

Pranavsai Gandikota

Professor Kalijah Rahming

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A Shaping Struggle

Having been born and raised in the US for most of my life, I was accustomed to how people speak and act here. I have maintained a good position in my classes and have always strived to keep my streak as an all-A student. But despite all this, English was the one subject I struggled in.

It was later in my life, after I finished 7th grade, that me and my family decided to move to India. While the thought of leaving a place I have lived in for so many years for a completely different country was quite a shock for me, I was excited about it at the same time. As time went by, the day I left the US for a new life came. Once I reached India, and our classes started, I realized what used to be my weakness turned into one of my strengths. But, at the same time, I was faced with another big challenge, the native language. (The image on right shows Andhra Pradesh, the place in India where I moved to)



Since I was a child, I was taught my native language, and we used to use it at home. Hence, as repeated use helps in practice, I mastered my native language to an extent. My family's response to my native language was my assurance of accuracy. Despite all this, once I entered my school in India, I was faced by many people who incorporated various slangs of the same language. While I was able to understand some, the others were either too fast or too varied for me to understand. Apart from that, my limited vocabulary was also a hindrance to my ability to start a decent conversation.



(The picture on the left is the group of friends who I spent most of my high school with. They shaped the way I started to speak English and my native). As any other student would, I decided to make friends. Since classes were limited to forty students at max, it wasn't that hard. Unlike how we

must go to different classes for our lessons, in India, the teachers come to you. All my subjects went by smoothly, and so did English. English was one subject which was particularly made to be easier in India, but as the grade levels increase, the length remains the same, but the question difficulty changes. English is regarded as a “scoring” subject since it isn't too complicated apart from the twisted questions. This was in contrary to how English comprehension used to be a nightmare when I was in the US. We had letter writing, comprehension and story-based questions dependent upon the stories we read in class. This for a large part helped improve my reading speed and understanding ability.

(Me giving a speech on a cultural event – Diwali - as the head of the secretary of school events) The picture shows one of the activities that my teachers encouraged me to do to help me improve my speech writing and public speaking skills. It in-turn boosted my confidence in speaking and sentence formation.

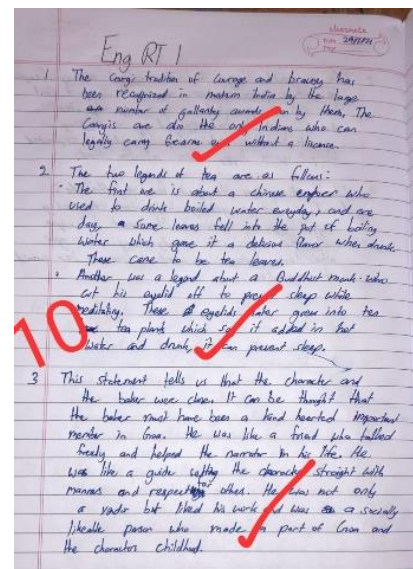


While all my subjects went by clearly, I struggled with one subject, my native language Telugu. The class itself was not too complicated. We had to read a story and answer questions like how any other reading assignment is done, but as I was not born and brought up in India, I was unable to understand half the words in the passages. (On the left is a picture of a page in my native language textbook which was a major part of influencing the storytelling I do today). Since I started my Indian schooling in 8th grade, the level of

difficulty was high as well. I was expected to be able to answer the questions with ease. While one may find it a simple read and write, for me it was all Greek. As I had experience learning my native language at home before, I could read to a decent amount despite being unable to understand completely. With the help of the practice and materials my teacher gave me aside from the class, I was able to cope with the work. Spelling mistakes and words I forgot in the middle still haunted me, especially since there was strict grading. Some things I wrote did not even have a meaning. In India making a mistake means you would get scolded. This might

explain the amount of pressure I went through. But thankfully, most of my teachers had a soft spot for me as I have not had much experience with my native.

As the year went by, I also made many friends and started to get a hand on speaking my native language more and more fluently. As English was one of my subjects and was the medium of teaching in my school, I still had a connection with English. But this time, it was the accent and formation of words that changed. As I went to an international school, many of the students knew English well. But there were also some teacher and students with a more defined Indian accent. Since many were not first time English speakers, they used to skip a lot of phrases in their sentences and used to add extra words to what they say. Such as “That is not how you do it, you know”, where the “you know” was quite a common ending in a lot of things they said. As a person who lived there for almost five years, although I was able to get better at my native, I started to lose my American accent and started using the local English dialect to fit in better with my friends. Using any kind of accent or perfect English, would only get you looked like an outsider, which was the one thing I was trying not to be. This in a way changed the way I started to view communication and language as I started to be more conscious of how things are toned and the style of wording I choose as it can affect the way different people perceive things. The one place I could showcase my English, however, was in its class itself. (To the right is a picture of one of my assignments in English in 8th grade. We were made to do such assignments which helped me improve my comprehension and wording)



One of the frameworks, “Ethnic and Linguistic Identity”, by Julie Wan talks about how she went through humiliation and isolation when coming to the US due to her difficulty in speaking English. She says, “Any word I became acquainted with would be reproduced incongruously” (2), and like Wan, this is something I too could relate with, where after I moved to India, I faced the same type of difficulty in speaking my native language, Telugu, in a place where everyone mostly communicated in the native. My difficulty in producing proper sentences at the time made me hesitant to carry on a conversation any further and much like how Wan had to adapt to English, I had to adapt to different forms of Telugu being spoken as being able to talk with others was a big part of my identity which in turn shaped my writing. But unlike Wan’s situation, I was not just facing a problem in fitting in, but I also had to find a way to balance how I used both the languages I knew at the time. For example, reading in both Telugu and English helped me learn how to express my thoughts more clearly and understand different pieces of literature, where regardless the language, the meaning was the same. This might also be relatable to other international students who may have had to learn English as a new language such as Wan who had to adjust to the change in sentence formation and wording although the thought of what one wanted to express is the same.

I can also relate to Ema Antochi, in “The Two-Toned Journey of Bilingual”, a video about another such student who has gone through such bilingual problems due to moving from one place to another. In her situation, she lost touch with her native, and had to fake it till she made it to get along with the other people of her new environment. I on the other hand started to lose touch with my traditional English and was introduced to a more different type of English; one that followed British English and was influence by the Indian slang. Like her in a different

sense, I had to start speaking more in my native, and had to start changing the way I pronounce things in English to fit in. This was all apart from the culture change I was faced with.

It was thanks to my English class that I was still able to withhold my comprehension skill which later proved fruitful in my SAT and my college essays. Our teacher gave us a ton of work, assignments, posters and more which all shaped who I am as a writer now.

Despite being put in a completely new world, being made to read, write and speak my native, and having to adjust to the differences of an Indian school, I was still able to participate in school politics, maintain good grades, keep in touch with English, and master my native language at the same time. It was the learning of my native which helped me in describing my thoughts more descriptively which in a way lead to influence my writings in English as well. The heavy number of assignments, the strict correction, the experience to different languages and dialects and forms of expression, the help I received in writing research papers and the reading practice I was made to do all shaped the writer I am today.

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