I still remember today my first step outside of the airplane.
My father wanted to move us to another country
I knew the answer, but I didn't know how to say it in English.
This struggle made me stronger ...
Some words in English are difficult to say and harder to write.
I would write it on a piece of paper and give it to the student sitting next to me, and he would read it.
I am a proud Spanish- and English-speaking American.
English has gotten me to a high point in my life.
Learning English was my ultimate goal.
I was excited to go to school ...
Today I live the dream of many who have never made it this far and still live with struggles back in their country.
I would not be where I am
Today I live the dream
I feel like I'm missing a big part of my culture
This is my message to the people who have the same struggle
Books are my best friends.
...We were labeled as the "green side" or the "know-nothing people."
I strived to learn English
It wasn't until the first time I heard the English language that it hit me that from now on, things would be different.
We had everything ...
The way we get treated by Americans is not very kind.
The obstacles I conquered made me who I am today.
We don't get the same services as others in the way that Americans treat us.
I love this country, too
I am thankful to be here
I don't have the words in English.
Another obstacle I had was writing from opposite sides of the paper.
It's some sort of loss in translation
College, here I come.
This must have been the hardest thing to overcome because I was so used to writing in Arabic.

WORDS HAVE NO BORDERS:
STUDENT VOICES ON IMMIGRATION, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

CollegeBoard
The National Commission on Writing

I, as an immigrant, still have love for my native country and that love will never end
My father wanted to move us to another country
I have experienced how to live a good life.
I would not be where I am today
This must have been the hardest thing to overcome
Immigrants do come to improve, not make things worse
I was excited to go to school. Despite the fact that I didn't know any English, I still wanted to go.
I received the news that my life would suddenly change
I don't have the words in English.
The country that we knew as "The Land of Opportunity"
Learning English was my ultimate goal.
I am thankful to be here and most thankful for being given choices in life.
Trying was something I constantly did.
I had the advantage of speaking English
Today I live the dream of many who have never made it this far
I feel out of my element.
The richness of the language immediately took its hold on me.
I strived to learn English
They start making fun of us because we don't know how to speak English very well.
After I lost my fear, I was able to communicate more effectively
College, here I come.
I love this country, too
English has gotten me to a high point in my life.
I have accomplished what many foreign students are trying to do now.

Introduction by Edwidge Danticat, National Book Award Finalist

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The pieces in this volume were drawn from three sources. In January of this year, we wrote to 41 high school teachers asking for student reflections or letters on language learning and immigrant experiences. The majority of the work is drawn from these submissions. We also included several pieces submitted to the Letters to the Next President: Writing Our Future project, an online writing and publishing project for students co-sponsored by Google and the National Writing Project. And finally, we supplemented these two sources with quotes from students from focus groups conducted by Research Images, LLC in four diverse communities across the United States.

TEACHER RECOGNITION

We would like to thank the wonderful teachers who submitted student work:

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"The most successful school innovations rest on the time, talent and skill of teachers. These are the people who make everything else possible, including all the other professions. Teachers count. Thousands are doing great work. They are the center of education."

"Teachers and the Uncertain American Future"
The College Board's Center for Innovative Thought
July 2006

PREFACE

For the most part, the United States is a country of immigrants. During the first three decades of the 20th century, nearly 18 million people arrived here, and to this day we remain the destination of choice for tens of millions from around the world.

Today's immigrants include many of our students. These students and their families bring to us their different world perspectives and different cultures, all so essential and important as the United States faces the challenges of the 21st century. A recent article in the New York Times points out that "education officials classify some 5.1 million students in the United States — 1 in 10 of all those enrolled in public schools — as English language learners, a 60 percent increase from 1995 to 2005." These new residents bring language, culture, knowledge of the modern world, a sophistication regarding their life expectations, and their potential contribution to their adopted country.

This publication from the College Board's National Commission on Writing, records the powerful voices and experiences of these students: They describe where they came from and why they came, what they encountered, and their hopes for the future. But underlying all these stories is an unmistakable current of hope, courage and hard work, clearly illustrating that, as in the past, these students are among our nation's greatest assets. As you read their words, you will be given a sense of optimism and inspiration, so important to all of us in these challenging times.

"Words Have No Borders: Student Voices on Immigration, Language and Culture" is the seventh report from the National Commission and the second in our Student Voices series (the first, Letters to the President, was released in March of this year).

In "The Neglected 'R': The Need for A Writing Revolution," the report issued by the Commission in 2003, we stated:

"If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write."

The students in this report have taken on and met this challenge.

Finally, I would like to thank Edwidge Danticat, author and National Book Award finalist, for the moving and compelling introduction to this volume. We are privileged to be able to include her exceptional essay. I would also like to thank the many students who contributed to this project and their teachers who inspired them.

