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Transformation: Challenges Faced by an ESL Student

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I was born and raised in Taipei, Taiwan and moved to different cities in China during middle school and

highschool. I am currently a freshman majoring in Travel Industry Management and planning to graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree. This piece of writing was originally an essay assignment for my ESL100 class, and through working on this piece I learned more about myself and was able to reflect my English learning process. I hope to encourage and motivate others that are interested in learning a second language.

Transformation

Challenges Faced by an ESL Student

FIONA LO

English as a Second Language 100
(Composition I for Second Language Writers)

Mentor: Daniel Holden

As more international students study abroad, they probably have been through the stage where they struggle from learning a second language. In “Transformation: Challenges faced by an ESL student”, I presented my English learning experience as an ESL student to the audience, as well as the struggles I have faced throughout my language learning process. The intended audience for this piece of creative writing would be all international students or anyone that is currently learning a second language. And the main purpose of this piece is not only to inform my audience the struggles or difficulties while learning a new language, but also to encourage them to challenge themselves and overcome their fears and doubts. I chose to write about my English learning experience in a creative narrative form because it would be easier for the audience to link their personal experiences with mine. Learning a second language is not easy, and I hope my audience will become more confident with them and eventually “transform” and become successful.

(Handshake) “Hi, nice to meet you! My name is Fiona and I’m from Taiwan. This is my first semester at UH.”

“Nice to meet you!” and wow you don’t have an accent when you speak English!”

“Thanks! I actually get that a lot!”

This is me, a girl who is not afraid of meeting new friends and is confident in introducing herself to strangers. I have encountered so many strangers ever since I came to Hawaii, and I am usually the one that starts a conversation and introduces myself to new people. I became the type of person I’ve always wanted to be—someone that is confident in speaking English and friendly to others. I am very surprised because even my parents did not know that I use to cry myself to sleep because I could not understand my homework assignments. Nobody knew that I was going through a four-stage transformation and was slowly, slowly growing into a butterfly.

English was my least favorite subject during elementary school back when I still lived in Taiwan. I could never understand the teacher, and it was difficult to understand the textbook materials. Students were only expected to memorize sentences and vocabularies, and the course material did not even teach us how to use the knowledge in our daily life. The course was simply not designed for me. My parents tried to help and signed me up for English classes outside of school, however, the classes never seemed to help me with my English skills, nor made me like English for at least a little bit more. During the first semester of sixth grade, my family was informed that my dad got promoted and was assigned to take over a position in Shanghai, China. I was angry about moving to China not only because I didn’t want to leave this beautiful motherland, but also because my classmates teased me for “betraying my home country” and said that I will “never success in speaking English.” The words hurt my feelings and made me dislike English as a language even more. As we moved, I was forced to go to international

schools because Chinese local schools do not accept foreigners that live in the country for less than five years. It was my first time going to schools where all classes were taught in English, and I did not enjoy every bit of the experience in the beginning. It was my last semester of elementary school, and it was the most “painful” stage of my life. However, it marked the very first stage of my four-stages transformation—Egg.

I cried almost every night from struggling with completing my homework assignments. During my first semester, I could not understand most of the vocabularies from my homework, and it was extremely challenging and time-consuming to look up every vocabulary using my dictionary. I was an undeveloped egg quietly lying on the leaf, not ready to hatch from the layer of protection yet.

As I graduated from elementary school, I transferred to a British international school and took English as Second Language (ESL) class. This marked the second stage of my transformation—Larva. My English skills started to improve and I started to feel a little more comfortable interacting with my classmates, however I still tended to only make friends with people that speak Mandarin. I was getting better at listening and responding to people speaking English to me until the one time I chatted with my American classmate, Sarah. Sarah is a very out-going, straightforward and friendly person, and I enjoy talking to her. Once during morning recess, we sat at a bench and she was sharing her story about her family. I barely responded because I wanted to be a good listener. However, all of the sudden she said to me: “Well, you probably have no idea what I’m talking about right now.” I was shocked, hurt and upset at the same time, but I chose to sit quietly, smiled and tried to be friendly. She completely shattered the confidence I just started to develop, and it hit me back to stage one. I became very quiet and very afraid of raising my hands in class because I did not trust the English skills I had. I was weak and powerless like a tiny caterpillar that hides under the leaves by itself day after day because it is scared of the big, unfriendly birds with big eyes and sharp beaks.

After living in Shanghai for two years, our family moved again because of my dad’s job, and this time we moved to Xiamen, another city in China. This was where my English skills improved significantly, thanks to my friend AJ. AJ was an American girl in my grade that is very popular and friendly to everyone. She was very supportive, positive, encouraging and caring.

She gave me a very strong impression of a positive girl not only because she was a cheerleader, but also because she was always smiling and caring for people around her. I still remember that one time when I was very nervous about giving a presentation in front of class about environmental issues in Science class. Since I was not confident with my English skills, I wasn’t a big fan of public speaking either. AJ was the one that patted my shoulders, gave me pep talk and told me “you can do this Fiona, be confident and you will do great.” I have never felt this confident before and I finished my presentation so smoothly that it amazed me. I knew I was prepared for the next stage—Cocoon.

Our family moved again after living in Xiamen for two years and a half. We moved to Beijing, capital city of China, and that is where I finished the last two years of high school. I studied International Baccalaureate (IB) and Diplomat Programme (DP), which were pre-college level courses. Though the courses were very challenging – my chrysalis was forming and I couldn’t wait for it to open. I was not afraid of talking to foreigners anymore, and I enjoyed talking to people that come from different cultural backgrounds. I had my first foreign best friend Maria, who came from Russia and became friends with me since the first day I started school. I was able to overcome the challenge of being recorded for final IB assessments during my Further Oral Activity, where students had to present a certain topic and provide a critical analysis with understanding; and Individual Oral Commentary in which students were required to provide a detailed, critical analysis of unseen texts within a given time. The chrysalis opened as I slowly find my way out.

And here I am now, a butterfly with pumped wings, excited to explore the world and surroundings. This reminds me of the farewell card I received from my teacher in Taiwan’s elementary school. She wrote about how she believed that I would become a butterfly the next time she sees me. I didn’t really understand the message back then, but it all makes sense to me now. This life-changing process was long but significant, challenging but worthy. I cannot imagine who I would be today if my family never moved to another country and I never got the chance to learn English. I may not be the most beautiful butterfly, but I appreciate everyone that has helped me through my transformation process and made me who I am today.