I sit in front of an eighteen year-old refugee girl.

“KM, what do you want to tell the audience?” I ask her in a low voice.

I am working on a linguistic analysis of her native language. It’s a language spoken by only a small handful of people and is under threat of becoming extinct by the persecution of a military government. The two of us are presenting my findings with another consultant and two other linguistic majors at a conference in a few weeks. The two of us sit in her kitchen along with my partner; the light is limited and the air is thick with the smell of chili powder. KM’s eyes are cast down, and her speech is slow, deliberate, and quiet.

“You see, I don’t know what to say. I think my English is not so good.” As she speaks she sinks down in her seat and we can see the confidence drain from her face.

What we are asking of her is a very intimidating request. We have invited her to speak in front of a crowd of forty college students and professors. This task would frighten most people, but KM also has to deliver this speech in a language she has only been using for two years. KM is very self-conscious of her English speaking abilities; she is petrified of being laughed at. My partner and I realize that this is a much deeper issue than just her language proficiency. She has told us that she is the only girl in her high school who speaks her native language; the few others are boys. I cannot imagine myself in her shoes. Being a teenager in high school is something I did not enjoy; couple that with zero female friends and only a handful of people who have even heard of your language? Isolation is her daily experience. It’s certainly not an environment to encourage a positive self-esteem. I look closely at KM and see a slight shadow of the little girl I was in elementary school. She needs someone like my mother…

“gʰ…o…’go…sʰ…tʰ…o…’pʰ… stop?, in, out, yes, yellow, blue, to…” I’m five years old again and am reading sight-words scrawled in big bubbly purple writing on flash cards.
“Good job, Lisa! I think we can add new words tomorrow,” my mother says, clearly relieved that I finally memorized the twenty cards we’ve been reviewing for over a week.

This is the nightly routine that my mother and I shared while I was in kindergarten. My mother made learning sight-words a game of who could have the largest pile by the end of the session; more often than not she won. My mother was a thirty-five year old kindergarten teacher at the elementary school I attended. She also had her certification in reading and special education, but what tipped her off about my “learning disability” the most was her ability to recognize herself in me. During her graduate studies she diagnosed herself as having dyslexia. When I went to kindergarten and was unable to match the sounds to the letters that symbolized them it was clear that I was dyslexic as well.

My mother never had me diagnosed; she figured since she and my father were both reading specialists they could provide the intervention I needed at home. I attended “mommy school” during the summer months, building up my sight vocabulary and reading an endless number of texts. During the school year we studied the spelling lists for hours, just so I could pass the test and forget how the words were spelled a week later. I did not realize this was not normal for other children until my sister went to school when I was in fourth grade. For her there were no flash cards, no nightly review of the spelling words, no “mommy school” in the summer. But the fact that I was unaware that I was different was the key to my success; I did the work because that is what I had to do. My mother did not let me use dyslexia as an excuse nor allow me to throw pity parties when I struggled. This was not a life sentence. Together we taught my mind how to compensate.

It was the end of second grade when reading finally clicked. Mr. Daniels was my teacher, and I had chosen a chapter book from The Babysitter Club Little Sister collection to read on the windowsill of my classroom. I looked at the cover of the book and thought the white cat looked like the ones in the television commercials for Fancy Feast. I opened the book and it came alive. These were not just words; they were Karen’s thoughts. Between the rote memorization of sight words, context clues, and sheer stubbornness on my part, I finally understood why a person needs to know how to read. It’s a source of communication! From then on I had a book in my hand every possible moment. I remember reading about Amelia Earhart making a rollercoaster off of her roof; I remember Sarah who might have been plain and tall, but she was loved and respected; I remember Lise who was the sister who died in Number the Stars. Books became a staple in my life and as a result my vocabulary grew at a rapid rate. From then on only my spelling mistakes and mispronunciations when I read out loud gave away the fact that I struggled with this learning disability.

