Mother Goose in Monterrey

I wish that I could memorize my class curriculum as easily as I memorized Timon and Pumba’s arguments, or Iago’s witty complaints, or Pocahontas’s explanation of her strange dream. I know these things (by heart) now because as a little girl, I used to watch Disney movies over and over. At the time it seemed like a great pastime, but looking back, I’m grateful to see that these movies did way more than just entertain me: they helped me learn English.

When you’re a child, everything around you is a learning experience. So when you’re exposed to foreign things, like a new language, they are assimilated as much as any other lesson like learning manners or learning to count. I think that introducing a second language for children is an advantage, since their minds are much more receptive to new things than when they’re adults.

My English education started mainly at home. I grew up in a small town called Montemorelos, an hour away from Monterrey, Mexico’s second-largest industrial city. Being so close to the American border, my family made very frequent shopping trips to Texas. Every so often, we would go to McAllen, Texas, to buy some clothes, household items, and if we were lucky, a new movie. At home we didn’t have cable, so if we watched anything on TV it would be a movie, probably a Disney classic or a Sesame Street
If I look them up now, we’re probably missing only a couple of movies from the entire classics collection.

We children loved watching movies in English so much that we would hate it when we got a translated version of an American movie. As we grew older (before DVD was invented), we would avoid buying movies in Mexico because the dialogue wasn’t the same for us if it wasn’t in the original language: English. In fact, we only had two movies in Spanish -- *Pocahontas* and *The Aristocats* -- and eventually we were insistent enough that we got a second copy of them in English.

We also read a lot in English. One of my aunts was the head of the English department of a school in Monterrey, so every time she ordered English textbooks, my mom would ask her to order a few extra ones for me and my siblings. Every night we read an English book and a Spanish book, to the point of memorizing them. So I knew all the traditional Mexican nursery rhymes, like *Cri Cri* and others, but I also learned about Mother Goose and other classic English children’s stories like “Five Little Monkeys,” “The Wheels on the Bus,” “Three Little Kittens,” and “The Little Red Hen.” We also had Disney books about the movies we watched and about other stories as well. (I dare anyone to challenge me on Disney trivia, because I’ll probably kick their butts.)

We read like crazy. At some point, my mom would take her jumbo clear Scotch tape and reinforce the bindings on each page because some books were falling apart from so much use. We even had several copies of the same book, either by chance or because my mom thought that four children in the same household might
need a bigger library. There's a very funny home video in which my younger brother and sister are arguing about holding a book, and I randomly cross the frame, storm away frustrated from hearing them bicker, come back with the second copy of the book, give it to them so they would stop arguing, and then without a word walk away to return to whatever I was doing.

I attended a very small and conservative Catholic school, in Montemorelos, where I received very basic English lessons for only a couple of hours a week. My parents wanted us to learn more English, so we took private afternoon lessons with a good teacher from Canada. We also traveled twice to Canada to attend YMCA summer camps, and where my brothers and I got the opportunity of being immersed into an English-speaking environment. The first time, I remember being struck by the fact that everyone around me was speaking English and that I had no choice but to make an effort and do so myself. The second time, however, I found myself much more comfortable being around children who didn't speak my first language, and even though I wasn't as fluent as I am now, I managed to make lots of friends in spite of my limited English.

All this experience came in handy when my family decided to move to the big city and pursue a better grade school education for us. Private schools in Monterrey are very expensive, competitive, and selective. My parents worked hard to find the right one for us, and more important, to get us accepted into it. After an arduous search, they narrowed the choice down to two schools. One of them, very highly regarded, rejected us out of hand. The people in charge of admissions said we did not have the
necessary bilingual education to catch up with the rest of the students, although they didn’t bother to test us on our English or on other subjects, for that matter. All they saw was the name of our small Catholic school, and they turned us down. The other school, however, the American Institute of Monterrey (AIM), opened its doors to us, assisting us in the transition from a monolingual to a bilingual school. I was very nervous about being a new student, not only because I had to meet new people and try to fit in but also because the AIM was bigger, bolder, and quite frankly, so foreign compared to our little small-town Catholic school.

The summer we moved to Monterrey, we were assigned teachers by the AIM to prepare us to enter a bilingual school. I was assigned to Miss Ale, who taught in her house, in a ranch a few minutes outside the city. She instructed me in some math and spelling but mostly in English grammar. What I remember the most about her lessons were her two black Doberman dogs, which were always around and scared the English out of me. At times, she would let me work by myself on short assignments and would leave the room. The dogs would watch me work, sometimes circle the table a few times, and every once in a while growl to each other. I felt like they were judging me, and their presence would force me to concentrate on my work. I remember trying to finish faster and accurately so as to get Miss Ale to come back and spare me the guard dogs. It wasn’t until five weeks later, when Miss Ale talked to my mother about my progress and how well I worked by myself, that I realized I had greatly improved my English skills. The day of our last lesson, my older brother came along. While Miss Ale
and I wrapped up our remedial course, he played outside with the dogs. When my lesson was over, I found myself going out and joining them. The dogs weren’t so scary anymore, and neither was entering a new bilingual school.

Literacy transitions are always complicated. As Mike Rose points out in Lives on the Boundary, struggling with writing or reading does not mark a person as “illiterate.” In his book, he discusses some students in remedial classes he observed who participated very effectively in the classroom, contributing valuable points to the lesson. “These are [supposedly] the truly illiterate among us,” Rose remarks. His story resonates with mine and helped me understand that aptitude is not always measured by grades but by life experiences and the education one receives at home when growing up. Just because I needed help adapting to a new environment, especially one involving a second language, doesn’t mean I was poorly educated.

I started my AIM life in August 1998, as I entered the fifth grade. Four years later, the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Superior Studies (ITESM), the largest combined high school and university in all of Mexico, granted me an Excellence Scholarship for high school, an honor given to the graduating secondary (middle-school) student of each private school in Monterrey with the highest grade in his or her class. After secondary school, most students in Monterrey who go on to high school attend the same one: ITESM. I was surprised to find out that Lili Tello, the student in the ITESM class with the Excellence Scholarship from that school that had rejected us four years ago, had a lower grade than I. My
mother likes to brag about this, but I like to think of it as a way of showing how things are not always what they seem, and that education, especially early education, comes from many places (mostly home) and not just from school.

Today, Lili and I are great friends. We developed a strong partnership in high school, working together on projects and such since we have similar temperaments regarding school. It’s a shame I didn’t get to meet her sooner (in her school) when we first moved to Monterrey, but I wouldn’t trade my AIM experience, or any other English preparation I had, for the world.