“I’ve heard that she will give you detention for not speaking British English,” my best friend yelled over the sound of the wind while we were biking to school during a cold summer morning.

“Oh man, but American English is so much cooler! I want to speak like the models in Germany’s Next Top Model when they arrive in L.A!”,

“Doesn’t matter, she won’t allow it,”

“I have heard that she is secretly a dragon and eats children that do not speak proper British.”

We burst out laughing. Even though I dreaded the upcoming semester, the 120-minute classes three times a week with the infamous Mrs. Wilson¹, being together with my best friend and joking about our shared nervousness calmed me down a little – until. I looked down on my pink watch and realized we would never make it on time. That was when my heart started suddenly exploding with worry. I should have known that’s what you get when biking slowly on a school day.

We arrived at the place that would slowly become like a second home to us, the “A Bau,” an ancient 3-flight building with outdated 60s architecture, at our public school. At this point, we were drenched in sweat and sprinted up the stairs. My heart was racing when we knocked on the heavy door. Usually, you could always hear people giggling and chatting through the door (after all, we were 36 students)- but today, it was dead silent. Even through the door, the mood had

¹ All names have been changed for privacy purposes
shifted with our collective nerves. The door opened slowly, and an elderly-looking woman
chilled us to our bones with her icy-blue eyes– truly as she could see into the depths of our souls.
The last bits of relief from before vanished right at that moment; no, she wasn’t a real dragon but
came to it as close as a person could come to it. “Entschuldigung!” (sorry) we said in unison,
looking down on the ground and hoping she would simply let us in, and this instant would be
forgotten- after all, we were only 5 minutes late. She opened her red lipstick mouth, smiled with
a mean grin, and spat the words out: “Now, you two ladies go back out the door, knock and wait
until I say “You may come in,” and then you say “Sorry I am late mam.” What a great start to the
new school year…

Mental Notes in English class

‘Chips versus fries’ (huh?)

He she it the s must go with

The difference between will and am going to?

colour vs. color = minus 5 points on the exam

(Looks at the clock on the wall) Sixty-five more minutes ... does time ever move in this
classroom? :///

English doesn’t equal Hollywood & freedom

English = prison

This is going to make me fail 6th grade..
“Paulina, please stay after class.” Anything she said always gave me an instant fight or flight response. Sweaty and shaky hands, my mind racing: “what could she want from me?!.”

“Your mother called today, and I was informed that you will be moving to an English-speaking country. Well, even though you are not one of my best students, I will let you pass this class. You will need it.” I was overcome with emotions. First confused: “how would any of the material and one meaningless letter grade possibly help me on my move?” Then I was relieved “I passed the class! (and never have to see the dragon again..).” And then my thoughts started racing anxiously. I only learned the empty British phrases– how could this possibly help me in any country other than Britain?. It was then that I realized how burdensome language could become if you don’t speak it natively. After all, without language, how would I ever express my thoughts if I was unable to speak it?

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My 6th-grade self would defend the perspective that Mrs. Wilson was the perfect example of how some literacy sponsors do not want you to learn or have fun acquiring language skills.

After all, Deborah Brandt describes in her paper “Sponsors of Literacy” that literacy sponsors are the ones deciding on what you learn and have to give you permission to learn based on their own motivations. On page 167 Brandt mentions: “Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact.” This quote shows how the literacy sponsor has power in the relationship with the literacy receiver and fully influences their relationship with literacy learning. This was
also true for Mrs. Wilson. Her teaching skills reflected her selfish motivations of just wanting to get the year over with and finally retire from the draining career in the German public school system. However, when thinking about the situation with less emotional attachment, I realized that she just followed the curriculum, which was her job. The German English class curriculum required her to emphasize the British use of English since GB is closer to Germany and has always been done that way. The curriculum was obsolete and didn’t reflect the present state: a heavy emphasis on multiple accents and cultural considerations. And after all she was a teacher in the public school sphere, thus not getting as much repaid for her sponsorship -she wasn’t the best literacy sponsor but also it wasn’t all her fault but rather that of the public school system.

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South Carolina, U.S.A; Private School Teachers Room, 2017
Start of 7th Grade

A couple of months later, I found myself in another English classroom—this time in the U.S. at a private school. I was nervous- anxious from all the new impressions and culture shock, but mainly because my new English teacher Mrs. Han asked me to stay after class. I got flashbacks from the past- staying after class has never been a good sign. She wanted to discuss my latest essay. The first essay I had ever written in English. I received 50%, which didn’t surprise me. Half of the time, I didn’t know how to translate my complex ideas into English words. It took me two days to figure out MLA formatting, and google translate became my best friend. My English skills were reduced to small talk and a few words. My hands were sweating, my heart racing and I kept thinking “Was, wenn ich sie nicht verstehen kann?” (What if I don’t understand what she is trying to tell me?) my biggest fear of the time. She sat me down, and I was expecting the worst—someone yelling at me like ‘the dragon’ and blaming me for my lack of English understanding. I held my breath as the new teacher approached me.
The young English teacher sat across from me, smiled warmly, asked me how I was doing, and emphasized that nothing was to worry about. She was aware of my situation and promised me that we would work together, and by the end of the year, I would do much better. It also helped that she spoke some German. We went through my essay sentence for sentence, and she showed me how to compose a sentence correctly. Asked what I was trying to say and helped me put my chaotic thoughts into sentences.

