

STORIES OF LEARNING AND TEACHING PRACTICES | 学習・教育実践の成功談・失敗談

From Hating to Teaching English: An Interview with Jackson Koon Yat Lee



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Ken: Jackson and I conducted this interview in Zoom for our classes to showcase him as someone who was born in an Asian country then moved to Canada where he developed a phobia to speak in English. We agreed that his experiences could inspire students who harbor similar fears of becoming able English users. As our interview progressed, I found myself vicariously immersed in his experiences, seeing myself in him, through a narrative inquiry lens (Connelly and Clandinin 2000) that situated me in time, location and personal experience. Although I was born and raised in the United States, I could see parallels with my own upbringing that brought me to Japan.

Much of what I reacted to Jackson's experiences is embedded in this interview. I'd like to let his retelling of his language development experiences speak for themselves, and invite others to react and engage in dialogue with us.

Jackson: Thank you Ken for this valuable opportunity to share my experience as an English learner with other educators. I believe it is an interesting account that demonstrates several important aspects of language learning, including language trauma and confidence. It also shows how exploring our own journey as learners, we can discover valuable teachable moments for our students.

Here is a link to our [interview](#) uploaded to YouTube. Some portions of the transcript below have been condensed and abridged for readability. Time stamps are included below to aid those readers who would like to view more.

Jackson: (00:46) My full name is Jackson Koon Yat Lee. I'm a Hong Kong-born Canadian. When I was ten, my family immigrated to Vancouver, Canada, where I had lived for 12 years before coming to Japan to teach English. I have been here for almost a decade now.

"This narrative will explore how I overcame my fear of English as an immigrant and eventually turned my experience into a story I share to encourage my students in their journey in English learning, summarized in three life lessons at the end."

In Hong Kong (HK), we spoke only Cantonese. People called me Lee Koon Yat (李冠一), but I also had my English name, Jackson Lee. My family did relatively well, and I grew up as the first grandchild of a big family, being loved and spoiled by my relatives. Elementary school in Hong Kong was quite strict, but since I didn't go to cram school as most children did, my childhood was rather simple, relaxing, and sheltered.

When I was nine, my father informed us we were moving to Canada. I honestly didn't comprehend what that meant. I didn't understand the concept of overseas or immigration. All I knew was that I would be leaving my home, my school, my friends and my relatives. I got really upset and didn't know the rationale behind this drastic change. We moved to Canada several months later.

Ken: Did your parents tell you later why they moved to Canada? Was it related to the 1997 transfer?

Jackson: It is partially related to that, but we were quite late in 2000. We never met anyone who immigrated from Hong Kong after us. Another major reason for immigration was that my father wanted his children to see the world, acquire another language, and have more options in life.

Ken: How long did you hate your father for doing that?

Jackson: (laughs) I would say about ten years. I didn't realize how life-changing this experience was until much later. Instead, I was fixed on the immediate hardships, specifically the language barrier. People in Hong Kong studied English from kindergarten but my teachers focused more on vocabulary and spelling than actual communication. I had aced all of my vocabulary quizzes, but there was never a chance to speak the language.

When I moved to Canada as a sixth grader, I immediately realized that I couldn't make friends or understand what the teachers were saying. They were nice people, but I couldn't connect or share my thoughts with them. To help me, the teachers looked for other students who could speak Cantonese and asked them to be my 'friends'. However, it also limited me on who I could approach for conversations.

I had ESL classes every day, which I would attend in the room across the hallway. On one hand, I didn't need to learn subjects like French and science that I could not understand. On the other hand, I stopped learning science, a subject I used to be passionate about. I also felt embarrassed whenever I would stand up and leave our classroom for ESL at least once a day. Besides ESL classes though, I still had to take the normal English classes, which I hardly understood.

I didn't hate school life, but I hated that I couldn't do the things I used to be able to do like making friends or studying science, all because of the language barrier. Due to the resentment and shame, I started avoiding using English (15:15) even though I was in a situation where I should be using English.

At that time, my father was working in HK and only visited occasionally. My mother's English wasn't good and she couldn't drive. Life was difficult for her, especially with two young children. For instance, when we were renting, the landlord wanted to sell the house, and we were forced to move within a month. My mom didn't know how to look for places to rent. There were listings in local newspapers, but calling and negotiating in a second language was nerve-racking. Another example was when we took the bus downtown for the first time. When we reached downtown, I cried and begged my mother to not get off and let the bus turn around and take us home instead. The naive little Jackson was afraid we would get lost forever, and my mom was quite angry. Feeling helpless in a foreign land, unable to function or communicate due to language differences, I had become afraid of Canada and any new experiences.

