

CURRENT EVENTS CONVERSATION

Teenagers on What Their Families' Native Languages Mean to Them

"I'm not that embarrassed," one student said of his accent, "because it's a flex to know multiple languages."

By The Learning Network

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Do you speak any languages besides English at home? Did your parents, grandparents or great-grandparents when they were growing up? Do you or anyone else in your family have what might be considered an accent?

In the guest essay "'Don't Lose Your Accent!'" Ilan Stavans urges newcomers to the United States to embrace their "immigrant verbal heritage." He writes that "far from undermining the American experiment, immigrants enhance our culture by introducing new ideas, cuisines and art. They also enrich the English language."

What role does your family's native tongue play in your life? we asked students. We heard from young people who speak Russian, Telugu, Spanish, Farsi, Cantonese, Twi, Quichua, Arabic and Polish. We heard from those who took pride in their family's multilingualism and from those who were made to feel ashamed of it, but eventually came to cherish it. We also heard from several students who never had the chance to learn their relatives' native tongue and regretted it.

Benjamin, a student from San Jose, Calif., who grew up speaking English and Mandarin, summed up a sentiment many students expressed about their linguistic heritages: "Back in elementary school, I was often told that I had an accent, but

now that I think about it, I'm not that embarrassed, because it's a flex to know multiple languages." Read on to see what else teenagers had to say about what their families' native languages mean to them.

Thank you to all those who joined the conversation on our writing prompts this week, including students from **Casa Roble High School in Orangevale, Calif.;** **Union County Vocational-Technical High School in Scotch Plains, N.J.;** and **W.T. Clarke High School in Westbury, N.Y.**

Please note: Student comments have been lightly edited for length, but otherwise appear as they were originally submitted.

I bring my culture and language with me wherever I go.

I live in the United States, but my parents immigrated here from India. My parents speak a variety of Indian dialects, and English was not a language they learned until their late teenage years.

I have been exposed to many languages from a young age and being able to pick up on these languages has only benefited me. Sure, there were times in elementary school where I would be told I had incorrect grammar, but for the most part, knowing other languages helped me connect with other children of immigrants. It also helped me connect with my older family, although I have always been aware that I am not quite "Indian" enough.

Also, because of the fact that I know Marathi and some Hindi (the Indian dialects common in Mumbai and Pune), I am able to enjoy movies and music from more than just the English streams. Some of my favorite movies are Marathi movies.

I bring my culture and language with me wherever I go. The best places to innovate are those with diverse backgrounds; I love that I can contribute to it.

— *Riyana, UCVTS, NJ*

My parents made my sister and me cling to our language. Now, I have learned to appreciate my Polish heritage.

When I was growing up, I exclusively spoke in one tongue: Polish. Both of my parents had immigrated from Poland only a few years before and they hadn't mastered enough of English yet for me to pick it up, so my only real teachers for the first few years were my older sister and the cartoons I watched on Saturday mornings. As the years passed on, my sister would speak more and more English, and then I'd speak more and more English, until eventually we had a better grasp on both English and Polish. My parents knew this would happen and made us cling to the language, sending us to Polish school every Saturday and bringing us to Polish Mass every Sunday. And so we kept up this routine, but there were still some moments when I just couldn't think of the right word. Explaining things that I didn't know the name of because it's a szczotka, not a brush, and no, I'm not dumb, I just can't think of the word. To hand me those "thingies" because I know in my head that these are kwiatki, but you won't understand that. So I got better and I read dictionaries in between Pinkalicious and Amelia Bedelia books. Then I began to struggle to think of the words in Polish rather than in English. Asking my parents where the hairbrush is and where did we put the flowers? I'd spent so long trying to be "American" that I spoke more to my own parents in English than I did in Polish. Now, I have learned to appreciate my Polish heritage and accept that it will always be a part of who I am.

— Nicole, UCVTHS, NJ

I joined Tamil classes, and they forever changed my life.

As a first-generation child in the U.S., my family has very close ties to India. So, I grew up hearing Tamil and Kannada around the house. My mom speaks more Kannada, and my dad more Tamil. As a young child, I heard much more Kannada, so I understand the language much better than Tamil. However, Tamil became more necessary to speak, to talk to family in India. I joined Tamil classes and

learned reading, writing, and speaking. Although I am not fluent in the language, taking those classes forever changed my life. I became a part of a community where I met some of my closest friends and made many connections.

— *Rina, W.T. Clarke High School, Westbury, NY*

Seeing my family speak Farsi makes me proud.

