

Passionate Navigator: Seeing a New World Through Language
Interviewing Kevin Jiah-chih Liao

The first time I met Kevin was during rugby practice. Everyone was hurdled around on the pitch, but he was one of few who were late for the practice. Saying “Sorry guys. I’m late” with an awkward smile, Kevin joined the hurdle. “What a slob,” I thought. After the practice, he approached me with the same smile when he first showed up. He started to ask questions like “What’s your name, sir?” or “Where are you from?” From this conversation, I could find out that he was Taiwanese. I was quite surprised to hear that because he spoke perfect English, and moreover he seemed to be so “confident” in a way he spoke. This attitude of his was different from mine, (I was timid speaking in foreign language in front of other people) that I decided to ask him how could he keep such confidence in language.

Kevin Jiah-chih Liao was born in Taipei, Taiwan, and moved to Sydney, Australia when he was a one-year-old baby. He spent his life in Australia until he was seven years old, and moved to Beijing, China. (3) Just like different places he had lived, his language collection is also very wide. He said his first languages to be Mandarin and English; can speak Spanish and Arabic with confidence; and is currently learning ASL. Moreover, he even knows Esperanto, which is a recently developed language in the purpose of language unification. (4, 5)

Among a lot of language collections in his mental lexicon, Kevin thought English to be the most dominant language to him. He only thinks and dreams in English. Similarly, English comes out first when he expresses his feelings. He thinks all of these have to do with the comfort level of language. As one feels more comfortable with a language, he thinks, one tends to use the language more often. (14, 15, 16) As long as he remembers, he hasn’t mixed using English and Mandarin. It is weird that even though he considered both Mandarin and English to be his first languages, and was born in Taiwan and raised in China where people in both countries mainly use Chinese, Kevin thought English to be his dominant language. (7) It is not that he is awkward in Chinese. Kevin told me that he speaks Mandarin as fluently as he does English. The reason he could come up was that he uses and thinks in English more than

in Chinese. Spending most of his life in English using environment – lived in Australia, attended American high school in China, and currently attending Haverford College in the United States – he has been exposed more to English than to Mandarin. Hence, the environment Kevin had experienced affected his thought that considered English to be more dominant language to him than Mandarin.

However, although he speaks both Mandarin and English perfectly, as a Spanish and Arabic learner, Kevin did not seem like an expert in those languages. Actually, he has mixed up the languages in mistakes. For the mistake, Kevin reasoned that he made such mistakes because those two languages have words that share same pronunciation but totally different meanings. (17) Despite the mistakes he had made in using the languages, Kevin still considered himself as a “confident” Spanish and Arabic speaker. It is more usual to see someone who is afraid of making mistakes in using a language, and consequently avoids to use the language to native speakers. However, Kevin was directly opposite from the normal people. He said he felt “confidence” in Arabic and Spanish because he could communicate with people by a foreign language. Making mistakes was not a concern to Kevin, as long as he could actually talk with other people.

Such confidence in learning foreign languages may have stemmed from his own thoughts on learning languages. He said, for sure, he was not good at the languages at first. However, he began to get better by practicing. He reflected back on his Spanish class which he took in high school. He said what environment you immerse in matters, not classroom experience. He recollected that his Spanish teacher was not a great lecturer, but he could learn much about Spanish thanks to the classroom environment. He used Spanish in conversation with his friends in the Spanish class, and they also did to Kevin. Even though he was not perfect as a beginner, he tried to speak in a foreign language whenever he could. For instance, when he started to learn Arabic, Kevin used Arabic with Halal food truck owners. He told me that “They were so surprised to see me talking to them in Arabic. You know, it’s hard to see someone like me speaking Arabic. They even gave me discounts for the food.” As a passionate language learner, he emphasized the importance of “actually using” languages you are learning and having “confidence” while you are using them. (12)

As a consequence of his own philosophy on learning languages, Kevin knows and speaks a variety of languages, and it looks definitely more than normal people do. However, his own philosophy was not the only factor that affected Kevin. His own background also affected him learning new languages. As mentioned earlier, born in Taiwan and raised by parents who speak Mandarin, Kevin learned Mandarin as a first language. Then, as he moved to Australia,

English became more daily, that even now he thinks English to be dominant over his another first language, Mandarin. A lot of moves that happened during his life had affected Kevin to become a bilingual person.

Moreover, curiosity let Kevin learn more languages besides the first languages – English and Mandarin. Kevin enjoyed learning new languages, since it made him encounter a new world. He started learning Spanish for quite a bizarre reason, though. Kevin recollected:

So, one day my Chinese teacher warned his students about IB Chinese, how difficult it is and things like that. With the warning, he said, “Even Kevin will not pass the exam.” I was angry about this, and dropped out of the course. Instead, I took Spanish course.