In comparison, my 6-year-old brother picked up the language and by the 3rd grade he was well integrated in the class. He was making friends and having fun while I was busy being scared and avoiding English. Watching him adapt to the environment successfully while I struggled actually made me jealous, but I didn't know what I could do, and I simply stayed in the comfort zone, hanging out with my handful of Cantonese-speaking friends.

At the end of elementary school, we moved, which meant I was changing school districts. I had just made a few friends in elementary school, and I already had to say goodbye. The night before entering secondary school, I stayed up crying, frightened about the idea of not having anyone there who could speak Cantonese.

As expected, there were only strangers. I couldn't identify the Cantonese speakers in the school, and there were no teachers matching 'friends' for me. I also missed another year of science due to a schedule mix-up and ESL class commitments, which set me back even further.

In the ESL program, the higher level you reached meant less ESL classes to take. Eventually, you 'graduate' from needing ESL classes altogether. My ESL teachers were mostly teachers at school who taught other languages (ex. Japanese, Mandarin) and had learned English as a second language too. My social circle started to expand to bond with other 'Chinese kids', which included anyone from HK, Mainland China and Taiwan. We all got along really well because we shared similar cultural beliefs and values. Ironically, I saw significant improvements in my Mandarin.

My issue continued to be my negative attitude towards English. I had my classmates ask questions on my behalf. My friends would lead presentations while I focused on the artistic tasks. I did my best to minimize public speaking. However, the more I avoided speaking up and interacting with new people, the more introverted, shy, and negative I had become.

Ken: I could relate to your experience, because I was a nerd too.

Jackson: Entering university felt like I was starting from zero again in a brand new environment. I majored in criminology in university, and there was not a single Chinese-speaking classmate in my program. My studies went well, but socially, I didn't make a single friend at university because I didn't know how to communicate casually in English. I was also still lacking confidence in my English. For instance, I would always check with teachers whether spelling mistakes on exams would be penalized before I even made the mistakes.

Ken: You said you hated English but you're teaching English!

Jackson: Two things happened that significantly changed how I considered my relationship with English. The first was my part-time job selling Japanese kitchen appliances in a small store. The customer base was mostly Chinese, but more and more English-speaking customers became interested in Asian cuisines, and I was the expert who could explain and teach them about rice cookers and hot water pots. This contrasted with my previous job at a pizza shop where I did everything but dealing with customers. Without realizing it, this sales job built up my confidence in English as I found success in my verbal English interactions, something I rarely experienced through my school life.

Another life-changing event happened when I was 20, when I took a trip to HK with my best friend from high school. We always communicated in Cantonese, but a random thought inspired me to try speaking in English throughout the day. I was curious about the reactions I would receive from strangers on the street. People on public transit did double-takes at us: first to locate the source of the English they heard, and another to confirm if the English was really coming from the two ordinary looking Chinese young men. It may not have mattered to anyone else, but I felt the recognition as an English speaker for the very first time, which ironically happened in Hong Kong.

This event made me realize my English wasn't as bad as I always imagined, as I had been absorbing the language for a decade. The issue was that I had convinced myself that my English was insufficient, my vocabulary was lacking, my accent was weird, and it was an embarrassment. Thus, I had locked my English away and avoided using it in front of people. The recognition as an English speaker by strangers blew the lock off. Since then, I found much more comfort with my spoken English.

Ken: *(As I listened to Jackson, I remember having a similar experience many years ago. I was speaking in English with a white American on the train. He told me that everyone was looking at me because I was speaking English at the same speed as him. Of course they didn't know I was a native English speaker if they only looked at my face.)*

Jackson: Back at university, I had lost interest in criminology. I also thought that my still-weak English made me undesirable in the job market. Rather than pursuing a professional career, I thought I would continue my comfortable kitchen appliances job for a couple of years. Working in Japan never came across my mind until I took an elective class called 'Japanese Cultures through Films' during my final semester, which discussed different values and beliefs found in Japanese society.

While writing the final exam for that class, which was also my final day at the university, I was distracted by thoughts about my future. When I finished, I waited to be the last to submit so I could thank him for the course, and we struck up a conversation.

"Based on your impressive work, you are quite passionate about Japan. Have you thought about working there?" I explained to him my interest in Japanese pop-culture. However, employment was unlikely with a criminology degree.

He agreed but gave another suggestion. "You could teach English in Japan as an ALT (assistant language teacher). This is your opportunity to fulfill a dream. Give it a try, even just for a year"

Despite many worries including having no interest in education, communication, and certainly, a job focused on English, my fondness for Japanese culture was enough to have me considering. Also, the professor's words of "give it a try" lingered in my head and ended up convincing me to "try" and applied for a position.

In hindsight, this life-changing interaction with the professor shaped the kind of teacher I wanted to become, one who sees potential in students and would encourage them to explore beyond their comfort zones.

When I made up my mind, I also spoke with my mother. She was understandably shocked, knowing my struggles with English and fear for new environments. She hesitated but ultimately supported me in pursuing a new challenge.

Throughout my application process, worries about my subpar English returned. Many ALT job recruitments listed 'native English speakers with any university degree' as requirements. In Vancouver, I had never come across the term 'native speaker' because there were so many people from different cultural backgrounds. (*I recognize 'native speaker' to be a problematic term, but that is a discussion separate from this interview.*) People in school were 'in ESL', 'out of ESL', or 'didn't need ESL'. 'ESL student' is a status anyone can graduate from, but 'native speaker' is something people are born into. I did not know if I qualified, but I got hired 2 months after my interview.

Initially, I was still very worried about how students and local teachers saw me. Perhaps they would doubt my 'native speaker-ness' based on my appearance and/or HK heritage, so I avoided telling people about my Hong Kong background. In Canada, I was someone from HK. However, in Japan, I presented myself purely as a Canadian. My introduction was "Hi. I'm Jackson and I'm from Canada." Considering my journey and struggles, I felt like I was a fraudulent English speaker, let alone an English teacher.

It took me two years to realize that teachers and students focused on how I taught rather than who I was. Some students told me that they appreciated how clearly I spoke, which came from me being very conscious and careful with my accent and pronunciations. Everyone involved enjoyed my lessons, and that replaced the fears and worries I had with motivation to become a better teacher. Years later, I had discovered my passion in teaching, and I realized that my one-year trial had turned into an unexpected career.

Ken: It reminds me of when I applied to be an ALT. I wrote on my application that my nationality was "Japanese" even though I was born in the United States and I had an American passport. We are our own worst enemy. We think, "I know myself better than anyone else, and I am not good enough." We ought to realize that often people think the opposite of what we think ourselves.

Jackson: Reflecting upon my experiences, there were three important lessons I learned.

1. English (or any skill) is not an on-off switch. A person is not either a 'good English speaker' or not, nor is it about being a 'native speaker' or not. Instead, it is a scale of what I can do now with my skills now, and what more I can do as I further improve.
2. Confidence is essential in learning. No matter how much English I learned in Canada, my lack of confidence drove me to avoid using it, so I never understood how capable I really was. Thus, we must nurture students' self-confidence alongside their skills.
3. This is about life in general. When given time to reflect, negative experiences at the moment may turn out to be positive life-changing experiences. I hated my father for immigration, but now I am really glad he opened a new world for us. English has traumatized me for over a decade, but that has shaped my identity and beliefs as a language teacher. Being able to reflect and view an event from different perspectives can help us find more things in life to appreciate.

With my students, they learn from me that liking something is not a prerequisite to learning it. However, recognizing their own growth throughout the learning journey and finding pride in improvements will be greatly encouraging. Without crediting ourselves for our effort, we end up locking our own progress away and give ourselves negative labels that hinder further growth. At the same time, I also tell my students that if I can get here after hating English for 12 years, those with a more positive relationship with English can get much further than me. (laugh)

Finally, by sharing this with other teachers, I hope more educators can see that many personal experiences in our lives can become valuable teachable moments. It requires us to seek deeper into how we have grown and overcome obstacles, and then match them with our understanding of what will support our students at their stages of development.

Thank you, Ken, for this opportunity to share my story. This has turned my past struggles into a positive message that can hopefully help some people in their classes or in their journey of language learning.

Ken: There is so much in your experience that it is a success story. I hope you will have more and more successes in your life, because you are not a native speaker, you are able to give confidence to students, to go over a great wall. I hope students will be more inspired to use English for learning and their part-time job and for anything else in their lives.