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## Literacy Growth: Life and Literacy Experiences

By Josue G. Ballesteros-Flores

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I was born in Mexico and grew up Spanish my entire life. I came to the United States in 2004. Coming to an entirely new world, my mind was filled with endless optimism. This was the land of opportunity and I was prepared to make the most of it. My upbringing is pretty stereotypical for a Hispanic adolescent. I was raised by a single mother, two brothers, and a very jittery dog named Pancho, which I still have to this day. My mother worked as a painter, and eventually opened her own company. Everything seemed perfect until we had to enroll in school. As a four-year-old, I was excited to meet new people and make my mom proud. I wanted to excel in school in the United States. She never failed to mention that all her hard work would only pay off if we got an education. She preached that education was the path to success and would always say “use this,” pointing to her head, and “not these,” holding up her hands. I wish I could tell the readers about my first couple of months in America, but I just fail to recollect any type of memory from kindergarten.

It was my first day of first grade and reality hit me; I was in an entirely new country. I first lived on the inner west side of Cleveland and one can say it was a rough neighborhood. The school I attended was broken down, with deep cracks in the parking lot, old musty textbooks, and un-enthusiastic teachers. My first class of the day was English. The language and the people captivated me like one could not believe. Sadly, the language and the people did not feel the same way about me. Kids, even at four years old, caught on to the fact that I was different and didn't belong. Years went by and I absorbed the language like a sponge, even though at times the English language did not accept me as I accepted it. I learned through reading, note taking and social media/music. These factors had an impact on my writing success.

Through my academic years, being bilingual, to a certain extent, hindered my ability to write. I was engaged in elementary school all the way to 6th grade. Speaking both languages messed up my word placement and ability to really learn and comprehend one of the languages completely. Lucky for me, music and TV were a huge part of my childhood. I would come home from school every day, eat, and watch TV till I fell asleep on the couch. It was no surprise to my mom that I was at home for most of the day. I could understand and speak English, but had an accent causing me to shy away from social interaction. Now, watching TV is mostly visual stuff, so how did that help a young kid like me? Simple, TV often showed various commercials advertising numerous companies, which caused me to read

the advertisement text since I watched TV so much. Now, everyone should know in order to have even remotely decent literacy skills, one needs to read a good amount. Now, watching movies was not the only way I learned English, but how I learned how to write. I have one word for you, music. I loved music ever since I learned what words were. Now, any music lover should know that music is universal. When it comes to music, the language in which it's spoken does not matter. As a child, curiosity took over. I loved music so much and would constantly look up the lyrics to songs. I fell in love with various genres of music, specifically rap. The wordplay artists have when they rap really engaged me in the words they said themselves. I'm not talking about mainstream rap artists, I'm talking about poets, such as Tupac, Biggie, and Big Pun. Real lyrical geniuses. All of this drastically improved my English and my literacy practices, overall.

Everything seemed to be on the right track. I was about to turn ten and I remember being so satisfied with the progression of my English. People in our community would praise my brothers and I for being able to speak English and Spanish. However, somewhere along the line, I started to let the English side of my vocabulary overpower the Spanish side. I couldn't let that happen, so it was a constant tug of war in my head between English and Spanish. I was starting to enter middle school and everything started to slip from right under me. I picked up bad habits, such as learning slang and becoming disengaged in the classroom. I got comfortable enough with English that I stopped wanting to improve. My family and I moved to Cleveland Heights when I was eleven years old. Eventually, my English, along with my Spanish, became stagnant.

Middle School went by very quickly. I picked up bad habits that I learned through friends and music. My English became very ebonic. I lost sight of my American dream and all that I envisioned as a kid, not to mention all the trouble I got in. I got suspended from school twice. Completely letting my mother down, she decided that she had enough. At the end of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, she decided to move to a suburban neighborhood called Solon. I was shattered; I loved the environment I was in; however, I had no choice in the matter.

