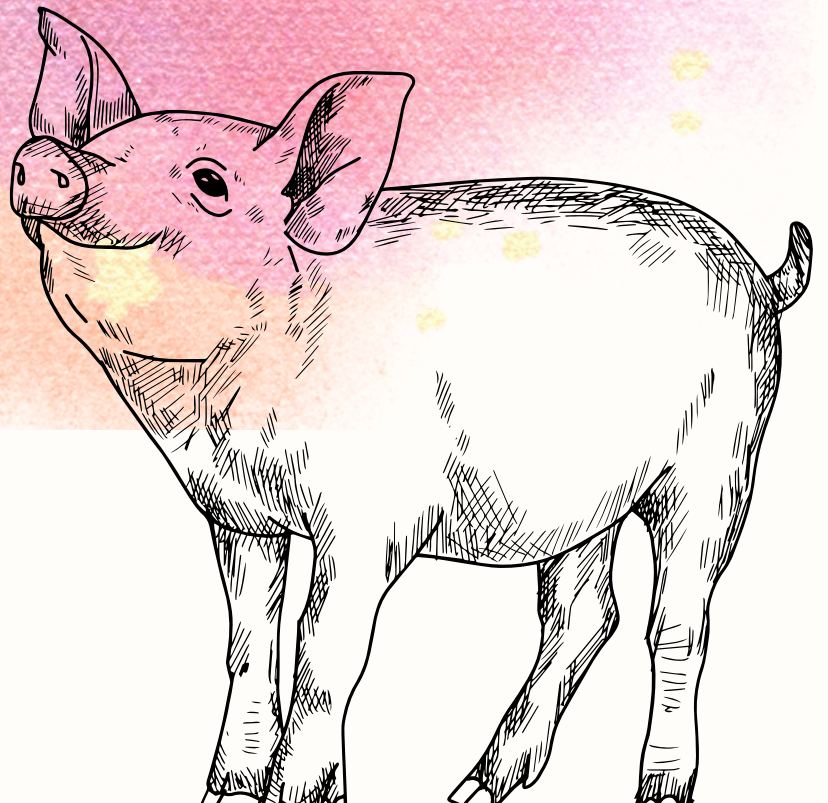
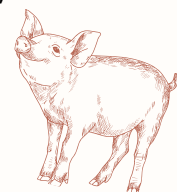


# My Literacy Adventure with People, AI, and a Piglet

By: Shota Maeda  
Soka University of America



A pink piglet is curiously looking at me from the small window. He might want to become friends with me. I look back at his eyes and realize that he is captured in the green cover of a tiny book. This was my first encounter with books and the moment I embarked on the adventure of literacy development. Since then, I, the adventurer, have overcome countless challenges through guidance from people around me. Now, I have discovered a secret key that empowers me to survive in the era of digitalization and globalization.



When I was as young as three years old, I opened a treasure box filled with sparkling pieces of an unknown world. My parents started reading me a book believing it would improve my language ability and make me smarter. I was absorbed in those bedtime stories under the orange light of a table lamp, which had the magical power to turn an ordinary preschool kid into an adventurer who explores a new world of imagination every night. As my mother was exhausted from her daily housework and often fell asleep before she finished reading an entire book, I had to wake her up again and ask her to read it from the beginning.

I couldn't read the books by myself, but I gradually memorized the sentences by ear and learned to recite them. My parents' look of amazement when I successfully memorized the whole book became a strong motivation for me to practice reading even harder. I still recall my favorite part from one of the books (see Fig. 1): "My dad is a pig. My mom is a pig, too. Therefore, I'm a piglet" (Otosan wa buta. Okasan mo buta. Dakara, boku wa kobuta-chan: おとうさんは ぶた。おかあさんも ぶた。だから、ぼくは こぶたちゃん。)(Kitayama, 1987, p. 3-8).

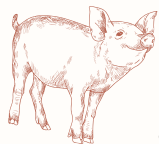


Fig. 1. Dad pig, mom pig, and piglet

It might sound silly, but I found these sentences beautiful and humorous. For me, this small green book about a pig family was a textbook that I put my best effort into reciting perfectly.

Because I loved reading books, my vocabulary expanded enormously. By the time I entered kindergarten, I was already familiar with *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*, which Japanese children usually learn in elementary school. While many children

unwillingly practice writing those characters, I simply enjoyed writing down random words in a notebook, such as the names of vegetables, furniture, and friends. Now that I think about it, I feel sorry for my mother, who, while preparing our meals, was often bothered by my ceaseless questions about *kanji*. However, every time I learned new words like *chair* (*isu*: 椅子), *Sunday* (*nichiyobi*: 日曜日), and *radish* (*daikon*: 大根), I was proud of myself and felt like I had become a grown-up.