Gaston Caperton
President, The College Board

In the Snow

During the winter of 1981, I slept through my first blizzard. Woke up to the sound of a shovel grating the frozen sidewalk outside my new home in Brooklyn. Snowfall is a striking transition from one culture to another, more abrupt than leaves turning in the fall, much more beautiful. There is a kind of music to the clearing of it, too — the sound of the shovel hitting the pavement, shrill one moment because of hidden ice crystals then muffled by snowflakes the next.

Snow flurries were still streaming past the street lamps when I woke up for school the next morning. Daylight had been delayed, and as the last flakes danced past the street lamp, they glowed like moonbeams. Suddenly I feel as though I were watching a nature show, where something exceptional was happening, like a dolphin singing or a musical instrument being played in silence. The only thing that's impressed me as much as snow is hail. Some childhood summers in my native Haiti, out of the midday summer rains would emerge perfectly round pellets, as solid and cold as anything I'd ever felt.

I would continue to remember Haiti and hail during future blizzards, when the snow would fly around wildly as though being guided by hurricane-sized winds. In high school, my best friend Norma, another Caribbean girl, and I would go to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden after a fresh fall. Mostly a haven for greenhouses, flower cultivation and summer weddings, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden was opened a few hours in the winter. Hooded with snow, the leaf-barren trees looked like arctic phantoms, ghosts from some past that was not ours. Sometimes we'd attack a whole field with our black rubber boots, leaving behind lines of footprints and imagining that someone might come later in the night to track them with helicopters and search dogs.

We had just read Jack London's "Call of the Wild" in Mr. Swizohn's — our bearded, red-headed teacher's — 10th-grade English class, and one of my favorite scenes was of the central subject and character, Buck, seeing snow for the first time.

> Words have no borders. Every experience deserves a hearing. Everyone has a story to tell and we are all the better for the telling.

"Buck's feet sank into a white mushy something very like mud. ... It bit like fire, and the next instant was gone."

Was Buck an immigrant from someplace warm too, we wondered. Was he also a creature who both feared and was intrigued by this frosty symbol of his new life? Norma and I were long past the first chapter of "Call of the Wild" before realizing that the Buck in question was a dog. Nevertheless, he was a dog who felt like we felt, out of place and time.

Like nothing else, reading and writing was the bridge to our new world. When reading we gained friends and allies in others who had traveled this sometimes cold path ahead of us. When writing, as these wonderful students have done here, we spoke for ourselves and we echoed those who had been brave enough to speak ahead of us, for us, to us. When, as a new arrival in the United States, my heavy Haitian Creole accent made me too shy to speak, I could always pour my soul out in my notebooks and journals, and even in class assigned essays. To have anyone ask me to express myself, on paper, in my new language, was as thrilling as watching snow fall for the first time.

Like nothing else, reading and writing was the bridge to our new world.

Words have no borders. Every experience deserves a hearing. Everyone has a story to tell and we are all the better for the telling. Like so much in our world, the immigrant experience is being redefined every day, one singular individual at a time. Currently, one out of four children in the United States is born to foreign-born parents. The beauty of this country, unlike many others, is that each of these children has as much right to be an American as someone whose parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were also born here.

Our current president is, like me, and like our writers, the child of an immigrant. At a February 2008 debate in Austin, Texas, then-candidate Barack Obama said, "... [T]his world is becoming more interdependent, and part of the process of America's continued leadership in the world is going to be our capacity to communicate across boundaries, across borders."

With the essays you are about to read, we are, I believe, a little bit closer to that goal. Now it is up to us to take heed and listen, and listen well.

Edwidge Danticat

Miami, Fla.

April 2009

Source of Obama quote: http://www.ontheissues.org/2008_Dems_Texas.htm

Luiz D.

A New Language, A New Life

… I was born in Curitiba, Brazil, in 1991. In 1998, I received the news that my life would suddenly change. Everything I ever knew, my country and my culture — huge family BBQs, sunny days at the beach, soccer games every weekend, and also my friends and family — was about to change. By this time in life my parents had suffered enough struggles in life to realize we needed a desperate change. After many months of hard fighting and diligent working for my parents, we were finally given our legal entrance into the United States, the country that we knew as "The Land of Opportunity."

I still remember today my first step outside of the airplane. I felt this fresh new air, and a fresh new feeling, but it wasn't until the first time I heard the English language that it hit me that from now on, things would be different. On my taxi ride to my new house every road sign had the same letters I had seen before but in a combination that simply made no sense to my eyes. I was no longer in my home country, and that was when I knew for sure.

