

# 5. WHEN (STANDARD) ENGLISH IS YOUR SECOND LANGUAGE: NAVIGATING LANGUAGE AND WRITING IN ACADEMICS AND IN LIFE

*By Antonio Sarabia*

## I. MY ACCENT

To this day, I carry the remnants of my first language in my mind and in my tongue. Like an auditory afterimage. It can be easily heard in the staccato of my vowels, the flavor of my consonants, the color of my words. It has been years since I have dreamt in a language other than English. Most of my conversations, writing and interactions today are in English. I teach in English, I read in English, I write emails, letters and texts in English. I argue in English (English is great for arguing). I have spent more years of my life navigating the world in English than I ever did in Spanish. And yet, that subtle delicate melody and rhythm that is my particular accent flows from my lips every time I speak.

I carry my accent proudly. As the years pass, I sometimes worry that my accent will slowly fade until it is no longer there. It is such a defining quality of who I am that I fear I might lose a piece of myself if I were ever to lose my accent. That is unlikely to happen of course. Even as my pronunciation changes and evolves over time, it would take a colossal effort to completely erase my accent. I am reassured every time I hear myself in a video or recording. It is a strange experience to hear yourself talk. I imagine that most people are surprised at how drastically a recording differs from their internal voice. But

rather than being shocked by my voice, I am always delighted to hear that my accent is still there, still coloring my words, reminding me of where I come from.

I am an immigrant. My parents and siblings are immigrants and I have many friends who are immigrants. One thing I know for sure is that all of us had drastically different experiences, especially when it came to learning the language of our new home. I know many people for whom this experience was very difficult, even traumatic. It is, after all, a daunting endeavor to learn a new language. It is not just about memorizing the meaning and sounds of a long list of words. Language is all about decoding a vast interdependent web of meaning and mastering subtle cultural signifiers. It requires us to rewire our brain into a completely new way of perceiving and experiencing our reality.

This may also be true even for people who were born in the United States and grew up speaking English. It is not that rare to come across individuals who have spoken English all their lives and still struggle with the writing conventions, grammatical rules and strange anachronism of standard English and academic writing. The challenges might be drastically different for English learners as opposed to Native speakers, but for both groups standard

academic English is a new skill that needs to be learned, developed and refined.

Learning English for me was and still is an ongoing process. But I consider myself fortunate that it was not particularly traumatic or distressing. Although I know this is not the case for everyone, the process of coming into contact and adapting to a new language was relatively smooth for me. My family moved to the U.S. in 1993 when I was 10 years old, just in time for me to begin 6th grade. I developed my ability to communicate relatively quickly after arriving. Within a couple of years, I was able to adequately read and write basic texts and I could speak well enough to make myself understood. During middle school, I progressed quickly from English Language Learning (ELL) classes, to regular classes. In high school I started out in college prep class and was enrolled in honor courses by my Junior year. I realize that I did not have to struggle as much as many of my friends when coming face to face with standard academic English.

But there were many factors that made my particular journey a lot easier, and I recognize I had many advantages and help along the way. I will focus on a few details of my circumstances that truly helped me become familiar and master my new language. First, I was lucky to land in a school that we would today call "Bilingual Instructional Program." My classes were in Spanish, with a teacher who spoke and taught core content in Spanish. When it came to learning English, there were lessons specifically designed to learn English, but I did not have to suffer the confusion of not understanding other subjects because I did not understand the language. I continued to learn science, and math and other subjects in my native tongue, even as our class gradually used more and more English. I only spent one year at that school before moving to Middle school

for 7th and 8th grade, which would immerse me completely into English learner classes. These were completely taught in English, but were basically just dumbed down versions of regular classes. However, I had learned enough that I could navigate this new world and this new language much better than other students who had simply been dropped into full English immersion. I don't expect you to believe that the bilingual education system is the best way to learn English based on a statistical sample of 1, but it definitely worked for me.

Secondly, even before I was able to decode the meaning of any sentence in English, my sister had already begun nurturing my love of reading. I fondly remember how one day she came into my room with a thick book and told me I would have to read it. It was a historical novel of more than 500 pages. She didn't have to force me, but she wasn't asking either. The fact is that I looked up to her so much that it was an established fact that I would follow any of her commands. She was (and still is) the smartest person I've ever met.

My parents were also readers. Every single Sunday, for many years, we would make a trip to the public library where we would spend a few hours. My parents never forced us to read anything, but they served as great examples. They would sit and read for hours and just let my siblings and me roam the library. But I observed and internalized their actions. Reading was just something they did and I wanted to be like them. The fact we were surrounded by books made it inevitable that we would eventually embrace the practice. And so it began with one book, and then another, and then another. Before long I was devouring entire novels. I could not get my fill. Some of my most cherished memories are from those peaceful Sundays with my entire family in the public library.

