

Pronunciation

English wasn't the language I was born into. It wasn't what was spoken at home. It wasn't the language of my first bedtime story. Born to two first generation Korean immigrant parents, English just wasn't destined to be my first language. My parents valued my connection to Korean culture and wanted me to grow up as "Korean" as possible; I watched Korean movies, listened to Korean songs, and exclusively spoke Korean with them. However, they made one concession; they wanted me to read English books. I may not have grown up hearing English around me, but I grew up reading in English. The foreign characters on the pages soon became familiar ones, and words I had never heard before cemented themselves into my brain. However, while the words on the page became my lifelong friends, I was unable to let them into the real world; I could not say them. I knew what the symbols on the page signified, but my tongue did not know what shapes it had to take to bring the words to sound. I did not know their pronunciation.

"Colosseum." Even to this day, I hate this word. I first encountered it in first grade when my mom deemed it fit that I started reading the *Percy Jackson and The Olympians* series. At first, I was very reluctant. The thickness of the book and the "fifth grade level" label on the book were much more intimidating than *The Magic Treehouse* books were accustomed to. At first I complained; too many unfamiliar words filled the pages. However, as I continued to read, I became engrossed in the novel. The names of the Greek gods such as "Ares" and "Aphrodite" became part of my vocabulary, but, in my head, they sounded very differently from their true pronunciations. Even at my young age, I was wise enough to not use these new words. I knew that my pronunciations of these words were incorrect as I had no way to hear them be used. While some kids my age may have overheard these names in a movie or conversation with their parents, all words spoken and heard at my house were in Korean. However, I was mistakenly confident in my pronunciation of "colosseum". I had thoroughly enjoyed stories of Percy fighting

in the giant roman stadium, and had no doubt about my pronunciation of the word. A colosseum was a colossal stadium, so in my head it made perfect sense that it would be pronounced ka-laws-eum. One day as I was playing with my friends on the school playground, I made a remark on how the amphitheater reminded me of a ka-laws-eum. All my friends paused and just stared at me. They asked me to repeat what I said, and when I did, they laughed at me. I hated that I didn't know how to pronounce it. I didn't like being laughed at. It almost felt like a betrayal that a word that I felt so sure about was said differently than I thought the whole time. I began to doubt the books I loved so much.

Reading was my passion and it was something I thought I excelled at, but, more and more, as I realized I didn't know how to pronounce many of the words I had "learned", I began to feel that there was a barrier that I could not overcome. I became too scared to try to use the words I had seen in my beloved books. Reading aloud became a phobia.

I never voiced my concerns to my parents, but they would still be the ones to resolve them for me. They were both so proud of me for being an avid reader. They bought me any book that I wanted and took me to the library as much as they could. My parents' faces would shine with excitement whenever a reading level assessment would indicate that I was far above that of my peers. They were completely ignorant about how embarrassed I was of my incorrect pronunciations.

My parents inadvertently helped resolve this insecurity with a trip to the St. Louis Art Museum. My favorite place in the art museum was the Greek section. This was due to the fact that my love for reading *Percy Jackson* had evolved into a love for reading Greek myths too. I loved seeing artifacts and depictions of the myths I had read about in my books. Wanting to share my passion, I would vehemently explain the story of each artifact. Observing a painting of Ares and Aphrodite with my mom, I would explain the backstory of Aphrodite's infidelity against her husband Hepheastus. I would tell these stories to my mom in Korean, translating everything I had read into my native tongue. However, many words I did not know how to say in Korean as

I had only seen them on paper, so I simply just said them in English. Looking back now, I realize that I butchered the pronunciation of many of these words, but my mom never cared and that's all that mattered. Everytime we were looking at a piece of art or an artifact, she would ask me to tell her the story behind it. As I would tell her, her smile made me forget that I didn't know how to say Aphrodite's or the correct pronunciation for kaw-laws-eum .

The fact that my korean parents were so proud of my love for reading in a language foreign to them helped me overcome the embarrassment of whenever I mispronounced a word in front of my american classmates. All throughout elementary and middle school this fact served as a cornerstone for my confidence.

While I did start to accept that as the child of immigrants my experiences reading would not be the same as others, I still hoped that I could one day like my friends.

"Execrable." It was the word that lingered in the minds of many of my friends and I after the end of the PSAT. Some argued that it was the correct choice to fill in the blank, some said it was blatantly incorrect, while others simply did not know. I was, however, confident in my answer. I had encountered the word in one of the countless books I had read and knew of its meaning. However, before I could explain to my friends, I made the blunder of mispronouncing the word. I instantly lost all credibility. It was here I started to struggle with the fact that even while my love for reading could even give me an academic advantage, it could still not cover the fact I was fundamentally different from my peers.

However, while it is true that reading showed me I am different from my peers it also showed me to welcome that difference.

I had never liked being forced to read a book in class. I felt that it took the fun out of my hobby. However, there was one book that I was forced to read that I embraced. The book was *The Patron Saints of Nothing*, a book about a filipino-american teen who struggled with similar problems as I did. As he struggled to find his balance as a Filipino and an American, I could see myself reflected in him. Although the contents of the book did resonate within me, it was

something else that struck a chord. According to my Filipino friend in the class, whenever my English teacher tried to read aloud parts of the book, she would completely mispronounce the parts that were in Tagalog. It was then that I realized that it was fine to mispronounce things. English was not my native language, just as Tagalog wasn't my English teacher's. While as a kid I saw my mispronunciation as something to overcome, I now accepted it as part of me. From start to finish, on my ups and down, books guided me on my journey to find my identity.

Korean isn't the language I read in. The stories I found solace in, the protagonists I loved, and the villains I hated were all written in English. I loved every minute I spent engrossed in the story. I loved every late night I stayed up rereading *Harry Potter*. Any anger or doubt I had towards reading was clearly misplaced and unwarranted. Reading highlighted that my identity as a Korean-American was one to have pride in. My experience of reading in English as a Korean does not blemish my love for it at all. Books granted me knowledge to nurture and stories to cherish, all without ever once mentioning my pronunciation.