By the end of the year, I got an 85% in the class, and the following years I fell more in love with the English language, being able to speak and write. It became like a drug. I learned more words, wrote stories, had a whole new world open to me, and saw how my skills kept improving. And all because of one literacy sponsor – a young and motivated English teacher that genuinely wanted me to succeed. Someone who believed in me and took the time to provide new knowledge.

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Figure 1: The German school system in a Nutshell

Figure 1: Inspired by: Gotchel, Karoline
“The German Education System and the ‘Children’s Garden.’
Yet, a couple of years later, I realized that both stories are much more complex than two teachers who had different motives and motivations in teaching. They also represent two other academic systems and their mentalities.

Mrs. Wilson was one of many teachers in Germany’s public school system that shared the same mentality. School is not to be fun; it needs to follow the regulated and obsolete curriculum. Most teachers don’t even want you to succeed, you are one of many, and the more students don’t pass the class, the better since there is not enough space for 36 students in a classroom for 20. I was about to fail 5th grade not because of English but several courses with similar teachers like Mrs. Wilson. They didn’t care if I succeeded or understood the content. The only thing they cared about was high academic achievement. Either you get the content instantly or you will fail and, worst-case, not be able to attend university if you don’t make it in the brutal “Gymnasium” system. The German highschool system consists of three separate schools ‘Hauptschule’, ‘Realschule’ and ‘Gymnasium’ (See Figure 1). If you want to go to college you will need to go to a gymnasium which is a state maintained secondary school, preparing you for university. Yet, this decision is dependent on your GPA in 4th grade. Many of the public schools are overfilled with children with not enough spaces, thus the curriculum is extremely hard with the goal to get rid of excess students. Thus, many literacy sponsors are less focused on sponsoring all, but rather only sponsoring the best and don’t pay much attention to the less talented students.

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All of that changed dramatically once I moved to the U.S. To a private school- sponsored by my father’s company, the compensation for moving us 5,000 miles from home. All my teachers interacted with me, similar to Mrs. Han. They checked in with me regularly, gave tutoring after class, and never made me feel stupid for my endless questions which in return
helped me develop more love for the language. My grades and my academic curiosity reached a peak, and I learned more in a year in the U.S than several years of German school. The private school I attended until graduation last year also has its motivations. Brandt mentions what literacy sponsors gain from successes of their students: “They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly by credit of association” (167). This quote made me realize that my private school promoted my literacy so much since it would benefit them in return.

By promoting their student’s academic interest and having a 100% college acceptance rate, they attract more potential students. Additionally, by making me succeed they get tuition in return, and will most likely receive more funding from past students that look at their high school experience with gratitude for building the foundation of their careers.

Despite the motivations in both stories, I believe that every literacy sponsor has the choice, no matter in which context, to impact their students. Systems themselves do not decide how literacies are handed over. Instead individuals in the system hold control. A curriculum may leave more or less space to explore literacy, yet one person can forever change the relationship between a language and a subject. Therefore it is up to the sponsor to decide how they want to hand over their knowledge.

**Word Count:** 1,922


**Dear Reader Letter (Part of the prompt)**

*Dear reader,*

I hope you have enjoyed my literacy narrative and see how these two moments in my literacy journey have shaped my relationship with the English language.

The biggest strength of my narrative is that I tried to explore some moments closely and connected them to emotional responses and thoughts I had. Using certain words and literary devices like “;/,” or German words like “Entschuldigung” and thought patterns, I aimed to show the reader my young age, native language, and let them feel the nervousness and frustration of the language struggle. For instance, in the first encounter with Mrs. Wilson, I wanted to make sure that I fully characterized her from my POV and let the reader be part of my nervousness during the first encounter. However, one significant limitation — that some of the peer reviewers pointed out — was that sometimes the context was missing. Since I am jumping in the timeline a lot (from Germany to the US), there is much background information that I initially neglected to include. This made the narrative a bit confusing at times. However, since the first draft, I added specific time stamps to clarify the setting and elaborated more on particular parts in the narrative. Additionally, I included more analysis and one more Brandt quote in my analysis paragraphs. By doing this, I believe my paper is now more analytical and makes more sense than the first draft. If I had been given two more days, I would have paid more attention to the grammatical aspects of my paper and made sure to include more variety in my sentence structure.

Yet, as it is, I am very happy with the end-result.

*Thank you for reading!*
Works Cited


Figure 1 Design inspired by: