

# **Sociolinguistic Autobiography**



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## **Sociolinguistic autobiography**

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I was born in Taiwan, and both my parents are Taiwanese, but as a child, I had the opportunity to travel and live around the world. I have lived in Uruguay, Panama, the United States - New York, Poland, Taiwan, Honduras, and Malaysia. Although it was hard getting used to the drastic changes caused by moving every 2 to 3 years, I had the chance to experience different cultures, people, religions, weathers, and languages. These experiences built up my ability to adapt to different cultures and most importantly my language skills in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Taiwanese. During my stay in some countries, I studied in local schools and some in American schools that had multicultural students and teachers. I grew up with racially diverse groups from around the world. So who am I? I am a quadrilingual Taiwanese that has had the opportunity to live in many cultures.

I was born in Taiwan but after two years I moved to Uruguay. Through context embedded communication I could “communicate quite well by gestures, non-verbal reinforcements and bodily movement” with other Uruguayan children s (Banks p.173). Soon, to survive, I learned Spanish naturally through the school and the community. I acquired both Chinese and Spanish simultaneously, but spoke better Spanish due to more exposure. My parents; however, tried their efforts to teach me my own language, so Chinese was spoken at home and Spanish in school or in the community. Most of the time, Spanish was my main

language.

After two years, I moved to another Spanish speaking country, Panama. Although we did have a few English classes in elementary school, Spanish was still the dominant language. My brother and I were the only Taiwanese students in school and we even spoke to each other in Spanish. We had little contact with our language and culture, only at home and when the embassy had events or gatherings. At that time, I felt I was from Panama, not from Taiwan. Once the embassy had a trip to the mountains and people were singing in the bus on our way to the destination. I volunteered to sing the national anthem. Many of my parents' co-workers were so impressed when they heard that I was going to sing Taiwan's National Anthem. So I got up, took the microphone, confidently started singing. Everyone started laughing, because I was singing the national anthem of Panama. To me, that was THE national anthem. To me, Spanish was the dominant language. My parents, eager to sustain our Chinese skills, still insisted on having my brother and I speak it at home; however, by now my parents' Spanish skills were also good enough to understand well. Code mixing would be our form of communication. Many times my brother and I would speak to them in Spanish and they replied in Chinese. However I still think family language planning at this point has been quite successful because we could communicate quite well in both languages. I had to be bilingual in order to survive.

Then we moved to New York during 3<sup>rd</sup> grade where I acquired proficiency in English.

We lived in Flushing Queens and I studied in a private catholic school named Mary's Nativity School. I could not speak English well at first so the school had a Mexican girl translate for me. Everyone was amazed how an Asian girl could speak Spanish so fluently. All the teachers in this school were fathers and sisters from the Catholic Church and were probably the nicest most caring and patient White teachers I have ever had. In school, I did not feel like a minority and felt no prejudice. My parents, however, had to deal with White dominance in the real world. New York City is an ethnically diverse city but it probably wasn't ready for so much diversity yet. My father's office was in Manhattan and he said discrimination was quite bad. There was a saying that if economy went bad, the blacks would lose their jobs first, then the Mexicans, then the Asians, then maybe the Whites. My mother was discriminated just because she spoke English with an accent. Whites said ugly comments like "learn the language or get out of our country." But I was protected by my parents, the nice neighborhood, and the school, so my days in New York were full of laughter and fun.

At this point of my life, Spanish had no function and a subtractive situation existed. No one spoke Spanish in our community and although there were several Spanish speakers in my school, no one wanted to speak the minority language. It was only a matter of time till we totally forgot it. My parents didn't have the effort to save both languages so they focused on Chinese, after all it is my native tongue. I even remember one summer my mother sat us down at our backyard and started teaching us how to write our names in Chinese. It was hard

and we weren't progressing much, but my parents' main concern was not our literal skills. They mainly focused on our oral skills. My parents believed that as long as I had good oral skills, literal skills could be acquired later on in the future when we go back to Taiwan. School was also quite overwhelming so they didn't want to add too much pressure on me. And I must admit I was not very interested in learning how to write those really hard Chinese characters. Knowing English was enough to survive and I really loved the language, the culture, the food, the people, the neighborhood, the TV shows, the school, my teachers, everything. I was in some sense, American. When people ask me where I am from, I tell them New York. I had no idea what Taiwan was like, but soon my life would take a big U turn.

I finally moved back to my home country, during 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Ironically, it was the first cultural shock I experienced. I knew nothing about my own country. My first horrifying image was seeing teachers spank students for getting bad grades. I didn't want to go back to school so my parents had an agreement with the teachers not to hit me. I was seen as a foreigner, an American, different. Some of my classmates were extremely nice and were curious of my difference; a few didn't like me. I went to a very small middle school and was lucky to have teachers who treated me with extra care, but because of this, some students were jealous and felt unequal. I recall one boy saying "why doesn't she have to get punished? It's not fair." That statement made me feel sad because I never wanted to be treated different. I felt like I'd rather be punished than seen as an outcast in my own culture. As usual I had to

adjust to the surroundings but deep down I really wished I could go back to America. American culture was so much more fun for kids with Holidays like Halloween, Christmas, and Easter compared to Taiwanese culture.

But despite the cultural shock, moving back did help improve my literacy skills in Chinese. At this point, I've forgotten 90% of my Spanish, so I shifted from being a trilingual to a bilingual. I was a bilingual, but not bilateral. But how could I take tests if I could not read them? The teachers decided to let me take "oral" tests, where they read the problems on the tests to me and I answered them back orally. This test taking strategy persisted for about half a year. Under the environment, I quickly learned how to read and write. I started out only knowing my name to being able to read textbooks. It was a difficult process and I thank my teachers for being so patient.

