

## Korenglish

Throughout its existence, the definition or true meaning of literacy has created an ongoing debate of what makes someone or something literate. Other words such as love or happiness carry this same trait. Over the course of humanity, society has questioned what love and happiness truly mean and how someone knows if they have achieved it. This is the same case regarding literacy. Literacy is usually related to intellectual people or associated with someone of higher education. It is believed to mean the understanding of a text or a language. Others debate that literacy is simple knowledge of communicating whether it's speaking,



reading, talking, or even body language. The continuous controversy regarding the true meaning of literacy is something I experienced with my grandmother.

As the son of two employed parents, much of my childhood revolved around my grandmother babysitting me. With the heavy workload my mother had at Corporate Bank of America, my grandmother took the role of mother and treated me as her son. As the school bell rang at 2:15, I ran to the bus stop carrying the heavy book bag that looked to out weigh me. As I dropped off my Power Rangers book bag in my room, I would tune into Nickelodeon for my daily Blues Clues episode. Hypnotized by the television, I would ignore the loud sounds of pots clashing as my grandmother prepared my daily lunch. Smelling the distinct smell of macaroni or spaghetti was the only way I could force myself off of the television. The table would be set with a hot, fresh meal along with my favorite fruit and a glass of milk. "Thank you" would be the only words I would say even though I had a deeper appreciation for my caring grandmother. Even though I was very attached and loved by my grandmother, the close relationship between her and I was greatly affected by a language barrier.

This issue of communication was the result of my grandmother learning Japanese and Korean while she was my age. She moved to America in her late thirties, so she had little to no

English experience. My parents ignored the fact that I was a Korean-American, so they **only taught me to speak the English language**. My father feared that I would grow a heavy Asian accent that is usually carried by Asians who learn English as their second language. My father believed that what **American's view** as the **"perfect"** accent would help my social skills as well as future employment in **Corporate America**. He thought a **"perfect accent"** would make me sound more **literate**. He believed my **success in life would be determined by whether or not people believed I was literate**. The struggles between pronouncing "R"s and "L"s as well as "P"s and "B"s have always been stereotyped with Asians. **These stereotypes like most stereotypes carry a negative connotation that Asian's with pronunciation issues are usually illiterate**. Why is it that society accepts and usually adores the accent of a European, specifically a British citizen, instead of someone who came from East Asia? Why does the accent of an Asian usually lead to a **series of jokes and humility and is usually found socially unacceptable to society?** As I held a special yet troublesome relationship with my grandmother, I grew up with the sense that an **Asian accent was a negative trait that only lead to series of ignorant jokes**.



Many of these questions still make me wonder why **society's** view on accents are the way they are. **Hurtful stereotypes** usually leave the idea that **many foreigners who carry their native language accent, for the most part sound dumb or stupid**. Troubles with pronunciations make certain accents a terrible and almost **curst tongue**. Literacy is not as straightforward as most people view it. **The basic idea of literacy is a much greater idea than the limited reading, writing, and speech skills that are tied with being literate**. It comes in different forms, dialects, and different views and thoughts. This sense of speaking, reading, and writing leaves false information on the true qualities of literacy. The quality and quantity of knowledge is no measure of one's literate skills. The way a person absorbs the information and knowledge is the only measurement of literacy. The way they gather and apply that information should not matter.



Graduating from kindergarten to first grade, I started finding ways of communicating with my grandmother without the use of the English language. She would speak Korean with the use of little to no English at all. I began to grow a habit of **analyzing my grandmother's hand motions as she softly spoke her mysterious language I never grew to truly understand.** Her overall **body language** became ways of viewing what she was saying, whether she would run to me, hold her hands on her hips, or even the swing her finger pointing directly at me. The **tone** of my grandmother's voice expressed a positive or negative statement. As she spoke softly, I obviously knew she was requesting a favor or asking for my assistance with house chores. If I were lucky, it would be a question whether I was hungry or not. Her harsh, stern voice grew fear in me, usually reminding me of my unfinished house chores or homework assignments.

Occasionally she would attempt to speak some English but failed. Her last resort to communicate with me was speaking a language that was not an "official" language. It was a **hybrid language of Korean and English,** mostly consisting of basic words in both dialects. It was an exclusive code that only my grandmother and I knew and shared. Simplifying sentences and substituting words made communication possible. As I began to notice this new form of language, it eventually became our code of communicating. I jokingly gave it a name called **Korenglish.**

As I grew older, I remembered a time where my vocabulary grew more sophisticated. Not necessarily using complex words but I would begin to shy away from simple sentences that children in pre-kindergarten spoke to their parents. Forced by my dad, I would dreadfully attend our monthly family dinner. We would drive to Charlotte where the entire family would sit in a table for thirty people. The menu burned an image to my memory because we attended that dreadful Asian restaurant so many times. As I sat in my seat, I noticed I sat down next to a familiar face that I rarely see anymore. It was my grandmother. I began to awkwardly start small

talk; resorting back to our hidden language I referred to as Korenglish. As our conversation continued through our long marathon of eating Chinese food, I began to notice a feeling of guilt.

Listening to my grandmother's "broken" English, I began to realize how I communicated with her. The way and tone of how I spoke to my grandmother made me realize I was almost talking down to her. I felt like I was asking a child silly questions and it really made me feel impolite. This life long relationship with my grandmother existed through words a toddler could speak. I felt embarrassed and disrespectful. These feelings led to a downturn spiral of our once strong connection. I avoided the site of my grandmother in public because of her poorly spoken English. I was afraid what people would think of her. I felt the role of a traitor towards my grandmother. Instead of having our Korenglish conversations, I'd regrettably ignore them and save the embarrassment.

As time flew by, I began to mature and accept the fact my grandmother would never be able to speak what people considered "good" English. Maturing took sometime but eventually I didn't care whether the public viewed her as illiterate because her primary language is Korean. As the guilt became overwhelming, I realized if anyone was more literate, it was my grandmother who could speak fluent Korean and Japanese. Her wisdom and words on life represents the true definition of literacy. Her way of absorbing information from a foreign language only speaks of her experience with literacy. Ignorance was the reason I had a lack of communication with my grandmother. The public perception on literacy requires someone to be able to read, write, and speak preferably English. I began to realize that no one person has the authority or right to define the true meaning of literacy. There are no specific requirements that have to be met to be considered literate. Ignorance and stereotypes create this negative tension towards immigrants as well as people who have issues related to reading, learning, or speaking the English language.

I had more questions than answers. Regarding Asian immigrants' accents, specifically my grandmother's English, is something I am still confused on. The fact that Asian accents are looked down upon and are usually the subject of stereotypical jokes compared to a British immigrant whose accent creates this sophisticated, charming image. How did the Asian accent create this negative public perception? Why does the British accent seem desirable and sophisticated and socially acceptable to the public? Why did the public give these accents of dialect negative and positive status's to society?

These questions really cannot be answered. My grandmother taught me many things in life but one that took a while to really comprehend was literacy. Using our own language whether it is an official language or not is a form of literacy. My grandmother's hand signals and tone of her voice was a form of literacy. Literacy is not a perfect accent or the public stereotype of someone being able to read, speak, or write well. Literacy comes in different forms, which means there are different ways of showing literacy. I believe it is a way of people absorbing information and applying it or using it in daily life. The idea of comprehending information should not matter from who or how it was sent. It can and usually comes in different forms, but I found different ways of using it without the use of English. My experience with literacy put countless definitions and ideas in my head. I am still experiencing stories of literacy to date, but I now have the knowledge that literacy comes in different forms and languages. There is no right way of using literacy in daily life, it is the way of communicating or taking in information with others.