

My Language Autobiography and Critical Reflections

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Language has always played a critical role in my life. In fact, if I were to select one way to tell my personal story, it would be through the influence of language and culture on my life. If one were to break my life into several distinct stages so far, then language has played an important role in every stage.

I was born in Shanghai China in 1985, but spent only five years in the country during my childhood. At the age of five, I had to move to Japan with my parents because my father decided to pursue his Master of Engineering degree at Keioo University in Japan. He applied to more than twenty universities, but only got accepted by Keioo University due to his lack of proficiency in the Japanese language. He kept applying to different universities, but was disappointed every time he opened his mailbox and saw no admission letters. However, he did not lose his faith. Eventually he was admitted by Keioo University. Now, whenever I encounter any obstacle in terms of my English study or TA job, he would use his experience to encourage me to keep trying and never lose faith.

In 1990, my journey of learning my second language began. My parents were very worried about my Japanese and whether I could acculturate, but I did not care at all about learning Hiragana and Katakana. I did not know where my confidence came from, but was convinced with childishness that there would be no problem. I went back to kindergarten because of my age and language problem. (I had already graduated from kindergarten in China.) Things at kindergarten did not turn out as friendly as I expected. One incident at this kindergarten still lingers in my memory. The first broken sentence I learned was “toire” (washroom) because going to the washroom was always an urgent matter for a child. Unfortunately, the first time I said, “Toire” to my classmate to ask for washroom direction, the response I received was “aho” (idiot). I felt both sad and shocked because I never imagined such an unfriendly response from another child. I managed to find the washroom, of course, but from that day on, I became determined to learn Japanese as fast as I could. I managed to speak like a Japanese child within three months. My parents were very surprised, but I indeed had confidence in myself. Now when I look back, I am still amazed by the power of critical period: a life stage fraught with unbelievable linguistic potential. Such potential, however, contrasts sharply with the difficulty I encountered later in my life.

Four years later, our family moved back to China because of my mother’s sickness. This meant that I had to start all over again with a totally new educational system. The language I mastered in Japan no longer mattered. Instead, the pressure from both learning Chinese and catching up academically overwhelmed me. I often spent many hours when it came to writing a composition because of my difficulty with Chinese. The realization of how different I was from other peers academically only aggravated my nervousness and stress. There were of course no Chinese as Second Language classes, and this left me to struggle on my own with negative psychological consequences. However, I was too young to criticize the Chinese schooling. I still remember my best

friend remarked that she had a dream about me 悬梁刺股 (tie one's hair on the house beam and jab one's side with an awl to keep oneself awake). I was shocked and disturbed by the image and her use of this idiom. I often slept at midnight because I needed to work on Chinese compositions, and went to school half asleep in the morning. I knew this vicious cycle would continue as long as I struggled with Chinese. It seemed that my potential, which was so evident when I was in Japan, could no longer help me to achieve what I wanted. Ironically, even though I was always sleepy at school, my teachers were fond of me. They all thought that I was a diligent and earnest student who accepted whatever was given to me in a banking system of education.

Meanwhile, my family became worried about me and tried to seek professional help. In retrospect, my academic success could be attributed to familial influences and diligence. My tutor was also very influential. Her name was Mrs. Shen. Even though I still had to do a great deal of practice exams and write compositions weekly with her, her calm manner eased my anxiety. Her charisma and the way she explored topics with interest gave me confidence. As a result, I not only enjoyed writing more, but also wrote with pace. By the end of Grade 8, I became one of the top students and secretly wanted to become a tutor like her.

After spending three years under pressure at Shanghai No. 3 Girls Middle School, our family immigrated to Vancouver Canada in 2000. My language potential now entirely lost its magical power. English became my biggest obstacle in high school. I could not complete any of my assignments without my electronic translator. I still remember how my ESL teacher told me to rewrite my paragraph three times because of my Chinglish. I cried outside my teacher's office not knowing how to write without grammatical mistakes. Unlike in China where we knew how to find academic resources, we were foreign to the land and did not know where to buy educational books or how to find a good tutor. Because our family was socioeconomically vulnerable, I had to employ strategies to offset the lack of resources by studying diligently. I was also confused by the five-paragraph essay structure, and all I could do was stubbornly following my teacher's "rules". I did not dare to start a sentence with "because", or use past tense when writing a literature review. I had to be as diligent as I could to make up for the past 15 years. I made index cards to memorize new vocabulary and was willing to spend twice as much time on my reading assignments. Fortunately, the academic English environment I was immersed in was conducive to my language improvement. As a result, my English seemed to improve gradually during the 3 years I spent at high school. In Grade 12, I had to face provincial exams and TOEFL for university entrance. Having been raised in a traditional Chinese family, entering a renowned university was the goal of my academic life. I pressured myself to prepare all sorts of possible essay topics in advance. I still cannot forget the day before the English exam. As I was preparing, I had an anxiety attack. Even though I was able to enter University of British Columbia as I wished, my health condition worsened. In 2003, I entered the imagined community at UBC. This imagined community consisted of native speakers of English and brilliant English language learners among whom I was always silent. The first English course, introduction to university writing, was a shock to me. My writing, which was always awkward when I was a high school student, seemed to be even more awkward. In addition to the obstacles I encountered at school, my work turned out to be

another challenge. Even though I graduated from UBC with a double major in English and Japanese, I was afraid of making mistakes or being judged in terms of my grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation skills by my students. Consequently, when I first started to apply for jobs, I only applied for Chinese teaching jobs. Ironically, I could not get a Chinese teaching job because I lacked the credentials.

