

Learning English Changed My Life¹

Liyan Zhang², Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Abstract

The article *Learning English Changed My Life* by Liyan Zhang was written in the International College-English Communication (IEC) 494 Senior Seminar course that I (Professor Shizhou Yang) taught at Payap University in Thailand in 2020. The main objective of the course was to prepare the seniors in English communication BA program “for work experience or senior project” (Course syllabus). Inspired by *Transnational literacy autobiographies as translingual writing* (Canagarajah, 2020), which included a clear course design, and building on my previous experiment of teaching literacy autobiographical writing to my graduate students in China, I imagined the Senior Seminar to be a catalyst for similar researching and writing explorations. Except this time, I wanted my students to write with an end goal of “submission to *MEXTESOL Journal* as non-refereed articles” (Course syllabus). There was some flexibility added, though. For instance, I allowed some students to research their internship experiences. I also provided the option for them to only submit their literacy autobiographies for an in-house publication at the end of the semester. During the 15 weeks of class, the students learned about the autoethnography research method, read and discussed recent publications on language, literacy, and identity, told stories, asked questions, collected self-related data, and based on our cultural analysis of the data, drafted their own literacy autobiographies. Toward the end of the semester, we shifted our focus to peer review and revision to make the literacy autobiographies more narrative, more autoethnographic, and academic. I was impressed by my students’ literacy autobiographies. They showed me that, through autoethnographically oriented literacy autobiography projects, literacy education can be made relevant, critical, imaginative, and liberating even in an English-medium environment in Asia. Liyan was one of the two students who submitted their literacy autobiographies to *MEXTESOL Journal*. She cherished this opportunity to be mentored by an MJ reviewer, and as evidenced by her current literacy autobiography, her writing has taken strides. I hope the readers will find that an important story of language learning is not just a mechanical skill, but impactful on the learners’ life trajectories— an important point for ELT professionals to bear in mind.

Resumen

El artículo *Learning English Changed My Life*, fue escrito por Liyan Zhang fue escrito como tarea para el Seminario de inglés con fines académicos que yo (el profesor Shizhou Yang) enseñé en la Payap University en Tailandia en 2020. El objetivo principal del curso era preparar a los alumnos de la licenciatura en comunicación inglesa “para experiencia laboral o proyecto senior” (programa del curso). Inspirado por las autobiografías transnacionales de alfabetización como escritura translingual (Canagarajah, 2020), que incluía un diseño de curso claro, y basado en mi experimento anterior de enseñar escritura autobiográfica de alfabetización a mis estudiantes graduados en China, imaginé que el Seminario sería un catalizador para investigar y escribir exploraciones. Excepto que esta vez, quería que mis alumnos escribieran con el objetivo final de “envío a la Revista MEXTESOL como artículos no arbitrados” (programa del curso). Sin embargo, se agregó algo de flexibilidad. Por ejemplo, permití que algunos estudiantes investigaran sus experiencias de pasantías. También les di la opción de enviar sus autobiografías de alfabetización para una publicación interna al final del semestre. Durante las 15 semanas de clase, los estudiantes aprendieron sobre el método de investigación de autoetnografía, leyeron y discutieron publicaciones recientes sobre lenguaje, alfabetización e identidad, contaron historias, hicieron preguntas, recopilaron datos relacionados con ellos mismos y, con base en nuestro análisis cultural de los datos, redactaron sus propias autobiografías sobre alfabetización. Hacia el final del semestre, cambiamos nuestro enfoque a la revisión por pares y la revisión para hacer que las autobiografías de alfabetización fueran más narrativas, más autoetnográficas y académicas. Me impresionaron las autobiografías de alfabetización de mis alumnos. Me mostraron que, a través de proyectos de autobiografía de alfabetización orientados a la autoetnografía, la educación en alfabetización puede volverse relevante, crítica, imaginativa y liberadora incluso en un entorno de inglés como medio de instrucción en Asia. Liyan fue uno de los dos estudiantes que enviaron sus autobiografías de alfabetización a *MEXTESOL Journal*. Agradeció esta oportunidad de ser asesorada por un revisor de MJ y, como lo demuestra su actual autobiografía de alfabetización, su escritura ha avanzado mucho. Espero que los lectores encuentren que una historia importante del aprendizaje de idiomas no es solo una habilidad mecánica, sino que tiene un impacto en las trayectorias de vida de los estudiantes, un punto importante que los profesionales de ELE deben tener en cuenta.

Learning English Changed My Life

I was very lonely in my childhood although I have two elder sisters, because they never let me join their leisure activities with their friends. My big sister was a nerd, and the only after-school activity of hers was inviting her classmates to our house to do assignments. They stayed at the study table for hours, maybe

¹ Received: 20 Nov 2020. Accepted: 24 May 2021

² 2925184cici@gmail.com, 0000-0003-2414-6955

without any break, as I remember. Yes, she was a boring person, because she only liked studying. My second elder sister was a leader in her class, so that she always had many friends around her, which was the proud reason she wouldn't let me to join her. A sadder experience was when I asked to ask for their help when I got difficult math problems. They never explained to me patiently. However, the only benefit as their youngest sister was that, as they were senior students, I could be a listener or an observer when they read aloud in English. I still remember the tunes when they sang the English alphabet song, like ABCDEFG, HIJKLMN... and these notes played an important role later in my life .