In school and in the community, Chinese became my main language. Now Chinese was not my parents' main concern, English was. English at that time was not popular in Taiwan so I really had no one to practice with. English wasn't even taught in schools. Already lost my Spanish skills, my parents feared that I would forget my English skills, too. My parents used the "one person, one language" strategy because only my father could speak English fluently. He made it a game. My brother and I would get points for every word my father said to us in Chinese. And lose points for every word we said to him in Chinese. At the end of the month, prizes would be given out to whoever had the most points. It worked well and it did

encourage us to speak in English. I also loved to “show off” my English in public because I would get so much attention.

Amazingly, Chinese was not the only language I learned during my stay in Taiwan. Through informal second language learning, I acquired Taiwanese, a minority language in Taiwan. I would watch soap operas in Taiwanese everyday and my grandparents would speak to me most of the time in Taiwanese. Gradually I understood, but my speaking skills were weak. I know just enough to get by. Taiwanese isn’t widely spoken among our generation anymore, so more and more kids are not familiar with it. Two and a half years in Taiwan really helped me learn more about my country and my language. I could finally hold my head up high and say “I am from Taiwan.” I finally felt like I could fit in, but I was not bound to stay in this comfort zone forever.

My next country was Poland. I studied in the American School of Warsaw and continued my second semester in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This school was very international and had a growing population of Asians going to Warsaw for business, mostly Koreans because of the popularity of Korean automobiles. The school suddenly had to deal with not only students, but also parents that could not speak English. Apart from ESL classes, many students were held back one or two grades. I myself was not doing well in all my classes because my English stayed at a 5<sup>th</sup> grade level since leaving New York. Cultural issues were also a main reason. In Taiwan, I was taught not to speak in class for two and a half years and felt uncomfortable

speaking in this new environment. I recall my White English teacher gathering my parents and other teachers for a discussion of whether I should be pulled back one grade behind. My English teacher's "considerate" assumption might have come out of good heart, but he did not understand that if I stayed behind every time I changed a new environment, I would never graduate from middle school! My father however did not yield in the school system. He insisted that I stayed in my grade level. I just needed time to catch up from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. It took a lot of hard work and time, but soon I was able to express myself in class and my grades improved.

Family Language Planning was not such a big issue to my parents anymore. I was old enough to not forget my Chinese. The Taiwanese embassy; however, was really motivated in opening voluntary language classes where extra schooling in Chinese was possible. They asked our mother's and some Taiwanese graduate students studying in the local university to teach us. We would meet every Saturday morning in the embassy. There were two classes, one for the younger kids, and one for the older kids. They taught me 8<sup>th</sup> grade level Chinese that was quite hard for me and since it wasn't formal class, most of the children went there just to have a great time. I don't think anyone took those classes seriously, but in some way it did encourage us to speak in Chinese during those sessions.

I also took Spanish class in school as my second language requirement. I agree that "younger children appear to pick up the sound system of a new language more easily than



adults,” because although I have lost my Spanish language skills, I still had a good Spanish accent (Baker). Through formal second language learning, I slowly acquire my Spanish skills. But it gets even better. During my second semester in 10<sup>th</sup> grade my father was notified to transfer again.

Honduras was the next country. As usual I studied in the American School of Honduras, Tegucigalpa. This American school was slightly different from the one in Poland, Warsaw. It was less international and most of my classmates were really wealthy Hondurans. So although classes and materials were in English, Spanish was still widely spoken. I was exposed to Spanish and had the opportunity to practice! I also took Spanish classes in school which enhanced my basic literal skills.

High school times were the best and it went by fast. Soon it was time for a big decision in life, to study college back home or go to the States. Through great consideration I finally decided to attend college in my country mainly because my whole family was there. And I was sure if I went to college in the States, chances of me going back to Taiwan would be slim. However, it was harder to get in a college in Taiwan because I had to take a big entrance exam. It was a summary of Taiwanese High School math, Chinese, and English. Math and Chinese were extremely difficult. I studied whenever I had free time during my busy senior year in Honduras. It was probably the hardest most stressful exam I have ever taken. Luckily, I got into Chung Yuan Christian University and majored in International trade.

Four years in Taiwan taught me a great deal of my own country, culture, and language. I acquired my academically related language competence in Chinese during these four years and even improved my English skills through self study. Now I'm here in Reno earning my master's in TESOL because of my love towards language teaching.

I acquired these languages naturally to survive in the environment, but family language planning has been the main reason why I'm still quadrilingual today. You could describe me with most of the terms in the book because my process of learning languages has been so complicated. This is my version of myself; balanced bilingual in English and Chinese, functional bilingual in Spanish, and incipient ability in Taiwanese. Many people envy my experiences but I tell them it isn't easy. Sure, I had the chance to travel and learn languages the natural way, but it is emotionally and academically very challenging. Arriving at a new environment is always scary and strange, but also exciting and fun. Leaving behind is what's most painful. I still don't like the feeling of leaving people behind, but yet I'm here in Reno, leaving my family and friends behind. But being the optimistic person that I am helps me live through everyday expecting more challenges. Many people think that I'm an ABC, American Born Chinese, through the way that I talk and act, but I'm not. "So do you want to be American?" people would ask. My answer would always be a quote from my father, "If you are wealthy, you will live a luxurious life anywhere, but if you are poor, you will be miserable anywhere." I'm proud to be Taiwanese and will work hard to live a luxurious life!

**Works Sited:**

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