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On Learning To Be Vulnerable

I can remember as early as 3rd grade peering over my dad's shoulder to correct the grammar on the business email he had drafted. For many multilingual and immigrant families, children guiding and helping their parents communicate is the norm. However as a child with one US-born parent and one foreign-born parent, I've always felt disconnected from my father's native culture because I never learned his native tongue. As a result of rarely visiting my family in Indonesia and tuning out my parents when they speak Indonesian, it was hard for me to feel part of my Indonesian culture. Dropping whatever I was doing to check my dad's writing used to make me groan, but studying Spanish fundamentally changed my perspective.

Learning a second language made me feel vulnerable. I was no longer the expert, but rather the student struggling to retain, practice, and comprehend a new language. Working daily on my Spanish grammar worksheets and class conversations forced me into a position of making many mistakes. Simply trying to create a comprehensible sentence took immense effort. I remember lacking the confidence to hold casual conversations with my co-workers because I couldn't think of replies fast enough and my vocabulary was limited. In those moments I felt ashamed of myself for not taking the leap, despite knowing I would be welcomed and praised for trying. As a world language learner, I now hold a stronger bond with my father because I understand

the mental challenge and desire for perfection in order to fit into a community that does not feel your own.

I have used this feeling of vulnerability to better engage with and assist the students I tutor. When I began working with newly-arrived refugee families, I was eager to teach English and practice my Spanish at the same time. I thought that knowing some Spanish would make it easy to communicate, but the language barrier still proved to be a tough obstacle. What allowed me to build deep and meaningful relationships with these families was the openness and acceptance we shared with each other. I empathize with the frustrations that accompany adjusting to a new culture and language, my students overlook my imperfections as a Spanish learner, and we try our best with both situations.

Without the feelings of uncertainty and apprehension that I felt learning a second language, I might never have developed the deep compassion I hold towards English Language Learners. I admire immigrants like my father who work diligently to learn English while integrating into a new environment. Being a language learner has kindled my connection with my Indonesian heritage and allowed me to build mutually respectful relationships with people from all different cultures and backgrounds.