I never understood what exactly they were reading about most of the time, but I used to imitate what they read until I went to middle school. My hard work of casual imitation paid off when that day came. After having my first English class in grade seven, the assignment was to copy the letters A to G in the exercise book. After I did that, I asked my big sister to check my handwriting, and she tore out the pages I had just finished and told me that they were too ugly. I wrote it again without any complaint, but I did not think it would make a big difference.

On the next day, our strict English teacher, a Chinese lady with a mop hairstyle that seemed very liberating and unique, came to the class with a very serious face and told us all the students had to rewrite the homework again, except for one student. "Let me check what's her name", she said. "Zhang Liyan ". "Really?" I was exempted. My face got totally flushed, "How come?" I asked myself many times. From that day, I became the representative of our English class. My job was basically to collect my classmates' exercise books and I also had to write a lot of exercise questions on the blackboard. Sometimes it took me hours since there was no printed exercise paper at that time. In this way, I understood and memorized a lot of words by repeatedly writing them.

I was getting a bit rebellious when several teachers from different subjects I liked were changed and also, I started to like doing sports and singing popular songs. Sometimes, I could not focus on the lesson during the classes, my grades were dropping, but I felt it was not a big deal because I did not put much effort into those subjects. But English seemed very easy to me. Something magical happened that I never figured out until now, there was a guy who always failed his English tests until he was moved to sit next to me; his English then got better and better. How did I influence him? I wondered.

I chose English as my major when I went to university, not because the guy sitting next to me made me feel accomplished, but because learning English was easy and pleasant to me compared to other subjects. But a Chinese old saying goes, "山外有山, 天外有天", which in English means "*There is a mountain outside the mountain, there is a sky outside the sky*". I thought my English was OK but when I got into university, I came to realize most of my classmates' English was better than mine because they graduated from better high schools. My English was "poor", which was the most common word that Chinese people used to describe their unintelligible English.

Before college, our family lived in a small coastal city which is 300 kilometres away from Beijing. Compared to my new college classmates, I was too shy to speak English because we did not have much speaking and listening practice. Instead, reading and writing were the contents that we studied most of the time, which is called silent learning. And we had never got a native English teacher, which made a distinct difference between my practical English and my classmates'.

Fortunately, my college teachers were very nice and merciful to me. They did not give students much pressure. But my ego told me I had to study hard to catch up with my classmates and to understand my teachers' lectures. I got up early in the morning to read English texts on campus, I recited articles from the textbooks, I even carried them when I climbed the mountain with my friends. Since then, learning English became a habit of mine, it even had become a part of my life. I seldom felt bored about learning English, sometimes a little bit, then I would watch some funny English TV series like Friends, or Desperate Housewives and I enjoyed imitating the lines of the characters, which set up a foundation for my keen enthusiasm for English drama.

Luckily, four years later, I was able to graduate together with my classmates, but I did not think what I had learned was enough to find a decent job since most of my study time was focused on exams and memorization., However, I did not participate in many realistic and social activities. I was worried about my future career.

But something that I learnt had connected with my life, a lot even until now, because I became a Christian later and more and more spiritual due to reading and doing a lot of personal growth teaching in the English language, which I consider the crucial supplement to my education. I still remember some selected stories from a Chinese version of the English Bible in which the language was not easy for me to understand, but the excerpt when Eve was tempted by a big snake and stole an apple from the Garden, and from then on, humans sinned and suffered, was fascinating to me because it is similar to Asian myths. The concept of "sin" was very unique to me in the level of my understanding at that time. Before that, I thought of sin as only by breaking laws or moral rules that referred to "sin". The story of Eve was the first time, I got to learn some contents of the English version of the Bible that my teachers provided. And I was eager to explore more about the connection between Christianity, English culture and, its language. It was much more interesting than learning other subjects in Chinese like Marxism, which was all about "matter is the most important", and there were not any fascinating stories like this.

I was still not confident with my English skills when I was trying to find a job, but I got several job offers. Anyways. They were all as a secretary or assistant to the managers and they all asked for English abilities to translate texts or to be an interpreter at meetings. I was afraid, because I was not sure about my translating competences, but I decided to try.

