

Milestones of a Life in Learning Languages

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Introduction

One way to comprehend lifelong language learning is through your own life experiences. By looking at one's triumphant moments and times of inadequacies with language, one can be in a better position to teach, learn, and inspire. Throughout my life, there have been a plethora of experiences that can be broken into four decades.

My Formative Early Years

My language journey began in the Philippines. I was born in Manila to 2nd generation Chinese parents and raised in a household by parents who spoke Hokkien, a dialect of Chinese. I was also blessed to have household help who talked to me in Tagalog. In particular, I would instantly cry at a song she sang called “Unang Halik” (First Kiss). The dance of emotions and language began early for me.

Our family immigrated to the United States when I was 3. I only remember fragments but one moment sticks out. There were social gatherings in the house and during those times I would be on my father's lap dozing in and out while they talked for hours. What they talked about was mostly forgotten but they spoke Hokkien the entire time and my brain absorbed it like a sponge. A majority of my early acquisition was through listening.

English would become my mother tongue as I spoke it with classmates in elementary public school, talking to my parents, and it would be the language of choice with petty squabbles with my sister. I would then be asked to apologize in Hokkien. Apparently language reconciles and teaches us lessons.

Teenage Years

I was 10 when our family decided to head back to Manila. Adjusting to the culture shock was hard and I missed my life and friends in America. The common language was Tagalog and I immediately picked up phrases like “akin yan” (that’s mine) and “ano ba?” (what the heck). I spoke it fluently within two years.

My elementary friends in private school often teased and bullied me for my use of English. This would affect my self-esteem and I hesitated to use the language in its pure form, often just resorting to a mixed language called Taglish (Tagalog and English). This was a case of hiding one’s fluency in order to fit in and it set my English learning back several years.

Back in school I studied Mandarin, the main dialect of Chinese. Sadly, I hated everything about it. The teachers weren’t inspiring and the textbooks were boring. A short term study abroad trip to Taiwan did very little to instill motivation. Forcing language on someone is a fool’s errand. But I did learn a few things though such as this sentence which I still remember to this day...

上學去, 上學去, 去上學,大家背了书包, 上學去

Let’s go to school, let’s go to school, let’s all bring our school bag and go to school.

Roaring Twenties

After a year of mucking around, I went back to America to complete my undergraduate studies. The first few months I fumbled speaking English, I was clearly not the Chinese-American I identified as. Luckily the fluency gradually came back and along with it the accent.

Furthermore, I used Tagalog for my foreign language credit, so I was thankful to my hometown for that. Finally, thinking it would be easy I took a Spanish elective since Tagalog has some loan words. Long story short, learning Spanish did not go so well.

One instance I truly regret not learning a language was in senior year I got accepted for interviews at two coveted jobs in Hong Kong. Without thinking I wrote on the resume that I had fluent Hokkien and basic Mandarin. The interviews were going perfectly until they asked me to speak those languages. I failed to muster even a few words and

settled for a job stateside which I quit and went back to the Philippines. At age 21 I found work with relatives but mostly spoke in English or Tagalog.

Going to Japan

Language became a vocation. At 33 I moved to Japan to become a proverbial English teacher. I was ancient by teaching standards and it was quite confusing looking like one of the locals yet speaking fluent English. Through a series of jobs starting with eikaiwa (conversation school) and transitioning to the university circuit I got acquainted with an entire range of learners both young and old, all with unique personalities studying a language that would require different approaches for teaching and motivating.

With age comes an insight that people can be an inspiration for languages. In different social circles I've met the most interesting people speaking English or Japanese in bars, talked about jobs and food with the Filipino expat community, and brushed up both Chinese languages with some international students. I continue to meet teachers who even in their older years love finding new things about the English language. Language lifts the impoverished spirits of even the most grizzled educators and frustrated learners.

Forty and Beyond

This will be a decade in reflection and appreciation. Past experiences are no longer categorized as highs or lows because they have turned into nostalgia. I've grown fond of telling jokes in multiple languages and making vocabulary or grammar mistakes. I embrace Hokkien now by trying to speak it more whenever I converse with my parents. Language has made me a grateful person filled with heartwarming memories and hope.

A long time Japan resident once told me, speaking a language opens up another world and then reading and writing in it opens up the other two. This piece of advice makes me look forward to

continuing to study Japanese. I will never be fluent in it but who knows where the next conversation or book will lead me to.

What I Have Learned

The high school I went to had a famous motto, to strive to be “a man for others”. To paraphrase: I have become a lifelong language learner for others. I am determined to make able speakers out of my students as my language experiences have become lessons in it of themselves.

What does it take for lifelong learners to become fluent? It takes time, passion, and perspective. Personally, perspective is the most important because it taught me empathy and patience. To know the things language learners go through is an invaluable tool for teachers.

If you told me 20 years ago that language would take me places I would have called you insane. My journey began with Hokkien, continued with Tagalog, picking up English while contemplating Spanish and failing at Mandarin and finally traversing Japanese. It's been an amazing ride and I don't think I'll stop teaching, speaking, or learning dialects.