After one month went by, it came time for school. For the first time in this new country, I admitted to myself that I was scared. Being escorted to my class was one of the most terrifying walks in my life. Luckily for me, I lived in Cambridge, which, at the time, was a major Portuguese community. My first teacher spoke some Portuguese and introduced me to a classmate named Bruno. Bruno was also Brazilian and spoke no English. By the end of the day, we were best friends and became each other's guide into this "new world." …

… A few days later my father had a great idea for me to learn this new language. He signed me up for Little League Soccer. …

… My life story is simple; I was born in a country where I did not have much to look up to other than soccer. My parents have always been fighters and brought me here where I live today. They opened up the door for me, but it was my choice to walk through it. To some who have never experienced this, learning a new language is not an easy task, but through the help of a best friend, a family member, and soccer, the "universal language," I have achieved what once seemed impossible. Today I live the dream of many who have never made it this far and still live with struggles back in their country. I live a healthy and comfortable life, and I try to succeed every day for those who couldn't because I know this is what they wish they could do — this is their dream which I am living. Now, here is another step toward success straight ahead of me: College, here I come.

Ouissame T.

I Don't Speak English

I knew the answer, but I didn't know how to say it in English.

… When I came to America from Morocco, I knew little to no English at all; I only spoke Arabic and French. On my first day of school, I was in the eighth grade. I had science first period. My teacher gave us a flash card to write our full names on and what we did over the summer vacation. After 10 minutes, everyone was introducing themselves and telling about their vacation. When it was my turn, I didn't say a word. I didn't understand what the teacher was asking, and everyone in class was staring at me. I hated myself. At the time, I wished that the earth would open and bury me. At the end of the period, I waited for the students to leave the class. I told the teacher that "I don't speak English," the only sentence I knew how to say, and I cried at the same time. She was nice to me and told me that it was okay and to not worry about it. Every day after school, I used to take children's books and start reading them. This helped to improve my English. At the end of the year, I earned the certificate of excellence in science, the first class I attended in America.

I was good at math. When the teacher, Mrs. Delany, asked the students, in my opinion, easy questions, they would get stuck. I knew the answer, but I didn't know how to say it in English. I would write it on a piece of paper and give it to the student sitting next to me, and he would read it. My answers were always correct. I felt happy that I wasn't completely incapable of doing anything in school. Math really is the universal language.

The school put me in ELL (English Language Learner) classes; I started learning a little English. I had only two friends, who spoke only a little English. I was put into regular math and science classes. My parents didn't speak English at all. When I got home, I would read and do my homework with no help from anyone. I had a hard time understanding what each assignment meant, but I tried my hardest to do them even if it was completely wrong. Trying was something I constantly did.

Learning English was my ultimate goal. The obstacles I conquered made me who I am today. I am now proficient in English. I write this essay knowing that I have accomplished what many foreign students are trying to do now.

Yasmin S.

Struggle in New York

Now I am in Brooklyn. My name is Yasmine. I am 16 years old. I am going to talk about the different cultures between the United States and my country, Sudan, especially between girls and boys.

In Sudan we have a different culture. The girls in Sudan can't touch boys. You can say hi to the girls by kissing each other on the cheeks, but the boys can hug each other. If the boys and girls meet together, they can shake hands. If you come to my country Sudan you will see boys holding hands in the street …

One day my friend came to Sudan. She is an American girl. When she saw boys holding hands she thought everybody was gay until I explained to her my religion and my culture.

In my country the girls and the boys can't touch and talk to each other. Sudanese boys and girls can love but cannot touch, talk on the phone, walk in the street together or go to anyplace together — if somebody sees them it's going to be a big problem. Also, the boys are in one school and the girls are in one school; there's no boys and girls having one school together.

In my area the girls can't go to the street after 6 p.m. Some girls are 14 and get married. My cousin, she is 16 right now and she has two kids. The girls have no freedom, but the boys have a lot of freedom.

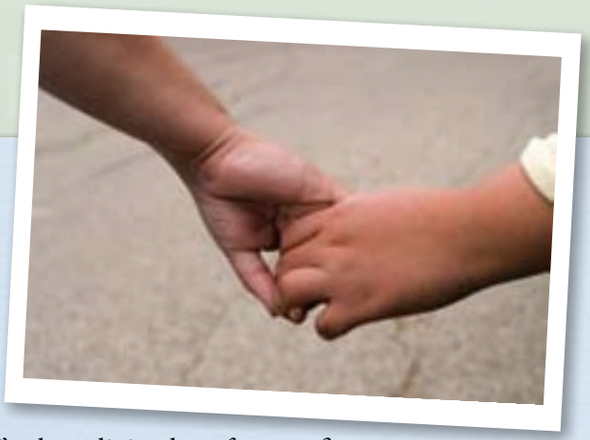
I don't know a lot about the culture in America, especially about boys and girls, because I have only been here one year. My culture in Sudan is so different than the culture in America. I understand if I am in Sudan I am going to use Sudanese culture, but if am in America I am going to use American culture. This is my message to the people who have the same struggle.