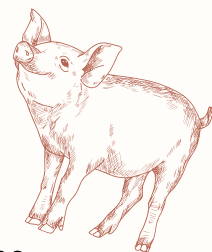
By the time I entered elementary school, I had already become a bookworm. It was a great joy entering the world of dinosaurs, pyramids, or the moon in novels every day, after coming home from school. My unflagging desire to find new books was like an ambitious explorer searching for new islands. Just as a map and a compass helped the sailor to navigate the oceans, my mother took me to the nearby library every weekend to help me choose interesting books.

However, once summer break started, my ambitions grew more extensive, which is to say, I started reading more books faster, compelling her to bring me to the library more often. Being busy, she devised the strategy to borrow ten books at a time, so that I didn't finish reading too quickly. Contrary to her intention, I ended up reading all the books in one day as if I were competing with her.

For me, my summer homework to read fifteen books was easy, and in fact, my mother consulted my teacher for advice: "My son is reading too much and doesn't play with friends in the park. Should I break his habit?"

Despite my abundant experience in reading and practicing *kanji*, writing composition was my weak point. In particular, I detested the picture diary homework assigned during long holidays, in which I had to write down what happened every day and draw a picture related to the event. One of the reasons I hated the picture diary assignments was simply because I was embarrassed to show my terrible artistic drawings to my classmates, but more than that, I was too shy to explain my daily events and reveal my feelings through writing. As a little child, I felt embarrassed and stressed, so I seriously thought the diary assignment invaded my privacy.

A turning point in my attitude toward writing arrived when I encountered a great literature teacher in 6th grade. She gave me detailed feedback and praised me whenever I submitted compositions or diaries. Moved by her sincerity, I gradually began to open up to her and share my experiences and thoughts to please her. The exchanges between my writing and her feedback continued like a letter:



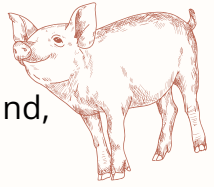
*Me: I went to the aquarium last Sunday.*

*Teacher: That's great! Who did you go with? What did you enjoy the most?*

*Me: I went with my family and enjoyed watching the dolphin show.*

*Teacher: Oh! It must be so much fun! Tell me more about it!*

After having these conversations for a year, I finally found pleasure in writing, and my weakness became my strength.



As my passion for learning went beyond the boundaries of the tiny Japanese island, my passion for acquiring English emerged. My first exposure to English was in elementary school, while most Japanese students started studying a second language in middle school. The main activities in the classes were singing songs, watching movies, and playing games in English, and I never felt like I was studying. Rather, I naturally had fun with my classmates and teachers using English.

I also loved chit-chatting with a teacher from Canada after each class, and I joined the English club just to talk with her. We chatted about our favorite foods, families, and cultures of Japan and Canada, and I imagined living abroad and speaking English fluently. Looking back, I wonder how I communicated with my poor English level, as I did not even know basic grammar back then. It was certainly not because of my courage but because of her kindness and patience that allowed me to speak English without fear of making mistakes.

A few years later, I started practicing English intensely out of necessity; I was determined to study at Soka University of America (SUA). Since a high score on an English exam was an application requirement, I had to prepare for academic reading and writing. As I memorized a long list of academic vocabulary and wrote essays with time limits, learning English suddenly changed its character from a fun activity to a hardship.

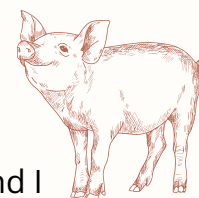
However, at that time, an English teacher generously offered to help me and enabled me to keep moving forward again. She corrected my essays and gave me advice almost weekly, pushing me to practice writing constantly. At first, even finishing one short essay was draining and painful, but her face came to my mind whenever I was about to escape from my desk, and I was determined to return the favor to her. As a result of my continual training with her for more than two years, my literacy in English became comparable to that of Japanese.

While my English acquisition has been going smoothly, one episode changed my mindset toward language learning. A teacher of mine who had studied abroad told me, "Your English level is amazing, and you can be confident in it. But, you must deeply consider what opinions you want to convey using English. Otherwise, once you go to the States, you'll be just a person who can speak." His words were eye-opening because I was somewhat satisfied with my language skills and almost forgot

the true purpose of learning English: to convey my feelings and opinions to people outside my country and learn from them.

