

From Kitchen to Classroom: Reflections of a Language Broker



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Imagine: *You are the first child of immigrant parents. Every night your mother sings “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” to you because it is one of the only English nursery songs she knows. It soothes you, and sometimes you sing along. It becomes one of the only English nursery tunes you know. Two years later, your younger sister is born. When she is napping, you sing the song to her. Time passes, and the three of you sometimes sing the song in a round. It is one of the only English nursery tunes that the three of you know.*

I was that child and, as a preservice English teacher, I continuously realize that I still am that child. When I first entered school there were many cultural differences I had to accommodate in my thinking. We didn’t take our shoes off before stepping into the kindergarten classroom, and instead of hearing my favorite stories about the Monkey King, I learned about Sleeping Beauty’s awakening kiss and Cinderella’s night at the ball with her Prince. One day in my music class, we played “Name that Tune.” Imagine the thrill I felt at being able to recognize a song—“Row, Row, Row Your Boat”—like most of my peers. For five bonus points I even agreed to do a solo performance of the song for my class! No one laughed at me, as I had feared, until I got to the part of the song that goes: “Marry me, marry me, marry me, marry me”

And the class broke out with laughter. *What? Those weren’t the words!* Those were the words I learned. Something must have been, as they say, “Lost in the translation.”

Brokering in the Kitchen

From as far back as third grade, I can remember explaining things to my parents. I was the “language broker” of the house—correcting my parents’ accents and grammar, chastising their linguistic mistakes in front of my kindergarten-aged sister, telling them the

English equivalent of Chinese words with a forced air of irritation so as to remind them at all times that I was embarrassed by them. It’s not that they were ignorant all around, or even at all. Both of my parents had graduate degrees in chemistry from Berkeley and could lecture fluently on the subject of mass spectroscopy or ionic movements in English. In terms of other languages, my mother could speak Cantonese and Mandarin, and my father could speak Cantonese, Mandarin, and another obscure dialect of Chinese called Tai Shan Hua. What I remember, however, is feeling as though none of their other accomplishments mattered. What *mattered* was that they could not speak English the way I heard it at school or at my friends’ houses.

My younger sister grew to suffer from the same embarrassment. For Christmas one year we “pooled our money,” “caught” the city bus to the mall, “searched high and low” at the bookstore, and found a dictionary of American idioms for my parents. We had every intention of making them speak English like “normal” people. The more fluent my sister and I became with our own English, the more we recognized our parents’ linguistic mistakes.

“What about when we were at Bonanza for the first time and the waitress asked dad how he wanted his steak and he said, “Large”

“Remember that time when mom decided I could have a slumber party and then dad told the neighbors that for my 13th birthday I was going to have all my friends come over and sleep with me?”

“Or what about when you came back from college to visit for the first time with your friend, Dan, and dad said, ‘I’m Jennifer’s daddy. Come inside. Can I help you take off your clothes?’”

“And that time dad was talking to UC Berkeley’s president and said he would be running around the world for the next couple of days so maybe they’d bang into each other. . . .”

Joyce and I bought the dictionary of idioms for my parents but it stayed on the most remote shelf of my mother's kitchen the entire time we were in public school. The last time I went home to visit, I could see its stiff spine and bright-red paper cover hidden between a garage sale paperback of Betty Crocker Crock-Pot recipes and Pei-Mei's cookbook of Chinese food. I started to see that arrangement of books across a shelf as representative of my life's experiences . . .

As the child of Chinese immigrants, my first language was also Chinese. It was not until I entered preschool that I learned to speak English or that my parents accepted the advice of my teachers and changed my name from "Chung-Yuan" to "Jennifer." My teachers said it would be easier for me that way, and so it has since remained. The experience of straddling a Chinese home culture and an American school culture throughout most of my life has taught me how to read a culture from the "outside," yet still be afforded some tools of the dominant culture by which to achieve mobility within it. I can see the extent of my assimilation, the depth of family heritage that surrounded me while growing up, and the strange balance of observing American culture at a foreign distance while still feeling pride in my membership.

Brokering in the Classroom

Modeling and identification are necessary components in the writing and language acquisition process. In *Writing Relationships*, Lad Tobin quotes Robert Brooks' description: "Writers learn to write by imitating other writers, by trying to write like writers they respect. The forms, the processes, the texts are in themselves less important as models to be imitated than the personalities or identities of the writers who produce them." Tobin's book

focuses on writing relationships because teachers and students, students and students, and teachers and teachers all affect the writing process in the classroom. However, are peers and classroom teachers the only writers a student encounters in her/his lifetime? A crucial relationship that is often overlooked is that of a parent and student. The parent—or family's—influence upon a student's acquisition of language is extremely important. Depending on a family's race/ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, etc., their family legacy of literacy can be affected.

No teacher should assume that her/his students enter the classroom with common experiences—either amongst themselves or with the teacher. The influences upon a student's linguistic life from outside of the classroom *do matter*. Some time ago, during a classroom observation, I watched a teacher hand out worksheets of fill-in-the-blank clichés to his students. With competitive energy surging through the room, students shouted out their answers to "Heavy as a _____," "Light as a _____," or "Bald as a _____," etc. The teacher was quick to publicly praise those students who were able to finish their worksheets with the right answers. However, this teacher did not realize his assignment and actions reinforced the culturally based knowledge of the majority. Even as a college graduate in English, the closest I had ever come to growing up with language like that was while sitting around a dinner of potstickers and spaghetti in my family's kitchen.

As a future teacher, I wonder how I can support and value the experience of individual students. Can I learn to be aware of the cultural assumptions I hold and how they affect the classroom? How will I find opportunities to reward students for what they already know? This seems just as important

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as explicitly teaching the skills and culture of the majority. I am beginning to recognize both the shortcomings and wealth of cultural heritage I was afforded by my childhood home and school environments. I am beginning to make choices—to re-learn Chinese, to acknowledge that knowing the answer to “Hungry as a _____” is not as important

as just being able to express that I’m hungry, and to recognize that the process of language acquisition is also the process through which we acquire elements of its culture.

References

Tobin, L. (1993). *Writing relationships*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Face It

When I look at my mirror,
I don’t like to see my eyes,
Short and small,
And I would use my forfinger to
pull my eyelids.
When I look at my mirror,
I would pay attention at my mouth,
Small and pink,
And I would use my little mouth
to make a kiss shape on the mirror.

Home

“Home” when I heard this word,
I feel so warm.
Home can protect me,
made me don’t feel cold in winter.
“Home” when I write this word,
I feel so sweet,
Like the colorful rainbow
but stay in the sky forever.

—Judy Wang
Grade 8

Sadness

Sad comes from leaving
This is how I feel
And I can’t stay there
Lost nest birds
And a leaky balloon drops in the garbage

For I’m leaving China
And I can’t stay in my country.

Dreams

I have a dream
to be a teacher
The teacher is the greatest in
the world
Exhaust all gentle efforts
to teach more knowledge to children
to alter bad students
toward the right way.
Teach knowledge in school at day
Correct homework in home at night
Students can be nice—that’s a
teacher’s comfort.

—Qing Zheng
Grade 8