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Global Competence Certificate Essay

Language has always fascinated me. I loved and looked forward to my Spanish classes that started in kindergarten. I asked for books for every birthday. I also, however, watched how an accent or a few vocabulary words changed how a person was treated, unsure at the real meaning behind these interactions but curious nonetheless. I dreamed of being an author and scribbled poems and stories onto loose pieces of paper around the house. Words gave me power. They made me feel interesting, important, and heard. The same, however, isn't true for everyone.

I remember my karate instructor, who had immigrated from Guatemala as a teenager, being incredibly insecure about his English. From my perspective, I hadn't noticed any accent, especially as a kid. He had a hard time, however, pronouncing some words, especially words with a "tw" sound like "twirl." One technique was called "twirling wings," and I saw his face change when it came up on the review list for that day. I watched him mentally dance around the word, spitting out "spinning wings" instead.

A kid yelled from the back, "That's wrong, it's *twirling* wings!"

His face turned red, and we quickly moved on. It made me sad to see him upset, but I didn't fully understand what was going on as only an elementary student at the time.

Flash forward to years later: I'm sitting in the Watertown library with my tutoring student Daniel, a Brazilian immigrant hoping to improve his English. I take out a notebook and begin to ask him some preliminary questions, hoping to get a general assessment of his English abilities as he answers, as well as get to know him. He tells me that he doesn't use English on a daily basis since he works as a painter with other Brazilian immigrants that all speak Portuguese to each other.

I sit up a little straighter, asking him why he then wants to spend hours a week learning English. He pauses and then says, "I want to fit in."

He tells me that he doesn't feel like he will ever belong in the United States if he doesn't speak English, and how his brother makes fun of him that he can't speak English perfectly, despite living here for years. He says he didn't expect to live here for so long, so he didn't try to learn the language at first.

I stood there quietly for a moment, seeing how intertwined Daniel's English ability was with a broader sense of identity. It's true that language can tell you a person's story, in some ways. Daniel's Brazilian accent signals that he comes from somewhere else and that English isn't his first language. But, when you only hear his accent, you don't see the hours he spends on the homework assignments I give him. You don't hear him ask question after question, some of which even I struggle to answer, about the subtleties he's noticed in someone's English. You don't fundamentally understand what it's like to be him: to not speak the dominant language in a society that all-too-often quantifies an English ability with a larger judgment of intelligence.

It's hard to boil down what I learned from Project Literacy into a few words. I saw how our society can shame those who struggle to understand English. I got a look into the lives of immigrants in the United States, seeing firsthand, especially when working as an assistant teacher in the Beginner 1 class and conducting research, the many obstacles immigrants have thrown their way. Above all, however, I was proud to see how despite long workdays, children yelling in the background over Zoom, and often inadequate access to technology or WiFi, how dedicated and hardworking the students were. Immigrants deserve more credit.