Personal Stories of Discrimination by ESL Students at Mission College

Introduction - Myo Kyaw Myint

When I started my TLI project with the assistance of ANAPISI to educate my ESL students on issues such as prejudice, discrimination, racism, and sexism, I was focused on capturing on how they as immigrants to the US might have encountered discrimination and racism and coming up with ways to help them cope with such issues in a positive manner that may lead to a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities in society. At the end of the two-week module, students were expected to produce a short paragraph that would describe an experience they or someone close to them had with regard to discrimination or racism. I truly thought these paragraphs would reveal how my students – mostly new immigrants to the US – have been exposed to the ugly truth about discrimination and racism and would mark the beginning of a change in their attitude about such issues and would help them turn a negative experience into one that could inform them about their rights and responsibilities. I was both right and wrong. True, there were a good number of paragraphs that did describe in detail their own experiences or experiences of someone they knew as victims of discrimination, but there were also a number of paragraphs that dealt with discrimination practiced by the students’ families or even the countries where they came from. This “unintended consequence” of the project while totally unexpected was actually proof that the project had indeed worked since it showed that students were actually examining the issues under question quite deeply and were actually thinking critically about terms like discrimination, racism, and sexism. Since my students were only at the high-beginning level, I had had my doubts about their ability to understand such issues, but here they were writing of such issues from a perspective that I had not even thought of myself as an instructor. As you read their earnest, heart-felt writings, I hope that like me you will be pleasantly surprised by their views and ideas and will be able to look beyond their minor failings in grammar and choice of words to the deeper and more critical issues that they are trying to raise. Whatever you might think about their skills in English or the lack thereof, I truly believe that you will be touched by their courage, humility and willingness to learn and positively engage with the new culture in which they find themselves.

Bad Experience with a Cashier - Ismael C Vaszuez

I’m going to share a short experience that happened to me. Months ago we went to celebrate a family reunion, and we wanted to have something to drink, so we stopped at a wine shop, and we decided to
buy some wine. I was in line waiting to pay and after waiting around ten or fifteen minutes, it was my turn. The cashier who was white looked at me and started speaking in Spanish. I told her that I spoke English, but she continued speaking in Spanish. I felt bad, but I couldn’t stop her. Then, she asked for my ID. I showed her my ID from my country of origin. She refused to look at it, and asked for an ID from America. I told her the truth. I left my driver’s license in the car. She said, “go get it.” There were many people behind me, so I said “Do I have to wait in line again?” She said, “Of course.” She didn’t even say sorry. I already waited in line about fifteen minutes, so I didn’t want to wait another fifteen or twenty minutes. I had shopped at this place for a long time, and never had this kind of experience before. This was a new cashier and she was white. I told myself – “Don’t shop there again.”

Discrimination in the Workplace - Binnan Du

I moved to the United States 3 years ago. I was working at a restaurant at ___________ hotel. On October 9, 2015, there was only one customer sitting at a table in our restaurant. One waitress who was Hispanic came over to me and told me to take some bread and water to the customer. My position at the restaurant was cashier, not waiter or waitress. So I told her that I needed to do my business first. Before she had asked me to do many things not part of my job, such as cleaning tables, serving customers and mopping the floor. This was the first time, I said “No” to her. She was very mad at me and went back into the kitchen. I don’t know what she said to the supervisor because he came out and told me that I must not be rude with my colleagues. I tried to explain what happened, but the waitress joined us and started saying that I didn’t understand anything because my English was bad. They both spoke very fast and in Spanish, so I asked them to speak English and to speak more slowly. They both laughed and made fun of my pronunciation and said “Can you understand this? Can you understand that? No, you can’t understand anything...” I remember this until now. I cried for a long time. After that day, they both gave me a hard time. I really want to do something, but I can’t do anything. That’s why I want to improve my English. Someday I’ll change my life.

Discrimination at the Airport 1 - Mai B Truong

My sister-in-law and two girlfriends travelled to Singapore from Vietnam three years ago. They were all about thirty years old. They didn’t travel with a tour group, but were backpacking tourists. They had booked return tickets a week after their date of arrival in Singapore, and had made hotel reservations
for seven days and six nights. They were very excited and expected to have a wonderful time. But when they got off the plane in Singapore, they were refused entry. They were put in separate rooms and queried. Without any explanations at all, they were forced to answer many questions, such as “What were their jobs? How much money did they bring? And “Are they married?” The immigration people and the customs people ransacked their belongings looking for something. After two or three hours, they were asked if they came to Singapore to engage in the sex industry. Of course, my sister-in-law and her friends were horrified. They were nice women in Vietnam and they were ashamed to be thought of as sex workers. Finally, they were denied entry into Singapore and forced to return to Vietnam. The people at the airport never apologized for their actions and to this day, the government in Singapore maintains that there are too many women from Asian countries coming to Singapore to participate in the sex industry.

