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Through my Spanish Eyes

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Through my Spanish Eyes

Many people will think that being able to communicate in four languages makes you a really literate person with obvious language skills. My case is different. I have been forced to learn several languages at the same time since I was born even though I didn't had (didn't though I had) language learning facilities. One of these languages in particular is English. My journey with it has been quite complex during all the years I have been taught it. First, I should introduce myself. My name is [Name Redacted]; I am from the North of Spain right on the border with France, which we like to call Basque Country. I really like doing sports. I like surfing, climbing, running, and hiking. I have done track since I was five years old. In general terms, I like moving and I have always been a really active person. Also, one of my passions is art. I love painting, drawing, and photography. I am an artistic person. If I was able to live from it I would definitely do it, but it is hard, so I am studying mathematics, another passion of mine. I am able to speak three different languages (Spanish, Basque which is completely different from Spanish, and English) fluently and I know some French. I have been raised as a bilingual kid my whole life. At home we used to switch between Spanish and Basque easily, which, frankly, helped my brain develop faster than other students around the world since I was able to disconnect from the Spanish grammar, and change it to a totally different one . Even though I mastered the literacy of two completely different languages at the age of four, English has always been the one I liked the least and the one that, due to that reason, became the hardest to learn for me. The structure of the sentences were strange, I wasn't used to the simple tenses. If you have ever taken a Spanish class

you would know that in Spanish we have a verb root and conjugations for every possible subject. However, in Basque we have two different verbs, the first one explains the action and the second one explains who is performing the action, who is the recipient and what is involved in the action (It is important to clarify that Basque is not nothing alike to Spanish, words so different that just Spanish speakers think that Basque sounds like Japanese, but actually the Basque language is an isolated tongue). So English, with its simple tenses, made no sense to me, and I started making it much more complicated.

In the Basque Country, as in many other countries in Europe, kids start learning English at an early age and are expected to speak and know English when they grow into young adults, since it is a globally known language. Considering it now, it makes sense and I am glad we were forced to learn languages since it helped me to achieve my dreams by coming here and to communicate with people all over the world. I started learning English when I was four and it was a mandatory class in primary school. We used to study all the basic stuff like the alphabet, days of the week, asking permission to use the restroom, and asking what the weather was like. Everyday one of us used to ask: "What's the weather like today?", and another one used to respond: "Today is cloudy!". We repeated this question and answer for an incredibly long time. When I recall all those memories I really understand why I didn't like English; they taught us in an extremely repetitive way. Every time I read the question I can hear my whole class choring those words at the same time: "Today", "Is", "Cloudy".

During primary school we used to play a bunch of different games in order to introduce us to the new language. I have to admit that English was never my strong point. I remember that at the age of six we started learning the months of the year with a song that is still stuck in my head. When we were singing the song I enjoyed every single word the song contained. I sang:

“January, February, March, April, June, July...” and when August arrived, I used to always scream “mocos” thinking that I was completely right. Until one day, one of my classmates found out what I was saying and all laughed. Because “mocos” in Spanish means boggers. I realized that everyone was saying it right except for me. That day my confidence in English plummeted; I thought everyone was good at it except from me so from that day on I started not enjoying my English classes

When I graduated from primary school, which in Spain is eleven years old, I went to a different place to attend middle school called Talaia BHI. There, taking a foreign language class was mandatory too, but we didn't have to take English, so I decided to study French since Hendaya, the next town over from mine, Irun, is in France. I wanted to stop learning English because even though I was having good grades I felt like I was the worst English student in my class, partly due to all the comments I heard during my childhood about my “just scientific skills” since I was a really logical kid. So I wanted to push all those feelings away by avoiding taking more English courses.

For the next 4 years I learned French. Thanks to that I was able to go on an exchange trip to Bretagne with my classmates. We learned a lot, and had so much fun. Knowing French also gave me the opportunity to get to know new people and travel around France with my family. I got a pretty good language level during those years, probably because both Spanish and French come from Latin which made it so easy to learn for me. For the first time in a long time I felt I was good at languages. Studying French helped me boost my confidence but I still doubted my literacy in English because English was the thorn in my side that made me feel inferior to other people during all primary school.

