

# Three Stories

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## A Tale of Three Tongues

“Carrot.” While shining boldly on the board in my kindergarten class, these six letters caught my attention. With little knowledge of what language owns those letters in that syntax, I stared at the word as though it might reveal some hidden secrets. At first, my mind translated the word to “karoti,” which is how I would say it in Kinyarwanda, the native language spoken in Rwanda. I remembered that my mother usually cut carrots on Sundays to put in the meat soup that we only ate once a week. Back then, I was not aware that I could understand three languages—Kinyarwanda, French, and a little bit of English—at the same time. I spoke three languages simultaneously within a conversation as if they were one single language. Due to this overlap, the line between my language development in my three languages is blurry. However, this literacy narrative incorporates my journey of becoming more fluent in Kinyarwanda, French, and especially English after learning how to appreciate individual words. I also incorporate my exploration of whether my coalesced fluencies correlate with my global citizenship identity.

## Coalesced Fluencies

Four years ago, I was not fluent in English, although I would have said that I fluently spoke three languages. Although I was taking English classes in every grade, I did not practice it outside of school. We only spoke Kinyarwanda at home, but my older brother would bring us television channels that were only in French. These television channels helped me practice my French, so I was exposed to French both at school and at home. I had spent quality time learning grammar in Kinyarwanda, French, and English, but it was only when I came to study in the United States in August of 2017 that I deeply immersed myself in the English language (which is now officially my second language). By taking an English as a Second Language (ESL) class, I learned the English language in a section of the course specifically designed for international students whose native language was not English. For the first two years in the US, I had to take ESL, where I received constructive feedback on how to write concisely and cohesively, similarly to how Americans write. Thorough English lessons prompted me to be more aware of how I speak and how I choose to articulate my thoughts.

I also utilized some skills that I learned in my ESL class while using French and Kinyarwanda, although grammar and mechanics are different in those languages.

After I began making sense of a whole sentences in English, words started jumping off the page. Words mean a lot because they give life to a sentence. Every word on a page has the ability to state its case through its definition and how it fits into the sentence as a whole. My ESL teacher encouraged me to read an entire sentence and focus on specific words that would help elucidate its meaning. I got so accustomed to this practice that every time I read in French and Kinyarwanda, I focus on individual words that will help me comprehend the whole sentence's meaning. Although I have imprecise memories of when I learned how to speak in my languages, I found myself enjoying spending time appreciating words and sentences.

Speaking three languages has its advantages, but writing never gets easier. When an idea surfaces in my head, it automatically gets translated into the other two languages. However, putting words on paper is more than just having thoughts. It is also about knowing how to articulate those ideas and captivate your readers' attention. Years ago, I was not fond of writing because I was neither exposed to constant composition nor the pleasure of writing. While reading the word "carrot," I comprehended its meaning, but I could not get myself to write those letters down while I sat in that little chair with my arms on my tiny table in kindergarten. For many years, I had allowed myself to believe that writing was not "my thing." My writing improved when I reminded myself that knowing a few languages does not make it easier to write. The struggle to write is what makes me a writer. After learning the power of words, I appreciated my languages even more, which allowed me to cultivate a passion for writing so that I could share written thoughts with my family and comrades.

Studying abroad required me to thoroughly learn English. My English classes taught me "White English," as Asao Inoue would probably say. By my senior year of high school, I had outgrown my ESL classes. Although my English was not perfect, I had made a lot of progress. Yet one of my English teachers suggested that it would be best to go back to ESL classes for more tutoring because I did not meet the requirements to advance. However, I did not get discouraged by the disregard of my effort and progress.

When leaving home, my parents reminded me that I have to learn from Americans, even though I am not one, and I can retain what is essential to me. When I read the introductory chapter of the book, *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*, written by Asao Inoue, I was reminded of how much the expectations and grading systems in high school did not respect my literacy experience. However, I made the most of it. I knew that when I was grown, I would create expectations that would respect my experiences.

Even though I know three languages, I never thought that it was exceptional to speak them. I took for granted that I was born speaking three languages, as though it was one language. I did not understand my talent until I realized that, in a few seconds, I could understand an idea in three languages. Fluency is not only about the ability to speak, read, and write a language, but also to comprehend and feel the language to its fullest. In my ESL class, I started admiring the English language's complexity, which gave me a newfound appreciation of Kinyarwanda and French, as they are all my favorite languages. Then, I realized how little I knew within each language. Earlier, I thought that my grammar was impeccable and that I could translate anything. I did not understand that some words can only be defined in their native language; I learned each language's power. After this realization, my literacy path became complex, yet straightforward.

### Global Citizenship

Fortunately and unfortunately, speaking different languages does not make a person a global citizen. For instance, in Nigeria, there are more than four hundred spoken languages, but a Nigerian who knows five languages is not necessarily a global citizen because of their tongues. On the other hand, someone may be a global citizen without speaking as many languages. Let me use my breaking-down-the-sentence system from ESL to explain what I mean. "Global" means relating to the whole world, and "citizen" refers to a person who is part of a society. Therefore, "global citizen" means a person who is connected to the whole world. Speaking Kinyarwanda, French, and English allows me to communicate with Rwandans and other people who speak French and English.

Alternatively, as Daisaku Ikeda, a Japanese philosopher, stated in the “Education for Global Citizenship” lecture, “wisdom, courage, and compassion” are some of the “essential elements of global citizenship.” Speaking three languages has given me wisdom and the ability to express myself in three languages. However, I need more than my languages to be considered a global citizen. Even though one may travel to many different countries on all continents, it does not make them a global citizen. Moreover, learning and respecting another person’s culture and identity does not make a person a global citizen; decent human beings should take these particular actions to respect their fellow human beings not to feel like “saviors” and “global citizens.”



To relate to the whole world is not an easy task. There are billions of people on this planet, so the idea of global citizenship is complex. Consequently, our languages allow us to have thoughts woven with cultures passed on from generation to generation. Knowing only one language is like reading a single story because what you end up with is one set of beliefs and thoughts. However, in learning another language, an individual is equipped with other stories and various kinds of ideas. As one learns many languages spoken around the world, they experience different beliefs and stories that connect them to the world more than a person who only knows one language.

Through speaking three languages, I attained diverse beliefs and thoughts that will assist me in my journey and adventures that will shape me into an authentic global citizen with wisdom, courage, compassion, and many experiences to share. From not understanding the word “carrot” in kindergarten to speaking three languages simultaneously, my literacy experiences have been a part of my identity and my life in general. Knowing more about my languages gives me hope that I can learn more about myself, as well. In the reading, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldúa, she confidently states that she is her language, which wholeheartedly resonated with me. Superficially, I knew my languages. However, through my ESL classes and reading more stories on diverse literacy narratives, I have come to be fond of my languages, which has significantly improved my language development and contributed to my perception of my global citizenship identity.

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