The books I read were all in Spanish at first, but they allowed me to become familiar with language. I understood words had power. They could communicate deep truths and grand ideas. I was moved to tears and was carried on epic adventures by the books I read during that time. That experience demystified language for me in a way that made tackling a second language more of a curious mystery that I knew I could solve, instead of a barrier I should dread.

I also understood English was like a key. If I was able to unlock that skill, not only would I be able to do well in school and make my parents proud, but there were so many books in English I would be able to open and experience. I could hardly wait. I made it my mission to unlock that door. I remember the first book in English that I checked out from the library for that purpose. It was a book of Greek Myths. I was already familiar with some of the stories so I figured it would be a good place to start. I sat down with that book and an English to Spanish translator and I promised myself that if I came across any words that I didn't understand, then I would look them up. I would not move on to the next page until I understood the entire page, every sentence and every word. Alone in my room with my book of Greek Myths, my English to Spanish translator and the determination of a young excited boy, I began my journey. The first sentence began with:

*"Hercules was so strong that he was able to move large stones with..."*

Then there it was. I came across the first of many unfamiliar words. I quickly searched my dictionary for the translation. The word was "ease."

## II. STANDARD ENGLISH

From the moment I spoke my first words in English in 6th grade to the beginning of my senior year in high school, I managed to navigate school with good grades. It had not been hard. Even though my English was still developing and my writing was nowhere near college level, my high school classes were simply not challenging. I was mostly able to coast on previous knowledge and I was excellent at following directions. Teachers liked me because I was quiet and did my work. But most teachers and their curriculum were the opposite of rigorous and so my high school education was mostly uninspiring. This all changed when I became a senior and enrolled in Honors English 12, the hardest and most inspiring class I have ever taken. That class transformed my writing and my relationship with Standard English.

My teacher, Ms. Crandall was at once a gentle soul and an intimidating force of nature. The best thing that ever happened to my writing was taking her class. I can give an accurate sense of her particular approach with two examples.

When it came to the mechanics of writing, Ms. Crandall was as relentless as she was ruthless. We had a writing assignment every week. Starting Monday we would have to plan it over, draft, revise and turn it in on Friday. These were no small projects. She was assigning complex prompts and expected college level work. The essays just kept coming, week after week. I had never written so much in my entire life. She would take all our essays home, all 30 of them and come back on Monday with extensive notes and hundreds of marks. The students and I jokingly called the beginning of the week "Bloody Mondays," for our essays returned dripping in red ink. She could identify the smallest grammatical or syntax error, every

dangling modifier, and every run-on sentence as well as every lapse in logic and every misused word. Her red pen was free flowing and infinite. This might sound like a complete nightmare, especially for someone who was still learning English, but paradoxically she had a way of making the feedback land softly, especially during our many one-on-one meetings.

She always sat with us individually. The first time this happened I was terrified, but I quickly understood that she had high standards and was only pushing me to pay attention to the details. More than that, her demeanor and attention made me feel like she genuinely wanted me to get better. She would provide me with extensive, detailed and thoughtful feedback. And she would do it so nicely, always taking her time with me and praising the larger ideas, all the qualities that she found strong.

"I know it looks like your paper is all red, but that's just the mechanics, all of that can be fixed. That's not as important right now. What is important is what you thought about, and you communicated that. I loved your ideas..."

And then she would tell me which parts she loved and why. She was able to narrow in on the essence of our writing, always encouraging us to go deeper. She would always walk me through the things I had done well and explain all the things I could improve upon. It is hard to describe how nurturing it felt to be taken seriously, to be heard, and to be encouraged.

The class was challenging, the essays were challenging, the topics were challenging, but she made me feel more than competent. She made me feel like I had power because she allowed me to develop my voice and my thoughts and made me believe my ideas were important. As the year progressed, the red marks became fewer.

What made the difference? In Ms. Crandall's class, my accent did not matter. Grammar and structure were important, but they were not mechanisms to expose our ignorance and inadequacy. She presented the tools of Standard English exactly as what they were: simple tools that I pick up and use.

I was still finding my way around the intricacies of English syntax, and I had yet to understand the nuances of expressions and dialects or how to find the precise words to fully express myself. But throughout that pivotal year, I internalized many of the powerful tools that allowed me to face every academic writing assignment that was to come without fear.

I had learned how to structure my ideas and plan my writing. I had learned how to clarify my thoughts and simplify my language for maximum efficiency. I had experienced the power of opening up my writing to feedback. I had learned that writing had nothing to do with natural talent, but was instead a process and a craft that I had the power to refine.