My Reflection on the Above Essay

My memoir was about my culture in Sudan and adapting to culture in America. I chose this story because we have a lot of rules in my country. This made me feel stronger because I wrote about my reaction. I shared it with my family. My dad felt proud of me that I chose this story because I totally understand the rules and I love the culture in my country.

… In the future I would like to write about my life and my college. …

They start making fun of us because we don't know how to speak English very well.



Katherine L.
The Life of an Immigrant

… I'm an immigrant from the Dominican Republic. I've been living here for over five years. … Most of the people that I know are Dominicans and Mexicans and they have an accent. They've been telling me that when they go to the store, some Americans don't treat them as immigrants, they treat them like they are stupid. They talk to them "loud and slow" as if immigrants are stupid. The way we get treated by Americans is not very kind. We don't get the same services as others in the way that Americans treat us. It is bad to say but Americans (partly) don't like to be near an immigrant because they think that they are illegal or just come to the country to disturb their peace. It's hard for me as a resident to feel how Americans treat us. They start making fun of us because we don't know how to speak English very well.

We were labeled as the "green side" or the "know-nothing people."

Loren D.
The "Green Side"

My first experience with the English language wasn't easy. In Honduras, the country where I came from, the only English words that they teach are the pronouns. My first day of school was the most embarrassing. I went to an ESL class. When the teacher asked me what my name was, I didn't know what to answer. Now I know that she asked me that question because it is the most common question that the teachers ask on the first day of school. …

... We were labeled as the "green side" or the "know-nothing people." The first time that I heard the term was when my ESL classes were changed to regular classes. When my history teacher asked me if I was new in the school, I answered no, but a classmate yelled from the back that I was coming from the "green side." Most of the students laughed at that comment. Beginning that day, I decided to learn better English. … That was how it was in my case. I was afraid that the people were going to make fun of me. I overcame this obstacle by making friends from different countries that were in the same situation as me. I was too shy to talk to a person who was born in this country. After I lost my fear, I was able to communicate more effectively. The biggest obstacle that ESL students have to face is to release their accent. If we practice, we can overcome this faster.

Hareem Q.

Brains Are More Important Than Beauty: A Memoir

Women must always wear a smile, not because there are many reasons to smile, but your smile may be a reason for someone else to smile. Media and magazines, etc., think that the woman who has perfect appearance (like long hair, fair colour, tall height and good smile, etc.) is a beautiful woman. They only prefer beautiful women, it doesn't matter if they are intelligent or lazy. They always look at the outer beauty of a woman. In my country Rema Khan is a film star. She is so beautiful, but not intelligent. Everybody wants to meet her, because of her beauty and popularity. …

When I was in third grade, I changed my school and admissioned in my cousin's school. … I was in girls school — that's why every girl made fun of my teeth … I was disheartened, because I had no friends. I felt abandoned.

I started to give importance to my studies. I got first position in every grade. It's my record in the whole school. I ignored those girls who made fun of my teeth. Then I became friends with books, the majority of them Islamic books. My most favorite book is my holy book Quran. Books are my best friends. By reading books, I also got interested in poetry. I like the poetry in Urdu. My favorite poets are Parveen Shakir and Allama Iqbal.

This struggle made me stronger, because when I got first place in every grade, the girls who made fun of me wanted to be friends with me because of my intelligence. Now I am a confident girl, because of this struggle. I have experienced how to live a good life.

My Reflection on the Above Essay

My memoir was about brains and beauty. I chose this for my memoir because this struggle changed my whole life. When I wrote this essay I felt light because I shared all my problems with you. It was hard for me to share this secret. I didn't share it with anybody except you until I wrote my final draft. When I shared it with my mom, she felt proud because I decided to go on the right path, which will help me to get success in every field of life. Before writing this story, I felt insecure … but I realized after writing this story that "well done is better than well appearance." This project made me feel that I can write a story. I didn't use any verb list, editing symbols, etc. I just listened to what my heart was saying about me. I would like to write a story about my life in future. …

Books are my best friends.

My family didn't want to protest because it was too dangerous.

Mifetao A.

My Struggle in Togo

It all started when I was 12 years old in my country, Togo. …

The president Gnassingbe Eyadema died on February 5, 2005. It was the same day that Faure Gnassingbe succeeded his father. The communists were protesting against the government and some survived and some did not. My father wanted to move us to another country. This struggle really changed my life of being a kid living a good life with my family and my friends. The schools were closed and there was nobody outside, there were just a bunch of chickens fooling around in the street.

My family didn't want to protest because it was too dangerous. Many people died in this war. The government noticed that it wasn't good to replace the president without being elected, so they started an election again.

Amir T.