**Discrimination at the Airport 2 - Jaspreet Kaur**

This happened when I was travelling to Canada with my husband for vacation. My husband was stopped at the airport security check due to his turban. While he was waiting in line for the scanning, a security officer pulled my husband aside, and asked him to remove his turban. My husband said to the officer, “Sir this is a symbol of my religion. It will be insulting to take my turban off, but you can use scanning device to scan my turban if you want.” My husband was trying to explain his religion and his religious values to the officer, but the officer insisted that he takes off the turban. The situation was starting to turn ugly, but fortunately another officer decided to call the supervisor. When the supervisor came, my husband explained again why he didn’t want to take off his turban. This time, the supervisor agreed to just scan the turban and when nothing was found we were allowed to board the plane. This story ended well, but both my husband and I felt bad that we were under suspicion just because he was wearing a turban.

**Discrimination in the Classroom - Nannan Tang**

My friend told me about discrimination she suffered in a classroom. She was taking a __________ class at Mission. She said that when she tried to talk to native speakers in her class, they didn’t want to talk to her. She wanted to make new friends, but nobody wanted to talk with her. She felt that they disliked her because she was different. Sometimes, the teacher asked students to form groups for group work and no groups wanted her. Even when the teacher placed her in a group, she felt isolated because nobody in
the group would talk to her. She wanted to tell the teacher and ask for help, but she didn’t have confidence in herself. Sometimes in group discussions, she had some good ideas, but since no one would listen to her, she was afraid to say anything. The few times she spoke, many students laughed at her pronunciation and some made fun of her. Maybe the teacher was too busy and didn’t notice or she noticed but didn’t want to say anything. Finally, my friend dropped the class although her grades were not that bad.

**Discrimination against Blacks - Huong Khong**

My uncle has three children and they are all very nice, but one of them dislikes blacks. Usually he is kind to everybody and friendly, but he is not kind to blacks. Once we were invited to a birthday party. There were two black persons at the party. When Tony saw them, he looked uncomfortable. Then, the two black guys came over to talk to us. Not only did he not talk to them, but he also moved to another room away from them. I was embarrassed by this, but I could not stop him. I don’t know the reason why he doesn’t like black people. I asked him once. He said that they are unfriendly and surly. I don’t know where he got that idea, but whenever he sees a black man around our apartment, he watches him carefully. I guess he is prejudiced against blacks.

**Gender Discrimination - Trang Nguyen**

In my country there is gender discrimination. People think boys will be more helpful than girls. Many families are unhappy because they don’t have sons. More than 20 years ago, most families had a lot of children. They wanted to have boys as much as possible. If the wife gives birth to only daughters, the husband will be angry and want to divorce the wife. I used to see my neighbor’s family. They have four daughters and no sons. The husband was angry and was beating his wife and children very brutally. My family is an example. I am the first child of my parents. My parents were disappointed because I turned out to be a girl. That’s terrible. When I was a child, I had to wear boys’ clothes and style of hair like a boy. Some people thought I was really a boy. The second time, my mom gave birth to another girl – my sister. My father got really angry about that. He said if my mom didn’t have a boy next time, he would divorce her. Finally, they had a son. My father was very happy. Everything was back to normal. Now, I hope there will be no gender discrimination in my country.
Bad Experience at a Shopping Center - Phuong Van

One Sunday, I went to the Great Mall. I couldn’t find the Daso Shop. I didn’t remember its entrance. I saw a security guard in front of the store. I asked him for help. He said something very quickly and I couldn’t understand because he spoke too fast. I requested him to speak slowly please. He looked angry and said something again and again very quickly. I didn’t understand what he was saying. Then, suddenly, he turned around and just left me. I was hurt and confused. Later, my friends told me about that guard. They said he didn’t like Asians. He didn’t like to speak with Asians. I felt very bad. He shouldn’t be working at the Great Mall because there are many Asians going there.