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Honorable Mention - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest 2020: The Journey to Becoming Literate

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Dr. Christopher White

The Journey to Becoming Literate

This essay is a story describing my journey that I went through to learn how to speak and write. For me, this story was not hard to think of because in order to learn how to write, I had to first understand the English language. This paper did have its challenges because I was so little when all of this happened, some of it is not in my memory. I had help from my parents to recall specific details of events such as the surgery and my early years in speech therapy. I created a rough outline with the ideas that I wanted to touch on. After that, I was able to put those ideas into a paper format and add in details. Both my professor and supplementary English instructor helped me to revise it and expand in areas such as what it was like for me to go through all of this and how I got through school with these setbacks. I was able to revise and add much more detail thanks to my parents and my memory. The revision process was not too difficult as I just needed to add details to the foundation that I had already laid.

Imagine trying to speak with your friends when you understand what they are saying to you, but they have no idea what you are saying to them. Hi there. I'm Lauren, and I have an interesting story when it comes to how I became literate. I learned to read and write at a slower pace than most kids. It all started when I was a baby. I was born with a cleft palate, which means I had a hole in the top of my mouth also known as the soft palate. That is the roof of your mouth closer to your throat. If you say the letter "q", the part of your tongue that hits the roof of your mouth is the soft palate. I was also born in China and put up for adoption, so I was in a Chinese-speaking orphanage. These two factors combined made for a difficult literacy journey ahead of me. When I was adopted and came here to America, my parents got my palate repaired and we began to work on my ability to speak, read, and write.

It all started when I was adopted by my parents. I lived in an orphanage in China with almost all women. My parents say the adjustment was not too bad for me, but I only went to my dad for everything. I got used to my mom quickly, but I did not know what to do when it came to my older brother. For some reason, just didn't like him right away. I was much more comfortable with females. I was seventeen months old when my dad brought me home from China to Mokena and I was only able to say words that started with m and n. I had a cleft palate, which is why I was unable to speak. My parents knew this before I was adopted, and they had plans to repair it when I came to the states.

You may not be aware of what a cleft palate is, so I can explain that for you. In the simplest terms, it means that I had a birth defect where the roof of my mouth did not fully form. It is a split in the roof of the mouth (the palate) that occurs when the facial tissues do not properly connect. Doctors say that this is one of the most common birth defects, and therefore, is usually corrected by surgery. Because a hole in the baby's mouth or lip is noticeable, doctors can

think of a treatment plan almost immediately after birth. There is no true cause of a cleft palate, but some scientists believe that it is a combination of environment and genetics. In my case, we do not know the cause since I had a closed adoption. This is a lifelong issue in a way because one of the common side effects after repair is chronic ear infections. I happen to get ear infections all the time, but there is not a huge issue with that now. At first, my doctors thought I may have issues hearing and understanding other people because of this, but that was not the case.

We got the palate repaired, and the day I came home from the hospital, I began to start speech therapy, the beginning of my exceptionally long literacy journey. Before I was able to speak, my speech therapist gave my family a poster with many pictures on it. I would point to the photo of what I wanted until I learned how to communicate what I wanted using words. I had to learn how to understand English, and then I needed to take that knowledge and form words and start speaking. It took me about two years of hard work and speech therapy four times a week for me to be able to begin speaking. One of the hardest sounds for me to make was the words with “s” and “sh” in them. My speech therapist would take a Cheeto ball and have me hold the ball to the roof of my mouth where my teeth met. This was so I could get used to the feeling of my tongue on the roof of my mouth. After that, I would attempt to say simple words like “she, shh, salt, sun.” I always struggled with “s, sh”, and” ch” words. I was able to understand English when I was about three. I could tell what my friends and family were saying to me, but most of the time people had a hard time understanding me.

The hard part now was not understanding people, but for them to understand me was difficult. I finished the four days a week therapy, but I was still in speech therapy until I was in fifth grade.

Throughout time, I was obviously improving, but as I was still in elementary school, many of the other students and even my teachers had a hard time understanding what I was saying. My parents always said that I would get frustrated when other people had to try and explain what I was saying, because I wanted to be able to speak for myself. I began getting self-conscious about my speech, so I tried to avoid reading aloud in classes. I was unable to read as well as the other students, and then I tried to stay quiet when the teacher asked for volunteers to read aloud to the class, so the school thought maybe I had a problem with reading. I had to go into a separate room with a nice lady. I would sit at a table with a book and a timer in front of me. I would wait for the teacher to come over and explain the same instructions I have heard many times.