However, in my Junior year of middle school I chose to change the school I was going to again even though I had the option to continue my studies in the same place. For high school I wanted to take English as the foreign language instead of French since it is a more used language around the world and it would help me in the future to find a better job. But I had an issue.

At that moment I had the English level of a primary school student (which is generally: asking to go to the bathroom, numbers, and introducing yourself; While all my friends already knew how to structure sentences, irregular verbs and a large word list that I didn't have clue of the meaning), also the new school had the reputation of being really hard (mostly with the English level).

Considering that situation, in my senior year I joined an extracurricular English class to catch up with all the new things that my classmates learnt in the past three years. That re-entry into the English world was really, really hard. All I was able to say in a foreign language was in French, so every time I wanted to talk in English I couldn't say anything but French words. I can recall as it was yesterday how my English teacher, Miren, used to ask me if I was done with my assignment, and the only thing my mouth was able to pronounce was: "Oui". She always used to laugh as if it was funny, but actually it wasn't. I always felt incapable of learning English, and at those moments when I found myself blocked and unable to say a word just made the frustration I felt with English worse. I was really trying to respond in English instead of in French. In spite of myself-disappointment, I knew I couldn't quit because in order to get accepted into the English program of the new highschool I had to pass an English level test, so it was time to study hard.

I tried so hard to learn all that I was supposed to learn years before. I really wanted to go to that high school since it was the same my mom went. But all those months of hard work were tough, and I wanted to quit on several occasions. I cannot tell you the exact amount of time I

spent in that 4 wall white classroom. Full of books without any kind of order. With that teacher that used to spend days laughing. Myself, my thoughts, and her. I know that if I got a dollar for every minute I spent there being upset about it, I would be rich.

I don't know how English is taught here, in the United States, but if you have to test in all the irregular verbs too I feel sorry for you. That was such a torture! I could not remember even ten, let alone use them in sentences. I wasn't good at tenses as I already said, I had the habit of making it more complex than what it was and all that tense confusion made my English literacy barely understandable, not to say impossible to understand. Miren used to test me on the irregular every week. She used to tell me to study 10 each week plus the translation of each one in Spanish, but also all those verbs I learnt the previous weeks. One day I completely forgot that I had a test, so I didn't study the 10 irregular verbs I had to, nor the previous ones. I remember entering that quiet classroom, Miren was printing my exam in the room next to mine and I suddenly remembered that test. My face speedily blushed; it was literally red. When Miren came into the classroom and looked at my face she couldn't do anything but laugh, my face was screaming: "I am a murdered! I committed a crime!". I kept looking at her, inmutable, and she asked me: "Hey Malen, didn't you forget about our exam, right?". I tried to lie, but it wasn't possible; my face said everything my mouth didn't. I ended up trying to write the irregular verbs I knew, some of them were easy: "cut, cut, cut, cortar" or "be, was/were, been, ser/estar", but others were difficult such as "think, thought, thought, pensar". My score in that exam was 4/30. I felt pathetic that day, and Miren noticed it, so she gave me another chance the next day. I spent the night studying all the irregular verbs, and I finally received an A in that test. After that day, that situation never happened again.

Finally, the test day arrived. It was a sunny morning in June. I woke up that morning feeling a little sick. I prepared my everyday breakfast: avocado toast and a big black coffee, always with my multivitamin pills. All my family woke up later that day. They came to the kitchen and just sat there in silence. If a person would have come in that exact moment, they would think that someone committed a crime, you could breathe the tension in the environment. I looked at the weather and it marked 80 degrees Fahrenheit (26 degrees Celsius for Europeans), so I decided to wear my favorite shorts and my dad's big sweatshirt. I remember putting my clothes on, asking my mom how to arrive there and leaving. I don't remember many details about that walk. It wasn't a far walk at all, 10 minutes max, but it felt like a marathon. During those endless 10 minutes I tried to keep my motivation up for that exam I had been studying for such a long time. Even though I studied really on the surface all the concepts my classmates learned during middle school, I could pass it. I wasn't the best English student, nor confident about myself. However, I did my best studying the past months: I went to extracurricular classes every single day, and juggled it with my studies and track. I had a huge stomach ache that day, I was feeling nauseous and butterflies were spreading all over my stomach. I eventually got in the hall, and a big guy who seemed tired of being there asked me what I wanted. "My name is Malen De la Fuente and I came to take an English test", I answered. Without saying a word the guy stood up and left the room. The guy came back again 15 minutes later with a tall attractive brunette man, who brought a sheet for me which I like to call "The Sheet". He gave me a signal to follow him, so I obeyed. Shortly, I found myself alone in a huge white room with the sheet in my desk. I read the exam and felt how my nerves were getting more and more calm. The exam only had two exercises: reading and writing. I started with the writing question, and everything was going okay, I felt like I knew what I was talking about. I have to also admit that my feelings