Impact verb \im-ˈpakt\: 1. to have a direct effect on 2. a verb that is thrown around in Education, but whose meaning I have finally experienced

“I want to say that I want to be a nurse. But I feel that I can’t because what if I don’t become a nurse because my English is not so good.” I am brought back into the room by KM’s words.
“KM, I think you can be a nurse. I know you are worried about English, but by being a nurse you would only need to know specific words and they will teach you those. I bet you can be a nurse’s aide until your English gets better. Plus think how great you’d be! You know English, Burmese, Karen, and Karenni. If you worked here in Syracuse you would very important because you could interpret for the doctors and nurses!” KM’s face brightens up a bit and her confidence returns.

After an hour my partner and I write down a whole page worth of notes - twice as long as we expected.

“KM, is there anything else you’d like to tell the audience?” my partner asks looking up from her notes; she is transcribing KM’s words so we can type them later on the PowerPoint.

“I want to say to them, ‘I want to thank you guys for wanting to learn my language. And for being my friends and helping me with my English and telling me it is okay when I make mistakes. I really want to thank you for that.’” KM looks at us with honest brown eyes. My partner and I stare back first dumbfounded, and then struggling to keep the tears away.

“You want to thank us in front of everyone?” my partner asks to confirm that we are all on the same page.

KM confirms with a simple, “I think they need to know.”

As I sit in KM’s kitchen overcome with emotion, I realize that KM does not need someone like my mother, because she already has such people in her life, my partner and I included. People go into teaching with the intention of making a difference, but linguistics is a more self-centered career. My partner and I entered into this project for a variety of reasons, but we did not stop to really consider what our consultant wanted out of the time we would share. The three of us had created a little circle of friendship where she taught us her language and we provided a non-threatening atmosphere where she could listen to and use English with native speakers. KM taught me more about English as a Second Language in those two hour sessions than I had ever learned in a classroom setting. She shared her fears, her hopes, her aspirations with us, while we shared our ears for listening and expressing an interest in this teenager’s life experiences.

My partner and I close our notebooks; we have another hour to go, but tonight should not be spent collecting data. The three of us talk about our families, share pictures on our cell phones, compare Burmese animal sounds to American animal sounds, and spend the rest of the night in peals of laughter. In this moment we are simply three young women defying language barriers together.

**Perseverance** noun \par-sər-
ˈvər-ən(t)\ts\: continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition 2. The most important word in my life and in my future classroom

KM practices her speech with us in her kitchen for three weeks; she is nervous but we can see her confidence improving every session. Finally the day comes and KM stands in front of a crowd of forty
people, reading her introduction in a loud clear voice. I beam. The audience adores her, just like I knew they would. The amount of growth in her confidence just in the past six weeks is absolutely outstanding.

This speech is not only a huge accomplishment for KM, but it is for me as well. Linguistics is a hard field for me because of my dyslexia; it requires me to listen to my consultant’s speech patterns and write down what I hear as accurately as possible. My strengths in linguistics are not in the phonetics department, but rather morphemes. If I think back to my language training this fits. To memorize the spelling words, I had to break each part down, sometimes into individual letters and attach a phrase or meaning to it. Now I look for such meaningful patterns in different languages.

My mother once asked me if I thought that I could handle linguistics. At the time, I simply shrugged and said “We’ll see”. After working with KM and sharing such an experience with her, the answer is an absolute “Yes”. Linguistics is not just rules and patterns, but the foundation of communication. I enjoy dissecting languages and figuring out how they work structurally; perhaps this stems from a curiosity of why I could not grasp language features as easily as my peers. As a future ESL teacher my own struggle with dyslexia and the success I have had with linguistics have taught me how, with perseverance, anything is possible. I wish to have the same positive influence in my students’ lives as my mother had in mine. My experience with KM is just the start of this long and life full-filling journey, but an experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

Assignment in LIT 396: "Write a memoir that tells about a small but significant moment in your life, or a learning experience."

Submitted by Dr. Walsh for TESOL EDUCATION Award