In retrospect, it is amazing how much I learned in such a short period of time with the help of just one teacher. When I enrolled in college the following year, I was ready. I thrived in my English classes. Once I transferred to CSU Sacramento after two years at City College, I decided to major in English. Three years after that, with my thick proud accent still on full display, I graduated with a Master's degree in Literature.

### **III. TIPS ON WRITING**

It has now been more than 27 years since I first came to the U.S. and in that time I have written many things. I have written essays, research papers and written tests. I have written a Master's thesis. I now write countless emails and grants for work. I write letters to my love, I

write for myself and I have even written a couple of articles. I want to conclude by sharing the most important tips and strategies that have served me well and that I still use every single time I have to write something, whether it's for academic purposes, for work or for everyday life. A small caveat: writing and the craft of language is more subjective than most people make it out to be. Part of writing is a science for sure, but most of it is an art and the beautiful thing about language is that it is infinitely adaptable. I only bring this up because you will have to find the ideas and tools and strategies that work for you, in your own life and academic career so that you may express your ideas in your own voice. This is simply a short list of the things that have worked for me, so keep that in mind.

●**Outline your thoughts.** Before I even wrote the first sentence of this article, I created an outline of the major points I wanted to make. In your own writing, this can take the form of bullet points or short sentences. Outlining is essential to tell a compelling story, and a good story always has a solid structure. Especially in academic writing, it is very difficult for readers to understand complicated concepts or ideas if you yourself don't have a clear sense of where you are taking them (you can read more about the process of writing in the chapter by Brooks in this Manual).

●**Clarify your ideas.** In any piece of writing, you have to identify the one essential thing you are trying to get across and you should be able to state it clearly. Whether it is a thesis on an argumentative paper, a finding on a research paper, an opinion on an article or the theme in the story. Every great piece of writing has a powerful reason for its existence that can be expressed in just one or two sentences and you have to be able to identify that reason in your own writing.

●**Clarify your language.** Ms. Crandall was big on this. Back in high school I would often introduce big words from a thesaurus into my writing in order to sound smarter or more sophisticated. That almost never works out well. The result is often imprecise words and sentences. Always strive for clarity. It is way more effective to state a simple and powerful idea in clear and precise language than to try to use fancy words that might muddle your meaning. Obviously, jargon is necessary in academic writing, but don't make it worse by overcomplicating the language.

●**Focus on craft, but don't lose sight of the bigger picture.** Grammar, syntax and rules are important, because they communicate attention to detail and lend your writing credibility, especially in academic writing. But any good editor can fix grammar and syntax errors in a couple passes. On the other hand, it is incredibly hard to fix a piece of writing without a solid structure and clear ideas. Most people will forgive a few mechanical errors. No one will forgive a bad argument or an inaccurate fact.

●**Revision and Feedback is a must.** I can't emphasize this enough. This is scary at first, right until the moment you realize that it is one of the most essential parts of the writing process. When I am writing something important, I always reach out to people I trust to look over my work. There are things I am simply not able to catch on my own and ideas that I need to discuss in order to clarify them. Find a friend or classmate and make it a habit of reading each other's papers. Go to a tutoring center or ask for feedback from your instructor, even if it's at the outlining stage. Obviously for this to work, you also have to finish your drafts NOT on the night before they are due (you can read more about the process of revising and editing in the chapter by Migliaccio in this Manual).

●**Read. Read a lot.** You are a busy college student. You might not have time to read *War and Peace* or *Cien Años de Soledad* between classes, but reading is a great way to understand the craft of writing. Read articles related to your subject of study or short pieces that interest you. Read think pieces about the state of the world. Read your professors' published articles. And during summer, when you finally have some time, go ahead and pick up a fun book. *War and Peace* and *Cien Años de Soledad* are amazing.

●**Write. Write a lot.** You have to do this anyway but in order to get better at writing papers, you have to practice writing everything else because it allows you to play with language. Make a habit of writing for yourself or for people you care about. Write down ideas down whenever they come to you. Start a blog. After reading a paper or hearing a lecture, or

watching a movie or reading a book or having a deep conversation with a friend, just sit down and write about it. Practicing will only increase your confidence, and your ability to transmit your best ideas into words.

In the end, English is my second language. But it is now in every sense MY language because I am able to use it and shape it and deploy it in any way I want. Spanish is also MY language. Anything I write or say whether it is Standard Academic English, or informal lyrical slang, or Spanglish with a thick accent, that is all MY language. Understanding the power of language and writing has served me well. We all have that incredible ability to learn, manipulate and transform language to communicate deep ideas and timeless truths and my hope is that you will embrace that power as you continue to produce beautiful and compelling work.