“Ok, now you are going to read as much of the book you can in a certain amount of time. You won’t know the amount of time you need to read for. I will stop you when the time is up,” “Great” I would think. “This is so embarrassing. I have to sit here, and I need to prove to this lady I can read.” Sometimes it felt insulting, but now I know that it was just to help me out. I do not regret it now, but at the time I really hated going to that room and showing that I was not dumb. Those few minutes felt like an eternity. I would read the few paragraphs and the teacher would always say I did great, but I never knew if I did a good job or not. The next part of the reading assessment was for me to read a new page out loud to the teacher. She would say “don’t rush. Take your time, and read correctly, not fast.” I always hated this part because I knew I wasn’t speaking clearly because I worried about the time and pronouncing the words correctly. It turns out I never did have a real problem with reading. I was just worried about what everyone else would think of me.

In addition to this experience, I always had an issue reading aloud, speaking to the class, and even explaining myself to my teachers. I was constantly questioned on what I meant or what

I was saying. My classmates did not know what I was experiencing very well, but at the time I did not know that or understand. I just knew that my friends did not understand me, and it was annoying to repeat myself. My teachers were typically more lenient toward me when it came to me speaking, but it was still uncomfortable for me to speak one on one with my teachers.

Sometimes, they would let me talk to them in private for some assignments, but they also tried to help push me to speak aloud for practice. The students did not make fun of me necessarily, but they would whisper to each other and it would make me nervous. Looking back, I now know that they probably were not even talking about me, but at the time it was very hard to understand. I was always a few reading levels behind because I would try to speak my books to learn how to say them. I would bring them to my speech therapy lessons, and we would work with them so I would get speaking in a practical setting. This is part of the reason that my classmates and teachers believed that I may have had a reading issue. I was just always trying to sound out what I was reading.

As I went into sixth grade, I found out that I would no longer need to go to speech therapy every week. I did not need it at all anymore. Since then, I have been able to understand English perfectly, and people usually understand me now. In fact, when I tell people I had a cleft palate repair, they would find it hard to believe. I can now read and write with little difficulty, and it is nowhere near as difficult as it used to be for me. I now have confidence when I speak in front of people.

My advice to anyone reading this is to not give up. To parents, be patient. Your kids are trying, they really want to make you proud and show you they are progressing. There is no rush. Let your child learn at his or her own pace. They will get there eventually. It is not helpful for you to be upset at slow progress. Slow progress is better than no progress at all. To the friends of

those struggling with literacy, do not ask what a million times. Please just explain that it is hard to understand and be patient with you friend. It is hard enough to figure out what we want to say, and we just get embarrassed when you continually ask us “what? Huh? You know what? Never mind”. That makes us feel embarrassed and insecure about our literacy skills. Instead, encourage your friend. Tell him or her that the progress is fantastic and to continue the hard work. To teachers, do not point out the students who wish to not read in front of the class. You can take the student one-on-one and offer to help with their confidence. Students struggling to read, especially at a young age, feel incredibly left out and insecure. Make sure the students know that they can feel comfortable with you, and if they need it, they can go to you and ask for help with their reading skills. If you cannot understand the student, do not be obvious or rude in front of the class, just politely ask for the student to repeat him/herself. This would become useful in a professional setting when asking someone to repeat themselves because it will not come off as rude or insensitive.

Having this experience is extremely beneficial to my career in the future. The reason for this is that I want to pursue forensic science and criminal justice, so I will have to work with many people of many ages and literacy backgrounds. I have a better understanding on how to treat a person I may not understand in a respectful manner. Especially in my field, I will be working with younger kids, and I will need to be able to communicate to them in a way they will comprehend, and then I will work with them. It is important to know how to treat people with difficulties communicating, because I will need to remain professional, and if I come across as rude for not understanding that person, I will not be perceived as a professional. In turn, those people I help or work with will then be more willing to open to me, and we may be able to make further progress on the case at hand.

While this was a long and trying journey, there is a concern that I may need more speech therapy because I need to have a major reconstructive jaw surgery in May. My family and I are hoping that speech therapy will not be necessary, but because of the cleft palate repair, my lower jaw is much further out than my upper jaw. It is typical with the cleft palate repair surgery that the upper jaw does not grow as much as the lower jaw, therefore I will need to undergo surgery to pull my upper jaw forward and my lower jaw backwards. As it can be imagined, that may greatly affect my ability to pronounce words or speak properly for some time. Obviously, my reading and writing abilities should not be affected, so I can find some way of communicating my needs. I don't feel that bothered because I have done it before. This time I know the language at least, so I am already ahead of where I was in the beginning. It has been a long journey, but it was all worth it to be able to speak and be a literate person.