

Project 1: A Writer's Autobiography

Someone Someone

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I have never really been much of a fan of writing, but I do consider myself to have some writing skills that I have learned since I was very young. There have been different periods in my life where I have been forced to write lots of documents for school; as there have been times where I spent months without writing anything at all.

As a child, I entered into a well known American school that had established in my country. There I learned to read, write and speak English at the same time I learned how to read and write in my native Spanish. I entered first grade when I was 6 years old, at least a year younger than all of my classmates. Even though I still managed to do pretty well in school.

My parents have always taught me that reading is a very powerful source of knowledge and that it is a practice that I should work on as much as I could. I loved to read lots of books, and by the time I was in the 5th grade I was reading novels that could extend for as much as 600 pages.

Even though I went to an English speaking school and I knew the basics of the language, it can never be the same if you don't practice it. And I didn't have the chance to do that very much because I talked to everyone in Spanish, except to my teachers. Anyway, I think what really helped my ability to write in English was all the reading I did. Reading helped me learn how authors use different word forms and writing techniques. I also practiced lots of reading in Spanish and have always been able to write very good essays in my native language. I felt pretty confident in my writing abilities at the moment.

Another thing that helped me on a lesser degree was to watch English spoken television programs. Since English is not the first language in Costa Rica, it is generally practiced that TV shows are not translated, but subtitled in Spanish. This is something that not all countries do, and

it allowed me to learn what certain phrases meant just by listening to the actors, and then reading the subtitles if I didn't understand them.

This practiced was enforced by translating assignments I had to do as a youngster. On the summers, I worked for my father's travel agency to earn some extra cash, and one of the things I had to do was to translate dozens of descriptions of hotels, tours, packages, etc. I always did this with a Spanish-English dictionary by my side, so if there ever was anything I wasn't sure about I would just look it up or try to associate the word with its Latin root. If I still wasn't sure, I'd ask to some other staff member at the office to help out. My father, by the way, speaks perfect English and Spanish, and sometimes they invited him to make translations for different conferences or events that took place. By hearing him, I also learned a great deal because I always translated in my head what the spokesperson was saying and then checked to see if I was right when my dad translated it.

Things like that helped me develop my English outside of class. Half of my family is American and if I hadn't learned English I would not have been able to interact with most of my cousins, uncles and aunts, so I always try to do certain activities that will teach me new things about the language. I would say that maybe 50% of my English was learned outside the classrooms.

During my elementary school education, you could say that my writing abilities in English and Spanish were in constant improvement until I reached the 5th grade. By this time, my school had moved its location farther away from home, reason by which my parents decided that it might be best if I attended a closer school and perhaps a Costa Rican school.

When I entered a Costa Rican school, my English studies changed a bit. Now I only took one class spoken in English (English class) and only had two hours per week of it. Plus the

English level that is enforced by our education system is not as good, of course, as the one that was practiced at my old school. So as it was expected, my writing abilities in English did not improve much from then on and my grammar or accent didn't either. On the other hand, my writing abilities in Spanish improved in a great deal over the following years, and I was taught many different facets of the Spanish language as a subject. I studied a great variety of books, from novels, to poetry, essays, legends and even newspaper articles. I was taught how to write essays, speeches, articles and other types of writing genres, in my Spanish lessons. We also studied many forms of sentence formations and practically anything you need to know in order to be able to speak and write in Spanish correctly. Many grammatical rules apply also to other languages, such as English, and I have been able to kind of build a structure of a document written in English, based on the parameters they had taught me in Spanish.

Even though Spanish was not my best subject at school, I did pretty well on my national bachelor exam. In Costa Rica, we are not only obliged to pass high school, but we are also submitted to national exams, one of every important subject. My Spanish exam involved writing an essay, so my high school teachers focused on this area very much and taught us different writing techniques we could find useful.

After I graduated from high school I didn't do much until I began working in a travel agency where I was forced one more time to practice my English skills. Most of the writing I did was in e-mails I sent to customers or other business related people, making detailed itinerary descriptions of some tourist packages we sold and other office assignments that had to be done. Working there really helped to build confidence in my English writing and spelling capabilities. I guess you could say that I am way over an average Costa Rican regarding his English skills, but I want to be at the same level as any other American my age.

This has basically been the story of my lifetime development as an English writer, a development that is still in progress and still has many things for me in the future. One of the goals I've set to accomplish at Purdue University is to take as much advantage as I can to English related subjects that will help me be a better writer in this practically "universal" language.