during that exam weren't actually true. I wrote so many wrong tenses that 1: don't exist, or 2: weren't supposed to be in those sentences. However I finished my writing pretty satisfied with what I wrote, and started reading the given passage. Reading has always been one of my weakest points in English literacy, and it wasn't any different in that exam. I barely understood what it was talking about but I tried to give all the words I did not know a meaning based on the context of the sentences. When I finished my exam I left the papers on the teacher's desk and left the classroom feeling free and relieved. All the work I did for several months was shown in the exam I just finished. I knew I didn't do it perfectly but a feeling of happiness flooded my entire body. I felt that I didn't have to study English in such a hard way in my entire life (which makes me laugh since my journey to improve my English literacy just started at that point). When I saw my parents and Miren, I was completely honest. I told them that I messed up in most of the tenses and made so many grammar mistakes in the writing part and that the reading one was incredibly difficult for me. I tried really hard to not give them many expectations about it, just in case I didn't pass. But I felt like now all the work was done and I just had to wait for the results.

I waited for so long, I did not know how and when I would get my results back. Almost a month later without knowing anything about my exam, I got an email with a list confirming the new high school students. We all were identified by our ID, all the classes we were going to take the next course were shown there too. I was full of nerves trying to find myself in that long list. I found myself and looked closely at every course I was registered for. Finally, I saw that I was registered in the English class "I made it!", I screamed. I got into the English program! I remember how happy I was and the celebration I made with family and friends. I was going to study in the high school I wanted to, and the foreign language I wanted. It was a complete success.

When the school year started, I realized that what I studied for the English level test wasn't enough at all... All my classmates had been studying English without gaps at school since they were five, and at extracurricular classes since eight, which made their literacy superior to mine in every aspect. I was so far behind all of them and I learnt that learning a language is a non-stop journey. You are never going to be completely literacy proficient in any language. And that, it is the main feature I love: You have to always push yourself harder and challenge yourself in order to get better.

As I was saying, my relationship with English has been complicated. We had different moments when it made me extremely happy, such as when I got all those good scores after all the work I did, but other moments when I just suffered and felt frustrated.

I have always thought that languages aren't my strong point. Parents and teachers always talked about my good math, science, or logic skills, and my poor writing or reading skills. All those indirect messages got stuck in my head, and made me think that I wasn't good enough in those academic aspects. Therefore, English or French, and even my first languages, were difficult for me to learn because I convinced myself that it wasn't my thing. I had that mindset for several years, and it made me feel scared every time I entered the English class, or talked with someone in English. I felt how my hands and legs were shaking, the warm feeling starting in my stomach going upwards to finally show in my blushed cheeks. But mostly, it pushed me back from being excited to learn different languages.

During all those years of process I went through, it taught me more things than just English grammar. I learnt that I am not a person who does not have language learning skills, that I actually like learning languages. I like feeling how I am improving writing, speaking and listening every single day, as well as getting to know new cultures and people.

Learning English since I was a kid gave me the opportunity to come here, meet new people and practice the sport I love while studying one of my passions. It is giving me a great opportunity to open my mind and new paths for my future career. Languages are barriers for understanding, but they also are gifts. Even though I didn't have fun during all those years of studying in a classroom, or doing all the work I did to learn English. I would never change anything about it. And I learnt that this process of improving my English literacy is never going to end.