre! ¿Qué hago aquí?”* (Shangó, my father! What am I doing here?). I had no idea what the drill instructors were yelling; I was alone, unable to communicate, and shaking in fear that one wrong move could detonate the fury of all the drill instructors there.

The first week of boot camp was the most challenging. As recruits, we were waiting to get “picked up” by a platoon while human resources processed our administrative paperwork. We were not allowed to sleep (short naps only), stand up, or do anything besides sitting down on the floor with our legs crossed. The only phrase I remember from that time is “head call,” which I learned meant “restroom break” in military jargon after waiting for a full day to use the restroom because I did not know its meaning. Quickly I learned that to survive, I had to pay close attention to what other recruits did when drill instructors yelled something out. I was disabled—linguistically disabled—but I was not going to let my linguistic challenges take me down without a fight!

During the first few weeks of boot camp, I was able to camouflage my status of English learner by following other recruits’ physical responses to our drill instructors’ screams. Looking back, I realize I had no idea what was happening most of the time, what our drill instructors were yelling, or why they were yelling. My bunkmate, Recruit P., soon realized that I could not speak (or understand) English very well. At that moment, he communicated with me through gestures and I understood that I needed to keep my eyes on whatever he was doing and replicate his actions. That strategy proved helpful through the first two months of boot camp but, towards the end, the number of our platoon had decreased from 89 to 45 recruits due to the

harsh training. At that time, our drill instructors had the opportunity to pay more individualized attention to the fewer recruits still left standing (metaphorically and literally) in our platoon. After my drill instructors discovered I could not speak English very well, the remaining weeks became a living hell. I remember being picked on by my drill instructors for no apparent reason and receiving blame for random things: “it was recruit Pinto bean’s fault!”; the drill instructors would yell aloud in the barracks as they joked about my last name. I also remember my drill instructors often telling me to scream the phrase “say hello to my little friend” and would laugh out loud. I was oblivious at what was happening; I later learned that this was a phrase from the renowned movie *Scarface*.

After completing three months of boot camp and almost two months of the infantry training school, I started to notice that my English skills were improving. Full English immersion seemed to be something my brain processed well. I started learning military terms, could blurt out one or two words from the cadence while running, and I could get some of my messages across to my fellow military members and instructors at infantry school, all English-monolinguals or non-Spanish speaking people. I recall thinking to myself, “I don’t have to understand everything, just enough keywords to follow along.” That strategy certainly proved helpful and carried me all the way through infantry training; I was comfortable with being low key, quiet, and unnoticeable. However, because the universe has a unique sense of humor, comfortability was not in my destiny. After completing my required training from infantry school, I was assigned to Okinawa, Japan, and became a military administrative clerk.

Greatness Starts with Fear

My first memory of Japan was answering a phone call at my new job station, placing the call on hold, walking up to my Lance Corporal (supervisor) and telling him “I don’t understand.” He saw the frightened, desperate look on my face; nothing more needed to be said. I was not asked to answer the phone again. That night I returned to my room in the barracks, called my best friend, Yanet, and cried out to her telling her “*estoy en una base militar aquí en Japón y no entiendo ni japonés ni inglés, ¿qué hago aquí?*” (I am in a military base here in Japan and I can neither understand Japanese nor English, what am I doing here?). That conversation with my best friend allowed me to release all the emotions that were tightening my chest. It seemed as if each of my tears represented the weight I was letting go; I was depurating my soul. That is the last

time in my life I recall ever being fearful of not being able to speak English...to survive, I had to become stronger.

Greatness Starts with Change

With time and the help of amazing military comrades, I quickly learned the ropes of my military occupation. I was physically strong, the fastest in my entire company according to the Combat Fitness Test, and a hard-working Marine. I slowly started to pull my weight around the office. The more I understood English, the faster my fear changed to confidence. The more I opened up and contributed to the office, the more my comrades began to see me as equal. I was no longer the guy who could not speak English, I was becoming the person who could now communicate and take charge in the office. Occasionally, I would experience contemptuous looks (similar to Mrs. R.'s) from officers and high-ranking enlisted personnel who could not believe that I, a person who did not speak English very well, was knowledgeable of my military occupation. For them, my heavy accent and broken English were indicators of my mental abilities and intelligence; they were wrong.