Afterward, I started taking online conversation lessons, in which I read news articles and discussed the topics with tutors from different countries. These lessons allowed me to think about complicated global issues and exchange opinions using English. This was when I started to put English learning into practice based on reading and discussion.

An aspect of my literacy development is digital literacy. Western Sydney University (2024) defines digital literacy as “having the skills you need to live, learn, and work in a society where communication and access to information is increasingly through digital technologies like internet platforms, social media, and mobile devices.” According to this definition, digital literacy has two aspects: communication and information.

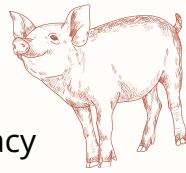


My parents bought me my first smartphone soon after entering middle school and I started communicating digitally with my family and friends. At first, they did not allow me to use chat apps like LINE, which many of my friends in Japan used, and my only way of communicating with them was by email. Having felt inconvenienced, I asked my mother the reason for the rule. She answered that writing an email takes longer than writing a chat, giving me more time to carefully consider how the person I'm writing to would feel when reading my message.

Even after the rule was removed, she continuously told me to be very considerate when communicating with someone online, as if I were actually talking to the person looking at their eyes. This advice taught me that digital communication sounds easy but requires a high capability to empathize and understand the person, just like a face-to-face conversation, which became the foundation of my digital literacy.

As I started using a smartphone and a computer, I gained more information through the internet and social media. Being impressed by how easy it is to acquire knowledge, I thought it would be a much better option than reading a book. My life as a bookworm seemed to end and was replaced by the life of a technical person.

However, my history teacher explained why reading textbooks in the digital age was essential in his class. He said, “The internet is certainly convenient, but it is overflowing with misinformation. To figure out if it is true or not, you need to build up the foundation of knowledge through secure sources, such as books. Only then



can you make effective use of the internet.” His words convinced me that my literacy skills in Japanese and English would never be wasted, even in the digital days.

As the world becomes increasingly digital, it is also becoming global. Accordingly, a sense of global citizenship is crucial to solving today’s intertwined global issues. While the definition of global citizenship varies, ChatGPT, which symbolizes state-of-the-art technologies today, suggests an interesting perspective:

Global citizenship is a concept that refers to the idea that individuals, regardless of their nationality or cultural background, have a sense of belonging to a larger global community. It involves recognizing that we are all interconnected and interdependent in an increasingly globalized world. (ChatGPT)

This definition implies the importance of literacy in globalization. High literacy ability is indispensable to gaining correct information beyond one’s community and understanding the interconnectedness of every human being on the earth.

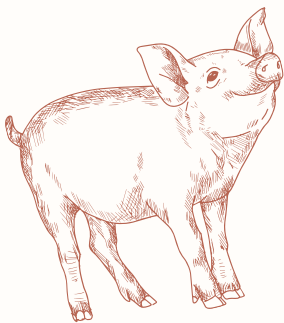
In 1996, Daisaku Ikeda, the founder of SUA, delivered a speech about global citizenship at Columbia University’s Teachers College. In his remarks, he suggests “the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life” is an essential quality to be a global citizen (Ikeda, 1996, p. 6).

These two definitions, which were given by AI and a human author, respectively, reminds me of when I learned about the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year. I imagined and empathized with the lives of people suffering there and felt connected to them. At the same time, it reminded me how an event in a distant country could politically and economically affect my country. In this way, I understood the world’s interconnectedness by synthesizing information from various sources, including TV, newspapers, and books.

On the other hand, false information and lack of literacy can lead people to make poor judgments and misunderstand the relationships among countries and people. In fact, during the invasion, the Russian government propagated disinformation in the country to justify its inhumane actions against Ukraine (“Countering Disinformation with Facts,” 2022). Consequently, most people in Russia who believe in government controlled TV news support the invasion (Kolesnikov & Volkov, 2022). These examples show how the literacy to tell if the information is true is essential to be a global citizen who can grasp the world correctly. As the wars and conflicts continue throughout the globe, including the Israel-Hamas war, the attitude to listen

to both sides without bias and make informed decisions is becoming even more critical.

In retrospect, my lifelong literacy adventure began with blank pages, a picture of the piglet's lovely face on its first page. Since then, other pages have been colored with the memories of interactions with my parents and teachers. In the middle of my journey, I, the hero in the story, was equipped with gears of digital and global literacy, and I leveled up successfully. Now, the book's second chapter starts; my exploration of the unknown world as a global citizen never ends.



## References