It Was Very Devastating

… When I left the war in Bosnia to come to America, my whole life changed … it was very devastating to my family. We had everything in Bosnia, and for us to come to America and start over, was very difficult. When I was about 5 years old, I had to start school. Going to school for the first time in my life was very new to me, and I didn't know what to expect. I was very scared, because I didn't know anyone or anything. Still, even though I was very nervous, I was excited to go to school. Despite the fact that I didn't know any English, I still wanted to go. As all the kids started to talk to me, I got scared because I didn't know what they were saying to me. Not knowing any English at school was very challenging for the first couple of months. …

Lina B.

The War in Palestine

… I'm 14 years old. I'm in ninth grade. I've been in the United States for almost three years. I'm from Nablus, Palestine. I speak two languages that are English and Arabic. …

In my hero struggle story the person that I chose and interviewed is my dad. I chose my dad to interview because I thought that he had a difficult struggle to talk about, so I thought he would talk about it and express his feeling to me. My dad's struggle was about losing his job during the war in Palestine. I did learn many things about my dad, and one of them is that he didn't give up and kept trying. … I think I understood my dad more because he had a lot of struggles that he didn't tell us about. So, I respect my dad more than before.

Dipti D.

"I came to America when I was 6 or 7 and I could speak my Indian language, Urdu and Spanish and English I'd learned both. But in school I was put in the ESL because I had an accent. I didn't really need to be there, I just had an accent. It was kind of thick because in India we learned British English so I remember being really embarrassed to talk in school and I would just stop talking and I avoided speaking as much as I could. At home, it was the reverse because my dad doesn't speak perfect English so I had to speak in Urdu. That was kind of difficult at home for me because my dad still doesn't have a perfect grasp of English and I don't have a perfect grasp of Urdu so it's hard for us to communicate. My dad says proverbs and I try to repeat them, but I really get them mixed up and I get my words mixed up. … I try to speak to my dad in Urdu and he tries to speak to me in English but it's still not the same. I feel like I'm missing a big part of my culture."

I feel like I'm missing a big part of my culture.

Minh T.

"Growing up, my parents always spoke Vietnamese to me. So I can understand that like almost perfectly. It's kind of weird. I can't write Vietnamese very well but I can read it like absolutely perfectly. And speaking-wise — I can speak a little bit but I can understand way better. But as far as English goes my experience with that is I've always loved English my whole life. It's my favorite subject. And I've kind of had a natural aptitude for English words, I guess. No, I don't understand Vietnamese as well. I've just always been good at analyzing, writing, reading — whatever it is. I don't really know why. I've tried like writing in Vietnamese because my parents need me to do something. And what I feel like is when they translate it, it's not holding the same meaning to me or not expressing my intent. So maybe it's just an English thing. It's some sort of loss in translation, I suppose."

Growing up, my parents always spoke Vietnamese to me.

Sandra M.

Did I Say it Right, Did It Make Sense?

Spanish was my first language. I lived in a town where people only spoke Spanish. In my house we all talk in Spanish. I never learned English until I came to Connecticut. I really started talking and writing in Spanish when I was in second or third grade. It was all new for me. When I had to move here and learn English it was shocking. When I was in second or third grade I had to learn my English. In second grade the teacher always read a book in English and we did homework in English. In third grade I had to write in journals just to get better. Through the years I have learned more and more English and my English is getting better little by little.

When I'm talking to someone in English I don't have confidence. In the back of my mind I'm thinking, "Did I say it right, did it make sense?" I feel the same way when I am writing in English. Sometimes I know it in my head, in Spanish, what I want to write, but I don't have the words in English.

Some words in English are difficult to say and harder to write. Before I speak or I write in English I have to think twice, once in Spanish and once in English, so I can correct myself. In Spanish you hear almost all the letters you write. In English it is different. The words have a lot of letters you don't hear. Also words in English have different meanings for the same word. It makes English a big challenge. It takes me so long to read and write anything in English, and that makes me feel bad, like I am not good enough. English and Spanish are so opposite. I am always speaking Spanglish.

I feel so uncomfortable when someone knows both Spanish and English and they don't make mistakes in either language. They say everything so right that my confidence goes down. It is like I don't even want to talk anymore. I just want to crawl. When I am in a class full of people who only speak English, I feel out of my element. It is frustrating because some teachers expect others and me, who aren't perfect in English, to know everything. If I spoke, wrote and understood English well, my grades would be so much higher. It makes me so nervous and upset when I see my report card. I feel I should be doing better. Sometimes I feel like I am not good. It makes me feel like I can't make it far in life. …

When I am in a class full of people who only speak English, I feel out of my element.

Hanan K.

My Parents Spoke to Me in Arabic

… Arabic and English are very different, so learning to write in English was difficult for me. In Arabic, words are written from right to left, and some of the letters are connected, so you need to know a lot of rules. However, in English, words are written from left to right, and the letters are not connected to each other unless you are writing in cursive. At first, my writing was unorganized, and I could not spell, which I could not really do in Arabic either, but it got better by the time I was in kindergarten. Today, I see many students who speak other languages and are learning English now, as teenagers. Learning to write in English was very hard for me when I was young, but I was able to absorb the new letters and techniques quickly. However, as the human brain ages, it loses that talent, which makes it harder to learn new things, especially languages.