My family speaks Farsi, a beautiful language that I have yet to explore and learn. When my grandparents converse in the language, I look at them with big eyes, hoping to catch a word or two that I know. When I was much younger, it would confuse me to hear people say that they're embarrassed of hearing their parents or relatives speak in their native language in public for everyone to hear. For me personally, I did not see them speaking Farsi as a burden to my reputation or happiness, but as something that made me proud. I would lift my chin up high, smiling wide, observing their thick accents and crisp language ... It is a gift that I have taken for granted and a mark of culture that goes back thousands of years. It's a piece of the puzzle that makes me who I am and something I'd love to share with the rest of the world.

— *Linden, Harvard-Westlake High School, CA*

I pride myself in being able to keep something as important as my native tongue.

At school? I speak English. I have no accent, few grammar issues, and I can't even read Chinese. Some could argue that English was my first language, even if it wasn't.

After a long day at school, I'll come home to greet my parents, speaking in only Chinese. For me, Chinese is one of the things that connects me to my culture. Although I'm an ABC (American Born Chinese), I want to be able to still experience and truly understand my culture and background. In the full article, Emily Kwong states how her father "explained how his need to integrate fueled his

desire to become fluent, and he forgot how to speak his native tongue. In the process, his family lost an important part of their cultural heritage.” As someone who has not experienced much need to assimilate or integrate herself into American culture, I pride myself in still being able to keep something as important as my native tongue.

— *Yolanda, W.T. Clarke High School, Westbury, NY*

Try not to lose your native language because one day, you might need it.

I speak Spanish because that is the first language I ever learned. I still speak Spanish at home because my mom does not speak English. But my dad does speak a little bit of English so sometimes I speak to him in English though most of the time I speak Spanish with both of them. I feel that it is important to keep talking about your heritage, where you come from and what it celebrates and also try not to lose the language because sometime in life, you will need it and also try not to lose the language because sometime in life, you will need it.

— *Lourdes, California*

Growing up with English and Tagalog was both a confidence booster and a blessing.

With my parents coming from the Philippines and me being born here, I guess I could say I’ve had a unique experience. I feel like growing up with both English and the native language of the Philippines, Tagalog, was both a confidence booster and a blessing. While I can agree learning a new language has its challenges, I also believe in the importance of sticking to your roots. In other words, I believe in the importance of how powerful a culture is. While I do primarily speak English, I also am in the process of learning Tagalog. Not to brag but I feel like I’ve improved a lot, not only as a Tagalog speaker, but also within myself. From eating Lunchables at

age 6 to eating halo halo, pandan, and pancit during high school. I've learned so much more about my culture from the food to the traditions I've learned to embrace it versus pretending it doesn't exist.

— *Isaiah, Glenbard West HS*

I'm grateful for what little Telugu I know, as it has allowed me to feel a sense of community and comfort.

Whenever I tell strangers that my native language is Telugu, I usually get a blank look or confused expression in return. While it's understandable that that statement may not garner the same impressed reaction as saying I speak French or Italian, I still take pride in my mother tongue. I live in an area where there are very few other Indian people, so knowing another language makes me feel more connected to my community. Being able to understand private conversations, inside jokes, and idioms that don't quite translate to English fills me with a sense of pride and belonging. Knowing Telugu also lets me connect with loved ones outside of the United States. My grandparents aren't fluent in English, and knowing Telugu is what allows me to converse with them, whether it's about small details about my day at school or news of a family member's wedding. While I'm far from fluent, I'm grateful for what little I know, as it has allowed me to feel a sense of community with those near me and feel comfort from those who are farther away.

— *Aparna, Wilmington, NC*

I learned that embracing my culture means embracing all aspects of myself, including my accent.

As a Ghanaian-American I am a swirl of both worlds. I am very in tune with my African heritage while being a part of the American fabric. My family speaks Twi, English, and French. Sometimes, I forget which language I should use in different settings ... I think my family members and I have been pressured to assimilate with others' ideas of what it means to be "American." This has been perpetuated when it comes to our accents. To others, it seemed that being different was not

unique, but instead, it made us “weird.” I specifically felt this way when I returned here from Ghana when I was five. The way I pronounced certain words was different because I was used to British English. I remember I got made fun of for pronouncing “water” and “Europe” differently from my classmates. I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb and I wanted so badly to fit in; I learned that embracing my culture means embracing all aspects of myself. I realized that I was every bit “American” like the next person. I think American English would not be the way it was without immigrants. Over time, certain aspects of our current dialect have been combined with words from different cultures. It is so diverse, and this should be celebrated.

— *Derene, UCVTS, NJ*

My family and I find so much community with those who also speak Cantonese.