Greatness Starts with Confidence

After honorably completing my military service, now in Virginia, United States, I decided to volunteer at non-profit organizations to explore what I wanted to do with my life. In what I consider a serendipitous event that brought me to a full circle, I was asked to facilitate an ESL class to adult immigrants. My life transformed the night I taught my first ESL class. From that moment on, I knew I wanted to become a teacher and empower immigrants. I still do not know how my English skills transformed overnight; one day I was struggling to write a paragraph, the next day I was pursuing my first master's degree in education with the goal of becoming an ESL teacher.

I like to think that my adult ESL students motivated me...or maybe that my English skills (especially reading and writing) suddenly improved because I had the goal of becoming an ESL teacher. I cannot say for sure. However, one thing I definitely know, I only started to feel like I belonged in the United States the moment I began to gain confidence in my (bilingual) abilities and chose to push my English skills to the next level. I was no longer comfortable feeling low key, quiet, and unnoticeable like I did in the military; I was now beginning to find my voice, my bilingual, confident voice.

Greatness Starts with Hard Work

As a graduate student pursuing my first master's degree in adult education and development, I quickly discovered writing was something I enjoyed doing and, from my professors' perspectives, I did it well. Most of my memories about that graduate education experience take me back to different moments where I was either reading or writing—to this day, I relish those memories. As a graduate student, learning had become such an intoxicating experience that I decided to pursue two additional master's degrees right after graduating from my first. My second and third master's degrees were in Spanish language education and in Bilingual Education and ESL, respectively. Certainly, juggling work and two master's degrees at the same time was challenging, but I felt empowered to keep learning for my students and for myself.

My journey through graduate education was truly emancipatory but it required all the dedication and effort I could muster. I recall using a notebook to create my own dictionary with all the new vocabulary words I was learning in our weekly readings (in English and in Spanish) and studying them every day to integrate them into my own lexicon. Speaking continued to be a challenge for me, especially in front of people but, with dedication, I was noticing how much my writing and reading skills were blossoming. Also, something I had not realized until that moment was that my academic Spanish was not as eloquent as I thought it to be. Certainly, my master of science in Spanish language education pushed me to grow as a critical Spanish writer and reader; I loved the challenge!

My love for education and learning was empowering and intoxicating. For this reason, I decided to pursue my doctoral degree in September 2014, right after I completed my third master's degree. One day, as a doctoral candidate, I suddenly realized that all the struggles I had gone through and all the details I considered flawed about me and my language-learning journey had made me, and my ability to write, unique. While pursuing my Ph.D., I realized that I was one of the very few doctoral candidates in my program who had the skills to write academically-publishable texts in both English and Spanish. I can now understand that my dedication and pursuit for improving my writing in both languages became the passage to my personal and professional empowerment.

Greatness Lives in You

The older I become, the more I reminisce about my experiences of becoming bilingual in the United States. In the beginning, being an English learner was

traumatic for me and it produced sadness, self-doubt, and fear—I often felt ostracized, criticized, undervalued, uninvited, untrusted, and/or unwanted. Looking back, I can now see all that time I was feeling down about my English skills I was, in fact, feeling bad about how others perceived me. I was placing more value on what others thought about me based on the way I spoke English than on acknowledging the merits of my own efforts to become proficient. Perhaps I was focusing too much on being accepted, on proving myself and my worth...I felt the need to do so because I saw myself as the foreigner, the one who could not speak the language.

The more English I learned, the less I cared about others' opinions of me. In a way, becoming bilingual gave me a sense of belonging and the power to deal with the occasional contemptuous looks, racist remarks, and discrimination. To this day, I still experience this kind of treatment, even by my own fellow colleagues, I just do not mind it. Instead, as a language and literacy educator, I now focus on what I can do to improve lives and teach two essential skills my students need to succeed in the United States: English and resilience.

It has taken me all this time to come to the realization that becoming bilingual in the United States has been one of the most enriching experiences of my life. It does not matter what anyone ever thought about me, how they treated me, or how they laughed at me. Their actions did not dim my light, did not diminish my intelligence, did not make me any less than what I am. Becoming bilingual was my life's metamorphosis—I spent so much time trying to find perfection without realizing that, all this time, greatness lives within me.