… My biggest obstacle to learning English had to be the fact that my parents spoke to me in Arabic. They spoke English, but did not want me to only speak one language. They figured that I would speak Arabic at home and English in school and outside of the house. However, this created an obstacle for me because I was so young. It was a little confusing to switch from one language to the other. I knew both well and could use them the same, but I could not distinguish between languages sometimes. I remember one day in kindergarten when I spoke to the teacher in a mixed sentence, some Arabic and some English. It became very hard for me to concentrate on one language at times because I was so comfortable with both of them. I eventually overcame this obstacle by training myself. I learned when it was appropriate to speak which language. This was difficult at first because it made things more confusing in my young brain, but it also made multitasking easier, and I rarely spoke in mixed sentences again. Another obstacle I had was writing from opposite sides of the paper. This must have been the hardest thing to overcome because I was so used to writing in Arabic. My parents taught me how to speak and understand English, but they also taught me how to read and write in Arabic. The Quran, the Muslim equivalent of the Bible, was written completely in Arabic. There are translated versions, but my family only owns the Arabic version. By the time I was 6, I had more than half the Quran memorized. This seems like a great deal to me today, but it is not. Now, I use English in most situations in my life, so it is easier to memorize things in English. …

My parents taught me how to speak and understand English, but they also taught me how to read and write in Arabic.

I am a proud Spanish- and English-speaking American.

Robert M.

The First Day of Kindergarten Was a Great Day

English is a very important language to master in the U.S. I was born in the U.S. in 1991, to a Spanish-speaking family. At this time, it did not seem like Spanish was an important language in the States. Spanish-speaking people were looked down upon. My first language to learn was Spanish because my mother and father could not speak English. Because I was born here, I had a little more of an advantage in learning English. …

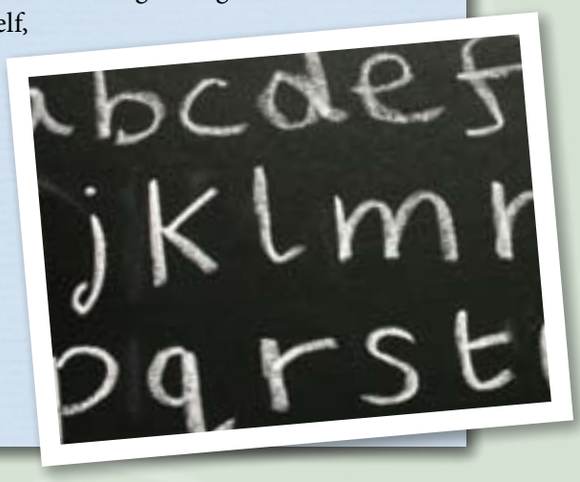
… The first day of kindergarten was a great day. I finally saw other kids that were in the same situation. The kids there spoke Spanish for the most part. The first couple of months were quite difficult because it was such a difference in the dialect and wording. The good thing was, before I knew it, I was speaking a small amount of English. Luckily at a young age, it is a lot easier to learn a language than when someone is in their teenage years.

The time I remember the most was when I was transferred to a regular classroom in third grade. It was something completely new for me, but it was great. I walked into the class, and there were all English-speaking kids. I felt like I was in a level lower than most of them because they could speak English fluently. I was just getting to the point where I could speak English almost proficiently. I made a lot of friends in this class because I had the advantage of speaking English. …

English has gotten me to a high point in my life. I am a proud Spanish- *and* English-speaking American. …

Camille F.

"Ever since I was small in my house we always spoke Spanish so my mom only speaks to me in Spanish. I remember watching "Sesame Street" in English and they'd be talking in English and I'd be like, "What are they saying?" and I'd just translate it by myself, like make up little stories inside of my head. Then I remember going to kindergarten and I didn't know English at all so they put me into ESL and it was easier for me to understand because my teacher, she knew Spanish and English. She'd teach you Spanish and English at the same time. Then at home my mom didn't know how to help me with the homework so I remember her going to English classes at community colleges. She'd come home and teach me the letters and that's how I learned. I didn't have older brothers and sisters. I'm the oldest and that's why she had to do it by herself."



Elizabeth G.