Finally, the job I got did not require me to do work as an interpreter, instead I just needed to translate emails for my boss, so in this way, I would have enough time to check those technical words in dictionaries. But business English was still hard for me because there were a lot of financial, administrative, and venture capital terms that I did not even understand in my mother tongue. I never learned those words in college. "But it's okay, I have to learn anyways." I told myself. I do not know where I got the "never-give-up" spirit. I think maybe because my mom always told my sisters and me a lot of stories about the hard times that my grandparents experienced during the war time, which encouraged me to be strong and resilient. However, my boss was a very energetic and tough middle-aged lady, about 20 years older than me. Truly, I learned some management skills from her. but she had non-stop meetings during the workdays and, unfortunately, I had to be around her in case she needed my help when she was in the meetings. She was always on the phone and having business trips around the country. One thing my body could not handle was the carsickness. I had to fly with her from one city to another in the morning and come back in the evening. The distance from the airport to the office made me feel nausea, but I tried taking pills and always had some back up plastic bags with me in case I would need them when I felt like throwing up, and I still had headaches. Nonetheless, I thought I would give up this job someday if I could not overcome this challenge.

To make things worse, I am not a night person. She always had meetings from morning to midnight to listen to district managers' working reports, and I had to accompany her. If I couldn't sleep well at night, I would feel dizzy during the day and I could not concentrate on my work. Reluctantly, I decided to give up that pretty high salary job, which paid 2500 dollars a month in 2009. During a period of time, I had no idea about what other jobs I could do within my physical ability. Every job involved taking cars or having business trips, etc.

On a normal day in Beijing, I received a phone call from a job agent while I was doing skincare at a beauty salon. The interviewer was asking me questions in English, so instinctively, I replied to her in English as clearly as I could. The conversation just lasted several minutes, and when I hung up the phone, the young lady who worked at the beauty salon asked me why I could speak fluent English; was I an English teacher? Although I did not think my English was that fluent, she seemed very excited about people who could speak some English. But I was encouraged by the unintentional small chat. You will never know who will inspire you in what ways. Then, I started thinking maybe I could do something related to English language training so that I could make a living using my limited English skills and, at the same time, improve my English proficiency. That would be great.

Later on, I began to ask for advice from my college classmates who were working in the English training area since I was determined to open a small language training center. At that time, there were already more than a hundred English training institutions in Beijing, but only a few big ones, such as "Xin Dong Fang" (New Orient English Training School), were popular. For English learners, to find English classes near their community was not easy. Only in the central business district of Beijing (CBD) could people find English training centers, so I decided to set up the center inside a community where the rent was much affordable.

I expected the community English center I was going to open could help white collar workers in Beijing because I hoped learning English could help them find jobs and opportunities, since there were more international companies coming into the city. So, I planned to hire teachers, including Chinese and native speakers of English. Since then, English became an inseparable part of my life as I had to use it very often to communicate with interviewees.

I had never done anything related to business by myself before, plus my parents were not good at doing business either so, I thought I had to be very careful about investing any penny of money. I would spend the least amount of it at the beginning to minimize the risk of bankruptcy, so I calculated the predicated income and expenditure carefully and I made a decision to just utilize one of the rooms of my apartments as the classroom. I decorated the living room like a reception, using my English name as the name of the center, and the little English classroom was eager to welcome its customers.

Thanks to my work at my previous company, which was an outdoor media company, I learned a little bit of common ways to advertise new brands or products by different means of publicity, such as handing out brochures at the subway station, at the gate of the community, and doing promotions, and answering questions about our English classes for people who were interested in learning English.

Honestly, I did not expect we would have customers for several months, but after sending out hundreds of flyers at the railway station, the miracle happened. Some people began to call our hotline to ask for information about our English classes which they saw on the advertisement, which made me feel excited because it was a good sign for the business. Ironically, I felt I was not ready because I had not hired any teachers yet. When the first person came to ask about our English learning program, I felt relieved because the guy was a southerner, and he could speak some English. and planned to find a new job in an international company, but his native southern accent was very strong, even in his Mandarin. What he wanted to learn was just to reduce his accent. That was the good news for me, since I myself could help him to do this at the beginning before teachers got hired and this was the least thing I could do. And after three months of training, the guy got a very good offer from a well-known international company, and he became my faithful fan.

The English training market in Beijing was much bigger than I thought so more and more English learners registered in our classes. Before long, the center was equipped with teaching assistants, receptionists, marketing people, and several part-time teachers including native English teachers. By the year 2020, it was already an 8-year-old teaching institution and interestingly, my big sister is taking charge of it as her endeavour since I made a big decision to study abroad after five years of running it because that the more I used English, the more I felt my English knowledge and communication skills were limited. Maybe my sister is doomed to do this work since she was the one who was reading English aloud and influenced me when I was young.

Life is dramatic and we never know who or what will have an impact. I thought my big sister could go to a good university because she studied so hard when she was young, however, her high school scores did not qualify her to go to a university in our hometown. To my surprise, I spent more time on physical activities like jumping rope, playing badminton, and hanging out with my friends, but I was the only one who finished college studies. I never thought my sister could become a businesswoman because she seemed like a boring and nerdy student, but she is doing a very good job in the business. One thing is certain, her hard-work and resilience in school and work have influenced me greatly so that I have the passion to continue my future studies related to English in other countries, which has and will dramatically change my life.