"You mean, none of us are understanding you," remarked the teacher.

Dominick screamed, "We don't talk like you do!" He was sent to the principal's office.

The truth is, we did not speak alike. Although we were getting a great education in school, it was the language we learned outside of school that determined our speech. Amy Tan writes that the way your friends speak to you, while you are growing up, will have a great impact on you (page 45). The effect on my language skills was a tremendous one, albeit negative. I could not speak English properly.

Once outside the neighborhood, this language hindered me. I was not always understood clearly, or was mocked. "What do you mean, you want to 'take' a haircut?" asked the hairdresser. "Where do you want to take it?" He began to laugh at me. I was so embarrassed. How could he not understand me? The language I picked up on the streets was a part of me, but as I grew up I wanted to get as far away from it as possible. It embarrassed me. In this case, being bilingual was not a blessing, it was a curse.

In high school, I began to use the rules taught to me in my English classes in grammar school. More than anything, I wanted to speak like everyone else. I tried my best, but was unsuccessful. The only way I could stop speaking neighborhood was to take a knife and cut the tongue from my mouth! In my junior year, I was approached by my English teacher who asked if I would like to write for the school paper. "I can't do that," I exclaimed, "I don't talk right!" She then told me that although I did not speak correctly, I wrote correctly. My written work showed no trace of my flawed speech. She had so much confidence in me that she wanted me to edit the paper as well. I was flabbergasted, and quickly accepted the position. When my first story was published, I was amazed at the response. I received from my peers. No one believed that I had written it! I could, indeed, write in proper English. This gave me hope. Perhaps, one day, I might also be able to speak correctly. I felt very much like M. Bella Mirabella, who described how she felt when she accomplished her goals. She wrote, "I was no longer the proverbial small child looking in the shop window." I too was no longer on the outside looking in.

Success at last!

After high school, I attended Brooklyn College. Walking on campus for the first time was like browsing through a travel brochure. I was transformed into a tourist. There were trees everywhere. Although I was only in Brooklyn, I felt far from the city streets of Manhattan. I was in

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a different world. This was not like the small Catholic schools I had attended. I was alone, and afraid, but determined.

On the first day of classes, I was overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety. I was so excited, I could hardly breathe. That feeling of excitement was soon transformed into a feeling of terror. One of my professors had decided to make my life miserable. He taught Speech 101. On the first day of class, he had each student read aloud from our text book to determine the quality of their speech. He then proceeded to demean me, my heritage and my education. That day was the first of many. He proceeded to make a fool of me each and every day our class met. That first, and last, semester at Brooklyn College was a dream that turned into a nightmare. José Torres (page 161) writes that you should not let someone else’s opinion of you affect your self-worth. Unfortunately, this professor’s opinion of me was so low, and his personal attacks were so painful, that I had lost all confidence in myself. It took years for me to gain that confidence back. I decided that college was not for me, and I went into the working world.

I was lucky enough to get a position as a typist in a very prestigious company, Morgan Guaranty. I began my career in the typing pool, typing on an IBM typewriter. Within a year, word processors came into the office, and I was thrilled to be picked as one of the people trained to use one. During this time, I met a wonderful man who would change my life forever—Michael. We dated for two years, and were married at Most Precious Blood Church, in Little Italy.

My personal life was wonderful, so too was my professional life. Over the next few years, I got small promotions within my department. Each promotion brought much more responsibility, with a little more money. One day, at review time, I was called into a meeting. When I walked into the dimly lit conference room, I was surprised to see several assistant vice presidents and a vice president with my supervisor. I immediately broke into a cold sweat. What had I done wrong? My years of “dedication, hard work, and knowledge of the English language” had brought me to their attention. Knowledge of the English language! They were joking, they had to be. They proceeded to make me an offer I could not refuse—my own department. I was dumbfounded when offered this position, but accepted quickly, before they changed their minds. I headed a department of word processors in the investment research department. This success was much larger than the one achieved in high school. I was now being accepted in the business world.

I eventually left Morgan on maternity leave with my first child. Upon my return, I was to be trained on the new IBM computers, and become supervisor of an even larger group of people. Once our son was born and I looked into his sparkling eyes, I knew I could not leave him to the care of a baby-sitter. When I returned three months later, it was to resign my position.

I am still a supervisor, but of our home. Michael is now twelve years old, and Matthew is six. Unfortunately, our children have a bit of neighborhood in them. I take the blame for this. As Dr. Benjamin Spock says about childhood development, “Between 3 and 5 years they were, generally, cozy, affectionate family children who proudly patterned their activities, table manners, and speech after their parents.” Our children’s speech patterns were picked up from the main caregiver in our home, me. When I hear one of our boys say something incorrectly, I explain why it is wrong, and tell him the correct way to say it. My husband often tells me that I should be an English teacher because I am always correcting their grammar. I want our children to have the benefit of a strong background in English. I know the downfalls of not speaking properly, and I do not want them to experience them, as I have.

To say that I have conquered all my fears of the English language would be untrue. Twenty-one years after walking away from Brooklyn College, I am back in school at Queensborough Community College. What was the first class I decided to take? Why English, of course. I am as determined as ever to speak English as well as possible. I am doing well in my class, and I am proud of myself. I am also quite glad that QCC has decided to give me the three credits I earned in Speech at Brooklyn College, although I barely passed, with a grade of D. I could not have taken that class again.

Over the years, I have gained confidence in myself as a writer. The way I speak does not exemplify who I am; however, my writing is a true expression of the person I am inside. When I write, words come from deep inside of me, and spill out onto the page. I never stop to correct myself, as I would if I were speaking. I may speak two languages, but I write with one voice.

INTERPRETATIONS

1. What distinctions does Madera make between the language of school and the language of the neighborhood?
2. Why does she regard being bilingual as a “curse” rather than a “blessing”?
3. What roles do her teachers play in her acquisition of written language?

*Dr. Benjamin Spock and Michael B. Rothenberg, M.D., Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care (New York: Pocket Books, 1985).*
4. What point does she make about her "two languages" in her conclusion?

APPLICATIONS

1. Do you, like Madera, have a "writing self" and a "speaking self"? How do they differ? What does each express about your identity?

2. The opening sentence to Susan G. Madera's essay is: "Growing up, I knew two languages: English, and neighborhood." What literacies are implied in this statement? What is involved in the literacy of "neighborhood"? What knowledge do you bring to your understanding of your neighborhood?

3. What literacy is presented in Madera's anecdote about Dominick Mazzocchi? What assumptions about literacy are made?

4. How does Madera ultimately resolve the conflict between the literacies of English and neighborhood? To what extent have you negotiated these same literacies and the demands they make upon you?