

Living a Bilingual Life in America

As a child, I always struggled with the feeling of being pulled into two different directions because of growing up between two seemingly polar opposite cultures. It took me a very long time to realize that I should not have to choose between my Vietnamese and American identities. I learned to be proud of living a “hyphenated American” life, and my struggles with identity actually gave me a clearer picture of who I want to be.

This autoethnography does not focus on the cultural exploration or traditions of hyphenated Americans, but it focuses on the languages that define them. My family migrated to America on my very first birthday, and I have lived here ever since. However, instead of letting the popular and, often times, overwhelming American culture engulf me completely, I managed to keep the Vietnamese identity and traditions present in my life. I wanted to hear the stories of others who faced the same struggles as me. I explore the culture of being fully fluent in two or more languages and how too often, the English language threatens to take over completely. I want to expose how hard it is for us to keep our native languages prevalent and thriving in our lives.

I believe that the initial stages of adapting to the American culture are one of the hardest parts for any foreign family. There are so many cultural and language gaps that must be bridged quickly and smoothly. In my family, one of the most important tools to help ease this transition was the dictionary. In the very beginning, my family depended so much on book of about two inches thick in width and about the size of a person’s hand. The cover is a faded green and can be easily overlooked on a bookshelf. When opened, the pages are thin, faded, and slightly yellow in color. The ink inside, with endless lines of words, is slightly smudged in some corners.

When it is opened right down the middle, the first half translates Vietnamese words into English and the second half translates English into Vietnamese. It used to be opened countless times

every day. It has been used in my father's office when he tried to decipher letters and bills he received in the mail. It has been used by my mother to understand the instructions on my homework to help me complete it. I have used it to describe how my day went, when I do not know how to say "crayon" or "sandbox" in Vietnamese.

This dictionary was used before Google Translate was ever an app on an iPhone. It might have taken a little longer to find the right page and the right word; however it was priceless to me growing up. It has been over a decade since our Vietnamese American dictionary has been opened or used. Over the years, we forget about it as it sits atop our bookshelf collecting dust. This dictionary didn't simply combine two languages into one book, it showed me how two languages can overlap and coexist in harmony. It was a hard thing for me to accept as a child that two languages, two cultures, can actually complement each other. However, after conducting my interviews, I saw more proof affirming the possibility of this idea.

It was late at night when I first approached Nadia to talk with her. She was reclining on her futon in her dorm while doing chemistry homework. She is an African-American freshman who, aside from English, speaks fluent Twi, a common dialect in Ghana. She was born in Ghana, but moved to the United States at the age of five. Her story is slightly different from mine, because the official language in Ghana is English. Therefore, she was already exposed to a multilingual society before moving to America.

Nadia attended school in Ghana before moving to New York City. Unlike me, she already had formal lessons in Twi and English. Although Nadia already spoke fluent English, Nadia still had struggles adapting to American culture and was bullied in school for having an accent. After starting school in the States, her exposure to Twi began to fade as she spent more and more time speaking, reading, and writing solely English. We discussed how we were both forced to adapt and speak nothing but English in school. Since we were so young when we started school, we simply did what our classmates did. For the

both of us, it came so naturally; we couldn't recall a time before we became "Americanized" in our behaviors and language.

Nadia is the eldest child with two younger sisters and one younger brother. Nowadays, Nadia rarely speaks Twi with her younger siblings. They have had even less exposure to the native language than her. As for her youngest brother, who was born and raised in America, he does not understand their native language at all. Her siblings unintentionally aided her as she gradually distanced herself away from the Twi language. Nadia not only spoke English at school but came home speaking English with her siblings as well. Twi began to become less and less prominent in her life.

Although I knew Nadia before interviewing her, I learned so much from our discussion. It made me realize how important of a role siblings and family play in a hyphenated American's ability to retain their native language. Our exposure to a language is influenced by the environment we face inside and outside of our own homes. One of the biggest factors that affected Nadia's fluency in Twi is her siblings. Since she had three younger siblings who knew less Twi than her, she was forced to speak with them in English. I never felt that influence, because I am an only child. Outside of school, I did not speak English, because there was no one to talk to besides my parents. Another important factor is that my own parents are not bilingual. They do not speak fluent English. Therefore, in the same way Nadia had no choice but to speak to her siblings in English, I had no choice but to speak Vietnamese to my parents. This played an extremely important role in how comfortable and fluent I speak Vietnamese today.