In an entirely new system and environment, I felt nervous. I attended one of the best public High Schools in Ohio, Solon High School. This High School was ranked number four in Ohio in 2017 and number 11 in 2018. The school was filled with lazy, naturally talented, narcissistic students. My freshman year in high school was awful, coming from a system who really didn't care if you passed or failed. Shifting to a system where students were naturally gifted and teachers babied them throughout the year. I fell through the cracks, I couldn't keep up, I simply lacked the type of culture they possessed. However, there was one thing I could match, and that was effort. I finished the year with a 2.1 GPA. My mom was ferocious, she made it clear how much she had to sacrifice to get us to attend this high school. She

worked from nine to seven, Monday through Friday, just so we could live in a better neighborhood. She got through to me, I put my best foot forward. I might not have been naturally talented like the other kids in school, but I took notes. When the teacher talked, I listened, she would tell us what to write, and what will be on the following test. When they spoon fed us information, I feasted. I put in just enough effort to land me merit roll sophomore and junior year. Pleased once again with my academic success, it just took a couple of notes and steady effort. However, senior year I started to slouch again; senioritis hit me hard. I finished the senior year with a 2.8. Although I did well enough to get accepted to college, all the work and effort my mom and I put in paid off. High school was over and it was time for college. In my adolescent mind, I strongly believed college was going to be easier than high school.

I couldn't have been more wrong. I received a quick reality check, I thought college would be a magical wonderland, filled with parties, girls, and freedom. The only thing I was right about was the amount of freedom we get as freshmen. Hypothetically speaking, 35 percent of your time will be devoted to going to class, 15 percent to participating in extracurricular activities. The other 50 percent will all come down to the student, whether they choose to study or go through the motions. The amount of material being thrown at you from a day to day basis is immense and at times overwhelming. Just relying on natural talent to be a good scholar and a having a reasonable memory just isn't going to cut it anymore. You'll go to lecture after lecture and you can either choose to sit back and watch everyone else excel. Or, you can pick up paper, a pen and go to work. I'm a criminal justice major currently enrolled in five classes for the spring semester. This includes HHS, Intro to Criminal Justice, GSW, Intro to Statistics, and Sociology for Minority Groups. Here's where everything hit me like a bulldozer at a construction site. My realization made me feel completely crushed. I took notes in four out of the five courses. In addition, Sociology and Intro to Criminal Justice are conducted of lectures. Meaning, I didn't write two or three sentences, I wrote for the entire class. The teacher talked for the entire time and you copied down the slideshow over and over again until you have a quiz or exam to take. Notes were being taken mostly three to four days out the week. On average, I immediately felt it in my core that I wasn't in high school anymore. Yes, taking notes will improve your grade but there are more components that lead to that, taking more notes in college also helps you stay more engaged with the material being lectured. Everyone can relate to being in class and trying to pay attention, then suddenly you're utterly lost in the lecture. You find yourself looking at your notes, then the teacher, followed by the ceiling and just dozing off. It's a huge mess! This can be avoided by just engaging in the types of notes you take. Taking notes is like practicing your form when you lift weights. Nobody really pays attention to it but the more you focus on your form the more engaged you are with the muscle being worked. That's the same concept with

taking notes. They keep you engaged with the concept being taught at hand, while you take notes you can avoid things like falling asleep or zoning out. From my own experience, I can conclude that I paid way more attention to my two lectures compared to my other classes. This can translate as I stated before to better grades. The baffling thing about taking notes in college is that the professors do not require you to take them. It's something that's self-implied; the bell rings and the lecture begins and all you hear is lead on paper for the rest of the period. Compared to high school where teachers practically begged students to take notes and pay attention, and more or less, half the class did as asked. Note taking is an extremely underrated way to pay attention in class and absorb the content being taught.

In conclusion, maturity played a critical role in my literacy success. Growing up, we often learn right and wrong, what works and what does not. I'm a firm believer that yes, everyone knows what they're supposed to do. Whether you apply it, it all comes down to one's own maturity. Understanding that one can't be successful academically without being coherent in the English language is very important. Learning that the little things matter will affect you in the future. Yes, I might not have been as naturally gifted as other kids when it comes to literacy, however, I learned in my very own way through music, social media, and television. I'm not ashamed of my struggles because it built me into the person I am today and I'm grateful for it all.