Despite the happening and unplanned change, Kevin told me that he had never regretted his choice. He even named this experience as “an eye opening moment,” because he thought that “without starting learning languages other than I speak already, I would not have thought of learning other languages.” (12) Starting from his Spanish learning experience, he also learned Arabic, Esperanto, ASL, out of curiosity and will to learn new languages. (11) With a combination of his idea on learning languages, his life background, and curiosity, he could have achieved the feat – becoming a multilingual person – that not many people can.

While he can speak and communicate with several languages, Kevin confidently said that he is a native speaker of both English and Mandarin. (18) As he mentioned numerously before, he thinks that, in language, confidence and comfort are the things that matter the most. For this reason, he thinks that being bilingual to him means “feeling as comfortable in Mandarin just as in English”. (19) With that speaking, he added that he considers other languages besides English and Mandarin to be secondary languages.

Although he speaks more than two languages, and two of them are dominant languages to the others, Kevin did not seem like safekeeping the second languages he knows just in his lexical nook. He told me that he tried to use the languages he knew whenever he could. He uses English basically most of the time; Mandarin to his parents, both Mandarin and English to his siblings and Chinese students he knows; Spanish to some of his friends who used to learn it together and who can speak it; Arabic to Halal food owners; and ASL with Deaf people. (7,9, 10)

“Speaking in other person’s native language,” he said, “helps me be more connected to the person.” It seemed like his wide collection of languages stemmed from his unique

background and his own philosophy on language – by languages, people can be more genuine. Kevin thinks speaking in one's native language makes conversation sincerer. For example, when he talks with Chinese international students in Haverford College, he speaks in Chinese. Because English is not their first language, it is sometimes hard to have deep communication with them. He thinks this language barrier has a huge role in having genuine relationship with people. So when he speaks in Chinese with Chinese international students, they tend to be more candid. He thinks by learning languages and removing language barriers, one can have more genuine relationship with people. (28)

Although he speaks multi languages, he has not felt any difficulty in switching one language to another. He said he switches from Mandarin to English, and vice versa, so often. (30) However, there is an instance when Kevin feels difficulty. The difficulty arises from the phrases that exist in one language but not in the others. Namely, four-word-Chinese-proverbs are the examples that exist in Mandarin but not in English or other languages he knows. He said that it is common in Chinese to make proverbs with four Chinese characters, because Chinese has constraint for four characters; and this form itself is unique that it is hard to see this kind of phrase in other languages. Moreover, the meanings in those proverbs are not same with those in English. He thinks proverbs are very cultural, so, even though there might be proverbs with similar meanings in English, they will not be same with the ones in Chinese. Thus, when he encountered the difficulty of expressing such phrases into another language, the difficulty came not from his language proficiency, but from the cultural characteristics that every language differs in. (26)

From the cultural differences that implicitly exists within languages, Kevin said he had some ambivalent feelings about his belonging. Although he considers himself as native Mandarin user, Kevin thinks Chinese native speakers would not think him as a native speaker. He reasons that to become a native speaker, one needs more than proficiency in a language. He thinks understanding the culture, life, and all other stuffs that cannot be taught by language are also the components for being a native speaker. (29) This is why he thinks he was not identified as Taiwanese by his coworkers at a Taiwanese company when Kevin was having an internship there.

Despite such separation and experience, Kevin confidently said he identified himself as a both Taiwanese and Australian. As a Taiwan-born person, Kevin felt strong affection and belonging to Taiwanese culture, especially showing affection to its society's progressiveness. Also, he answered that he belongs to Australia, where he first learned his dominant first language, English, and made friends, regretting that he had gotten rid of Australian accent.

(20) Even though he does not speak Taiwanese and has lost one of the most distinguishable characteristics of Australian, the accent, he identified himself belonging to those two cultures, Taiwanese and Australian. He thinks that it is not only language that makes people feel belong to one culture, but also various other factors: the spirit of the culture, where you spent your life, or even where you were born. (21)

As a passionate language learner, he does not think there are cons for learning languages, while there is a bunch of pros. He told me he genuinely enjoys learning other languages and having conversation with people all around the world. One of the pros of learning language, he said, is that it is fun to be able to talk to people in their native languages. Moreover, he thinks by learning and using different languages, he can engage in a more decent communication and deeper relationship with people. (31) For these reasons, being bilingual means a lot to him. It represents his background story, his identity, his curiosity to learn more and see further, and will to understand people. All of his characteristics come together as one and show why he is so passionate about learning new languages – Kevin is a navigator, who consistently goes on a journey to put himself in others' shoes and see a new world that he has not seen yet.