Just because my parents have been successful doesn't mean I'm going to stop caring about this issue

… I believe that education is one of the biggest aspects in life. I have big dreams of going to college and my parents have high expectations of me. As for me coming from a Mexican family, most of my family didn't get the education that I'm getting or that I want to get. But it seems really hard to get that education because college is getting really expensive. College funds are really low. I think that the government is aware of this, but not much is being done. Most of the college dreams for high school graduates are being crushed. Over the years the cost of college has highly increased. The years 2000-2006 have had the biggest and most incredible increase in the cost of college. And yet these costs keep going up. How much will college cost by the time I graduate high school? From what I'm seeing I am starting to think that it won't be affordable. And nowadays, since students are having so much trouble paying for college, they end up asking for loans. But the serious problem is that later on they end up having even more problems paying off their loans. And what is going to happen in the future? Eventually one day we are going to need educated people because there are many jobs requiring people who are educated. But how are people supposed to get educated with this type of cost for college? The government shouldn't just talk about this issue, but they should take action.

… As I mentioned before I am a Latina and of course I come from Mexican roots. Luckily, due to all the hard work that my parents have accomplished, my dad is now a citizen of this country and my mom is a resident, and of course I was born here. But just because my parents have already been successful in this country doesn't mean I'm going to stop caring about this issue.

How much will college cost by the time I graduate high school?

Mei L.

They Are the Same as You and Me

… The United States has been a diverse country for as long as it has existed. There are many people from different countries. These people are called immigrants. First, I need to clarify that immigrants are normal people and are human beings. They are the same as me, as you and as others well. The only differences between the immigrants and the Americans are that they speak different languages, they have different cultures and dress, and they have different looks than you as well. …

… Most of the immigrants (legal and illegal) came to the United States just looking for a better life. …

Monserrat V.

Immigrants Want a Say, Too

… The first thing I would like to talk about would be that immigrants do come to improve, not make things worse. If you look at it, not all immigrants come to affect the economy, the way we live or the things we do. They come for jobs and money. They come here for a better way of living, to get away from their government — not to "steal our jobs" or "take our money." If you look at things, most immigrants take jobs Americans don't want and think are low-class just to make ends meet. Not a lot of people look at it that way; they think that we come to harm them. I understand that what happened on 9/11 might have put the U.S. in a bad position, but that doesn't mean that everyone who sets foot in this country is here to reenact that. …

Jung P.

New Outlook on America 2008

… My parents, who are immigrants, were a businessman and woman, and were devoted to their communities in their countries. For the love of their children's future and education, they risked and gave up everything they had and came to this "land of dreams and opportunities," my United States of America. I am thankful to be here and most thankful for being given choices in life. …

Maria E.

Immigrants: We Want to Contribute

… The truth is that we immigrants are here to stay. We immigrants want our rights and obligations. We want to stay here, and we are willing to be good citizens and help out the country. I, as an immigrant, still have love for my native country and that love will never end, but I have been here for quite a while and I love this country, too. …

… immigrants do come to improve, not make things worse.

Guianeya H.

Writing in My Life

Beginning in kindergarten, children learn to write "I love you" for Valentine's Day cards and "happy birthday" for birthday cards. With that early beginning in kindergarten, writing becomes vital. Because of my Cuban roots I did not begin to write "I love you" and "happy birthday" until the fourth grade. I got a late start, but since then, my writing skills have consistently improved, thanks to dedicated teachers. Throughout life writing is the key: to exams, academics and attaining a bright future. Even though my skills have flourished, there's always room for improvement in the future and I'm currently learning to better develop my thesis statements, and to add more figurative language in my writing that sparks both the imagination and the senses of the reader.

Nine years ago my family arrived in Michigan from Cuba and the richness of the language immediately took its hold on me. I strived to learn English. Thankfully, I had a Hispanic teacher who was as dedicated to teaching as I to learning. Each time I mispronounced words or named objects incorrectly, he would teach me how to correct my mistakes. Even when I asked permission to go to the restroom he would say, "It's not a bathroom, it's a restroom, because it doesn't have a bathtub." His persistence, along with the dedication of all the English language teachers I have had since, has sculpted me into the writer I am today. …

Viola P.

Nothing could have prepared me

… Attending school in Italy taught me certain key words, but nothing could have prepared me for the dramatic difference in speech, tense, tones, and spelling in which this language was bound. I had become familiar with sounding out my words, then spelling them out, for that was the way it was done in both the Italian and Albanian languages. Starting school in this foreign land, I would find myself falling into a deep sinkhole of letters, having to then desperately spell my way out.

Learning such a strange concept seemed so unnatural to me. How could a word be produced with letters that weren't even supposed to be said? Why would it contain silent letters? Why can't you just forget about them? All these questions and more completely boggled my mind, and it was close to impossible to figure out the answers to questions, when I couldn't even pronounce the words in these questions. Writing in print was also some foreign custom that I had to quickly develop into a habit. Taught to write in cursive, print was a form of lettering only used in textbooks and novels, something acquirable only by computers and typewriters. It almost seemed strange for one to not connect their letters together — almost as strange as the thought my teachers had of a second-grader only writing in cursive.