My next interviewee was Audrey. She was sitting on the floor of my dorm waiting for me as I came and sat down next to her. I told her about my project, and she was happy to talk with me about her experiences growing up in America. Audrey spoke fluent English, Korean, and Chinese. However, when I asked her what she identified herself as, she replied, "Korean-American". Her family is from South Korea, and therefore Korean was her native language. Her family moved a lot as she was growing up, and this resulted in her being multilingual. She was born in the Philippines, but she attended

elementary school in America. In the sixth grade, she moved to China and attended international school for the rest of middle school and high school. Along the way, she learned how to speak, read, and write all three.

The most notable part of our talk was when she described to me how she learned Korean. She never attended school in Korea; which is very similar to how I never attended school in Vietnam. Yet we can both, not only speak but also, read and write in our native languages. This was all thanks to our moms. Audrey explained that before she ever started attending school in America, her mother sat her down and taught her the entire Korean alphabet. She honestly doesn't remember if it was a challenging task or not. All she knew was that before she ever started preschool, she already knew the basic foundations of her native language. She started elementary school not knowing a word of English. After a couple of months Audrey naturally adapted the way Nadia and I did. Even after starting elementary school, Audrey's parents spoke to her in complete Korean at home, and she was expected to reply in Korean as well.

Later Audrey moved to China, and she was formally taught how to read and write Chinese there. Although she was not physically in America anymore, her exposure to American English did not change. She attended international school which she explained was "an American school in China". Classes were taught in English, and students were expected to speak English outside of class as well. Chinese was "a mandatory second language" class the way Spanish or French might be in America.

Like Audrey, my mom also taught me Vietnamese formally at home, however she didn't start as early as Audrey's mom. It is a very challenging task to sit any seven or eight year old down and ask them to perform a tedious task such as sound out individual words or repeatedly copy down the alphabet. It was struggle, and I dreaded it every day. Also similar to Audrey, my parents never wavered with their policy about no English in the house. Whenever I stepped through the door, I was expected to speak full

and fluent Vietnamese. Although it was frustrating, it kept me balanced and knowledgeable about my language.

Audrey's story is not a typical one. I was surprised to find out she did not spend a majority of her life in America like my other interviewees, but her English had no distinguishable foreign accent. However, I decided to include her interview in this project, because although she was not physically in America, she was exposed to American English the same way my other interviewees were. I find it very ironic that she and I both had to formally be taught our native languages. When a person thinks of a "native language", it is generally not learned through books or paper. However, growing up in America, it was absolutely necessary.

My final interview was with Kenny. We finally found time to sit down and talk, after being so busy with school. We sat right next to the window chatting casually over frozen yogurt at Yogli Mogli's. He is a freshman at Emory University, and his family is from northern India. Although his parents are from India, he was born in America. He explained to me how India is divided into different states similar to America. His parents are from the state of Gujarat and therefore speak Gujarati, a language derived from Hindi. Although Kenny spent all of his life in America, he still has the ability to speak, read, write, and understand his parent's native language. He described how this was a result of consistent usage of Gujarati in his home between him and his parents.

Kenny's story is similar to Nadia's because not only is Kenny bilingual, his parents are as well. In this case, it is exceptionally challenging for any family to not fall into the habit of speaking only English. Since India is so heavily populated with such diversity in language and dialects, it is hard for Kenny to find people outside of his family to speak with in Gujarati. Even if they are from India, there is no guarantee that they will speak his specific language. However, he finds time to talk to his older brother, and the two of them speak Gujarati to each other.

During our interview, Kenny told me a very relatable story about how his Gujarati affected his English and his English affected his Gujarati. In the instances that he came back to visit his family in India, he described how it was intimidating to speak to the natives in Gujarat, because they could immediately tell that he was not a native speaker. He claimed that his “Gujarati had an American accent”. He isn't as fluent in his native language as my other interviewees; however his story accurately describes the struggles faced by many hyphenated Americans.

I have also returned to Vietnam numerous times to visit family. I understood exactly what he was talking about. I am scrutinized and observed when I travel over there. If I do not blend in through the way I dress and talk, strangers passing me on the street would be able to see the difference. Family or friends also examine me to see how “Americanized” I have become. Like Kenny said, it can be quite intimidating. We are not only caught between two languages but also between two different cultures. We don't necessarily fit perfectly into one specific category. We will always be different whichever culture or community we are in.

I enjoyed sharing my struggles with my interviewees and hearing their stories. Living it every day growing up, I knew being bilingual wasn't easy, but I now I know I am not the only one feeling this way. There was always this urge to immerse myself in English and completely shake off my native language. At times, it felt like an unnecessary burden that I had to carry. It would have been so easy to let go completely and not look back. Yet through it all, Kenny, Sammie, Nadia, and I all came out of it with the ability to read, write, and speak two or more languages. Through our different stories and experiences, we all had to agree that the cost of maintaining fluency in our native language, no matter how high, added a priceless dimension to our lives that we couldn't imagine living without.