My first language is English because I was born in America, and my family speaks English at home. My father immigrated to the United States when he was six or seven years old, and my mother was born in the United States. However, both of them speak Cantonese fluently, and my grandparents speak primarily Cantonese. Being a less common dialect of Chinese, Cantonese is only heard in certain parts of America. This means that my family and I find so much community with those who speak it as well. At times, I have found myself feeling like an outsider with those who speak Mandarin, which is far more common. The few friends and family who do speak Cantonese give us an opportunity to connect, allowing us to honor our linguistic heritage and ethnicity. Even the Disney movie “Turning Red,” which contains only a few lines of Cantonese, had me practically jumping with excitement. Despite feeling exiled and like an outcast for a large portion of my life, I have learned to appreciate the beauty and uniqueness of my “mother tongue,” and in the future I strive to become more proficient in it so that I may feel closer to my lineage.

— *Alexy, NJ*

A mixture of languages is what makes my family special.

I am a Latina student with Pakistani roots. My first language is Spanish though we tend to mix it with a bit of English and Quichua. We don't speak Arabic in our day-to-day but we do get a lot of customs from our Pakistan heritage, especially when it comes to the food. Our language plays a huge role in our bond as a family. A lot of our inside jokes are based on language or the mixture of different languages. Some people think it's strange and often don't fully understand what we are saying because we speak many languages at once, but I like to think that's what makes my family special.

— *Nicole, Quito, Ecuador*

Speaking Spanish has allowed me to build strong relationships with my relatives.

I can't help but smile when I talk to my parents in English. It just feels so weird.

Both of them immigrated from Colombia in their early 20s knowing very little English. Needless to say, I grew up speaking Spanish, and I continue to speak it fluently. For this, I am very thankful. It has allowed me to build strong relationships with my aunts, uncles, grandparents, and, most importantly, my mom and dad. In addition, it has connected me more to my culture. That includes music, dancing, tv shows, and movies.

So when I smile, talking to my parents in English, it is not due to an awkward sensation, but the reason why it's there. It reminds me of the important role the Spanish language has in my life.

— *Ivan, NJ*

I don't speak my family's language, but hearing it encourages me to engage in my culture more.

My first language and only language is English but my family on my dad's side speaks Spanish. Although I have never been taught it, I understand some of it and have been around the language my whole life. My dad does not speak Spanish at home but he speaks it with his parents and some of his other family ... Hearing the language being used around my family reminds me of my Hispanic roots and encourages me to engage in my culture more.

— *Giselle, Valley Stream North*

Learning Russian, Polish and English can be stressful, but it is a blessing.

I speak Russian, Polish and English and oddly enough I don't have an accent like my parents. My entire life, my dad has wanted me to learn more Russian even though I can already speak, read and write in Russian and having to learn that on top of all the other stuff at school is super stressful ... My mom was very lax with Polish and didn't want me to have to deal with the stress of learning it. In all, being able to speak different languages is a blessing and a great thing: it lets you socialize with new people and enjoy that culture's food.

— *Alex, Glenbard West High School, Glen Ellyn, IL*

Losing my ability to speak another language felt like an entire world was cut off from me.

Before the pandemic, I visited China every summer to meet with my relatives. As a small child, though I had the ability to speak, I never had anything to say. But then, as I got older, though I had more things I wanted to say, I no longer had the ability to speak.

Sometimes I wonder what insightful conversations I missed from not being able to speak Chinese, or how many new ideas I could get from books written in Chinese.

By losing my ability for another language, it feels like an entire world was cut off from me, one that could not possibly be accessed through English. Different languages provide their own unique interpretations of the world, different concepts and different perspectives. Language should not be one road, let alone one-way. Instead, it is an interconnected network of ideas and thoughts, all encompassing the gift of human communication, and someday I hope to rejoin this network myself.

— *Edward, NJ*

An accent can be a barrier in America, but mine is an important part of my culture.

In my life, Guyanese Creole has had confusing connotations. When I grew up, my parents avoided speaking it near me and my sister because it was viewed as “broken English,” since the language has a distinct accent and with many foreign words mixed in with English. On top of that, it would be completely unintelligible with people who aren’t Caribbean. My mom often discusses how her “improper English” has hindered her professional advancement. My dad talks with a thick accent, he too never had the chance to improve his professional career because of this language barrier.

Despite Creole not adhering to English grammar or not sounding “proper,” it is an important part of my culture. Talking in Guyanese Creole helps me to identify other Guyanese people, or even Caribbean people, and using these words help me identify closely with my culture, which is already fragmented as it is.

— *Elias, W. Tresper Clarke High School*

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