Critical Reflections

My career path was not smooth, similar to that of Mr. Kahakua, who suffers from external language discrimination in Lippi-Green's "The Myth of Non-accent" (1997). Mr. Kahakua is a forecaster who is forced to change his accent in order to get employed. Lippi-Green chooses to write about Mr. Kahakua possibly because he represents the minority who faces linguistic discrimination and marginalization in North American society. However, what differentiates Mr. Kahakua and myself is that I went through internal self-debasement rather than external discrimination in the process of finding a job. It was evident that discriminating against oneself can be harsher and more overt than discriminating against others, because others make reserved comments whereas one can be unreasonably and indefinitely critical of oneself. Even though I did not dare to apply for English teaching jobs, I had to try applying because I did not have enough credentials to work for Chinese language schools. Thus, I was eventually forced to realize that my self-debasement resulted from unnecessary lack of confidence. With a little bit of an accent and some minor mistakes, I was able to stand in front of the students and teach. Indeed, the more I taught, the more progress I made in my English. Lecturing also became an opportunity for me to practise English. I realized that I needed to cope with my own fear towards the imperfect "Sound House" (Lippi-Green 1997). This sound house depicted by Lippi-Green is an analogy that explains how accents are developed, abandoned, and adopted as we move through childhood and adolescence. The protagonist attempts to "renovate" her "sound house" (native tongue phonology) because she constantly compares her sound house with those of others. Lippi-Green maintains that even though we cannot eliminate our accent, we can reduce it. In other words, we can work on that "Sound House" as soon as we get rid of our fears. With the right environment, such as my teaching environment, I was eventually able to reduce my accent. Moreover, "education can only become a liberating experience to all when minority views are represented, when immigrant cultures are validated, and when all communities can equally participate in its operation" (Li, 2010). Due to similar cross-cultural experiences, two aspects of the participants' experiences in Jun Li's "My home and my school': examining immigrant adolescent narratives from the critical sociocultural perspective" (2010) resonate with me. "The adolescent stories about home testified to the significant influence of immigrant poverty, parental sacrificial altruism, and disciplinary Chinese parenting in their academic achievement. The adolescent experiences at school revealed their appreciation of Canadian liberal education, their perception of ethnic peer divides, and their concerns about the ineffectiveness and the negative psychological consequences of the ESL (English as a Second Language) programming" (Li 2010). In both China and Canada, I felt that the learning materials were disconnected from my previous experiences and cultural lives. Having been an English teacher myself, I realize that this is a serious issue faced by transnational youths. Teachers often enforce assimilation and overlook the need to respect cultural differences.

Since they contribute largely to reforming transnational youths' identities, they must take responsibility to reproduce identities that are conducive to students' personal and professional growth. In doing so, having respect for students' previous cultures and experiences becomes pivotal because the teachers can take approaches that reflect respect for the cultures of the students. For instance, the teachers can assign reading materials that exemplify such cultures. They can make short stories containing different cultural elements accessible to the students. Through reading, these students can learn to overtly appreciate their cultures and themselves. Since the teachers are constrained by the school, relevant rules supporting the teachers' practices should also be enforced from above.

Another aspect of the participants' experiences in Jun Li's article reveals how adolescents pressure themselves into believing that academic achievement is the most important of all. Diligence for better opportunities or due to familial pressure seems to be a trademark of Chinese children (Li, 2010). In retrospect, I am surprised that my teachers were actually fond of me for being a student chronically deprived of sleep because of studying so much. I had no other interests or extracurricular activities. Having been a teacher myself in Canada, I now understand the importance of the interplay of personal growth and professional growth. Students deprived of personal interests will not develop professionally. As educators, we should not only encourage students to develop personal interests and talents, but also be sensitive and supportive towards Chinese newcomers, because they need our care to adapt to the student-centred approach of the Canadian educational system.

As a student, I felt torn apart as if I could never get my writing right just like the participant, Amy, in Lee and Marshall's paper (2012). Amy struggles with academic writing at school and feels lost in two linguistic worlds-Chinese and English. Surprisingly, the second course I took at UBC was a turning point in my life. When the professor provided positive and constructive feedback on my assignments, I began to have confidence in my competence and reconstruct my identity. From a complete "outsider" to an "insider" in my imagined community, I was able to reposition myself. I began to realize that identity is context-dependent. It can be constructed and reconstructed depending on academic circumstances. Positive context produces positive identity and vice versa.

Today, I am a 29-year-old SFU grad student who has lived in three global cities during distinct stages of my life. The one consistent theme throughout all of these stages has been my love of language. This theme led to my decision three months ago to pursue a part time Japanese TA position at SFU to accelerate beginner students' learning of Japanese. Outside of my family, language has been the most influential part of my life. Looking ahead, I consider myself a lifelong student of both language and culture. Wherever I end up, I know I will be involved in teaching and learning the local culture and language. This not only excites me but gives me a true sense of professional purpose.

References

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