If it weren't for my grade school teachers and my parents, life right now would just be one major struggle.

Raphael T.

Mastering a Second Language

… I was born and raised back in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I came to the United States about a decade ago. I remember being enrolled into an elementary school in East Boston and being so nervous and excited to make new friends. But what I didn't know was that I couldn't speak the same language as the other children. As soon as I walked into the classroom doors, I knew something was wrong.

Being faced with challenges is part of an average day for a young child, but this one was far more extreme than I had expected it to be. The class began as soon as I sat down. My teacher asked me what my name was, and, of course I did not understand a word she said. "What?" I said in Portuguese. Every child in that room turned around, pointed, and laughed at me. When you're a child that young, you do not know what is going on. So my emotions took over, and I began to feel so insecure that I cried. I had to be escorted out of the room and into the office and have a talk with the principal. I was glad to see that he was Portuguese himself, and at least he would be able to understand me. He began to apologize to me and told me that I would be transferred into a bilingual class for a couple months. This was only temporary so I could begin to learn to read, write and speak the English language. He told me that after I learned English, I would be back into my regular classes. …

Learning any language is important if you're in a country with a dominant language. So for me, learning the English language was extremely important. That was the only way I would be able to succeed in life, the only way I could actually become someone in the United States. I know that if I could not speak, read, and write the English language right now, school would be almost impossible. If it weren't for my grade school teachers and my parents, life right now would just be one major struggle. I would not be able to apply for a job or to fully understand my classes. I would have only a few friends, and most importantly, I would not be able to communicate.

So I'm glad that I was pointed at and laughed at because that was what I needed. I needed something to push me harder every day, so I could accomplish my goal, which was mastering the English language. So for those who made fun of me, I thank you, because if not for you guys, I would not have become proficient in the English language, and I would not be where I am today.

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The National Commission on Writing was established by the College Board in 2002 in an effort to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing. The decision to create the commission was animated in part by the College Board's plans to offer a writing assessment in 2005 as part of the new SAT®, but the larger motivation lay in the growing concern within the education, business and policy-making communities that the level of writing in the United States is not what it should be. The commission and its advisory group are made up of leading educators, policymakers and writing experts, and over the last seven years they have worked to improve the teaching and learning of writing through research, public voice and change in practice.

More information can be found at www.writingcommission.org.

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The National Writing Project is a professional development network that serves teachers of writing at all grade levels, primary through university, and in all subjects. The mission of the NWP is to improve student achievement by improving the teaching of writing and improving learning in the nation's schools. Founded in 1974, the NWP has sites at more than 200 universities and colleges in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, serving more than 135,000 participants annually.

www.nwp.org

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ADVOCACY

I still remember today my first step outside of the airplane.

My father wanted to move us to another country

I knew the answer, but I didn't know how to say it in English.

This struggle made me stronger ...

Some words in English are difficult to say and harder to write.

I would write it on a piece of paper and give it to the student sitting next to me, and he would read it.

I am a proud Spanish- and English-speaking American.

English has gotten me to a high point in my life.

Learning English was my ultimate goal.

I was excited to go to school ...

Today I live the dream of many who have never made it this far and still live with struggles back in their country.

I would not be where I am

Today I live the dream

I feel like I'm missing a big part of my culture

This is my message to the people who have the same struggle

Books are my best friends.

...We were labeled as the "green side" or the "know-nothing people."

I strived to learn English

It wasn't until the first time I heard the English language that it hit me that from now on, things would be different.

We had everything ...

The way we get treated by Americans is not very kind.

The obstacles I conquered made me who I am today.

We don't get the same services as others in the way that Americans treat us.

I love this country, too

I am thankful to be here

I don't have the words in English.

Another obstacle I had was writing from opposite sides of the paper.

It's some sort of loss in translation

College, here I come.

This must have been the hardest thing to overcome because I was so used to writing in Arabic.

I, as an immigrant, still have love for my native country and that love will never end

My father wanted to move us to another country

I have experienced how to live a good life.

I would not be where I am today

This must have been the hardest thing to overcome

Immigrants do come to improve, not make things worse

I was excited to go to school. Despite the fact that I didn't know any English, I still wanted to go.

I received the news that my life would suddenly change

I don't have the words in English.

The country that we knew as "The Land of Opportunity"

Learning English was my ultimate goal.

I am thankful to be here and most thankful for being given choices in life.

Trying was something I constantly did.

I had the advantage of speaking English

Today I live the dream of many who have never made it this far

I feel out of my element.

The richness of the language immediately took its hold on me.

I strived to learn English

They start making fun of us because we don't know how to speak English very well.

After I lost my fear, I was able to communicate more effectively

College, here I come.

I love this country, too

English has gotten me to a high point in my life.

I have accomplished what many foreign students are trying to do now.