

School was My English Thief

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I feel cheated. I feel robbed. I feel like those entrusted with my education did not trust my intellect. I feel like a major part of my world, which is my language, was taken from me and I was not permitted to fully understand it because someone decided that it wasn't important for me to understand or study. And I know for a fact that, in public schools, this robbery is still going on because my own son is being robbed. It wasn't until I was about 41 years old that someone showed me, in a matter of minutes, what I had been denied and that was how English is really organized, and yes, it is organized.

Think about this, the word <debt> can be understood by a student with one lesson about the Latin word <debitum>. There is that pesky , right there for all to see. Instead someone decided that it would be better for me to just memorize that word and move on. I can tell you that as a child, I would have loved to understand that word and it would have only made me more curious, not overwhelmed or frustrated. I was a child who wanted to understand everything, just like every other child. I didn't need to be able to fluently read Latin, but it sure would have been helpful to know where a huge chunk of our words came from and the stories they told would have been so fun to hear.

It would have been so cool to me if someone had shown me a picture a tree that visually described how the modern languages came to be and how remarkable and memorable the stories about language evolution would have been. I could have spent the days playing with words instead of memorizing them. I would have loved to know what Proto-Indo-European (PIE) was and how it affected what I do every day, which is read and write. How fascinating it would have been to know what a French loan word was, like the word <camouflage> and what a huge role French plays in my own language. None of this would have overwhelmed me, I remember wanting to learn everything.

It would have been exciting to hear about the Greeks and how their words were so important in the sciences (and more) and how their <k> sometimes became our modern day <c>. I can imagine a class where we learned the Greek alphabet in order to understand my own. I would have delighted in it and

maybe even daydreamed about it. Instead, I was taught nothing about the impact of Greek on English. I was totally unaware. I was robbed.

How is it that my grammar lessons were so weak I did not know what a frequentative suffix was until I was in my forties? How is it that no one pointed out to me that the <refuse> and <refuse> change pronunciation and grammatical categories, but not spelling. I would have loved to spend a class period coming up with all the words that were spelled the same but pronounced differently and then analyzed the grammar. That would have probably led to a discussion about homophones which would have a wonderful discovery. Instead of having to memorize when to use <here> and <hear> I would have understood their different spellings. What fun that would have been. I probably would have continued to collect words even when I wasn't in class. Instead I learned next to nothing and then filled out worksheets.

How is it that I was robbed of information about my language but I was somehow deemed capable to learn historical facts, events and complicated math equations? What was it about English that my educators thought I was incapable of understanding?

What about Old English. I can see myself in my kindergarten or first grade class pretending to speak like they did in the ninth century in order to understand words like <knife> and <know> and talking with my classmates about all the other words with the grapheme <kn>. I never would have forgotten how to spell those words, never. How about the word <been>, we would speak like the British to help me understand the reason for the <ee> in that word and have another conversation about pronunciation and spelling differences. Then we could have followed that up by learning that <been> is simply <be> + <en> and added that suffix to our affix list. It would have sparked a perpetual word hunt in the classroom...what could be better for a school than to have kids looking for words and thinking about them?

I can't do anything about my own education except to continue to learn on my own. We can only work with what we know at the time and as we add new information to my knowledge base we take a look at what we thought we knew and make changes to our current understandings. But I still would like to know who decided that I was not capable of understanding my own language and I want to know why my son is

deemed not capable either - I can guarantee you that he, and every one of his first grade classmates - are not only capable, but hungry for the sense this would bring to their language world. So, let's hear it university professors, school administrators, policy makers - why aren't we learning about our language? Why is Latin not introduced, in even a cursory way? Why do the Greeks get left out and why is grammar so unabashedly ignored? My guess is because you don't understand it either, and if that's the case then let's work together to bring this back into the classrooms. I can guarantee you that those test scores you are so fond of would sky rocket - is that enough of an incentive?