

Languages and Me by Danny Hinton

When I was a student at St. Louis High School, our foreign language choices were Latin, German and Spanish. I took Latin and hated it. I thought it was the worst course ever. Even though some of the teachers were pretty good, the methodology was the old grammar and translation method, and the time was spent memorizing stuff for no apparent reason.

And yet I was living in a linguistic paradise. If we consider my 35 classmates and their parents, we could probably come up with native speakers of: Korean, Japanese,



several dialects of Chinese, Tagalog, and Hawaiian. And that's just the Asian-Pacific languages. Add in the European backgrounds and we could probably include Czech, Polish, German, Gaelic and Portuguese. Few classrooms in the world could offer such diversity and such a list of major languages.

We could have all been learning some wonderful Hawaiian from Emmett Aluli and from Brother Oliver Aiu; but most of us were ignoring

Hawaii's unique nature and were trying to act like we were on the mainland. I hope things have changed.

I went off to college in Texas, at TCU. I did enjoy learning a little Texican (Boy, howdy it's a fer piece from Yankee English, stud.) but that wasn't considered learning a language (just like Da Kine Talk in Hawaii.) So, I studied German. No, I took German classes. Terrible classes, teachers and students.

Then I joined the Peace Corps, and things changed. Language learning stopped being an academic exercise and became a necessary tool for getting along in a foreign culture. I was sent to South Korea, and got great language training before I left. Native speakers as teachers, very small classes, intensive, oral-aural emphasis. Korean culture and language are very different from western languages and cultures; and it's almost impossible to learn one without learning the other. Confucian values and social status are built into both the culture and the language: even the vocabulary you use and the verb endings you use change depending on your social relationship to the person you are talking with. I was an English teacher in a small town on the East coast of South Korea for two years, and considered it a very good, cheap education.

A few years after the Peace Corps, I started studying Chinese. Then I went to Taiwan for a year, supporting myself while teaching English, and taking daily one-on-one classes from some great instructors at Taiwan National Normal University. Chinese is very different from Korean – it's written language is excruciatingly difficult because you

need to learn thousands of characters, but it's grammar system is fairly simple for English speakers to grasp. Off and on, I've been studying Chinese for over 25 years.

I went back to the states and got a Master's degree in Linguistics and Chinese from Georgetown University. Since then, I've been using my linguistics background to teach and to create courses in technical English, mostly in the field of aviation training. My students have been pilots-in-training, experienced pilots who have English problems, air traffic controllers, aviation English instructors, and aviation managers. I've done about half my work in the states, usually at flight schools, and half my work abroad – mostly in Asia. Wherever I go, if I stay a year or more, I always try to study the local language. So I've ended up studying Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic and Turkish.

Mostly, I wanted to learn the local language for very practical reasons. One, it makes it possible to live on the local economy, which is almost always much cheaper than the “this is for foreigners” economy. Two, it makes it possible to travel on your own and see parts of a country that most tourists don't get a chance to see. I traveled all over China on my own in the early eighties, even way out to western China, where the Uighurs (a Turkic people) speak Chinese as a second language, so they sound and talk a lot like me...and are quite open about their dislike of the Han Chinese. Three, learning the local language is a sign of respect for the local culture...which really helps me get along well with my students.

So the high school kid who hated Latin ended up spending a lot of his professional time and personal time either learning or teaching a language. Although I'd probably still hate that Latin class if I had to take it. One of my best friends in high school, Hugh Lee, seemed to like Latin so much that he became an expert in Ancient Greek and Latin and a well-known scholar. Maybe he will tell us which of his Chinese ancestors pointed him toward Greek, while I was pointed toward things Chinese.

In the meantime, I still want to know: why weren't we learning Hawaiian from Emmett Aluli? I'll bet he was willing to teach us. I, for one, was too stupid to ask.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Also an Army volunteer, Danny Hinton served as a combat medic & advanced medical specialist. He & his wife, Sharon reside in San Francisco.