

# Concurso Literario

¡Gran Premio  
del Jurado,  
2015!

*Mylingualism, Education and My Assimilation to the U.S.*

I remember the day that I stopped speaking Spanish. I was a five year old in kindergarten. I had forgotten my homework in my room on the nightstand that day, and my teacher asked me where it was. "I left it on my *velador*," I replied (*velador* is the Spanish word for *nightstand* in Chile). My teacher looked at me as though I was a space alien. I repeated myself, but she didn't understand me until I had described the object. I then realized that I had said the word in Spanish and could not think of the equivalent English name for it. The weight that a simple misunderstanding like this holds for an adult may be small, but the communication barrier that anchored itself between my teacher and myself at that moment seemed unbearably enormous. I felt like running home and crying.

Earlier on that year, my after-school daycare program decided to teach some Spanish phrases to the kids in an attempt to "broaden our horizons." They asked if anyone knew the Spanish word for *goodbye*. Normally, I was as shy and quiet as a mouse but I knew the answer because we said it at home all the time. So, I eagerly raised my hand and answered "*Chao*," to which the young white American teacher replied "Nooo." She sang the end of her *no* and let it linger in the air as if to give us more time to figure out the right answer. To her, it was obvious that I didn't know how to say *bye* in Spanish. Her eyes said "Nice try, but that's not it." "It's *adiós*," she said, proud of herself for "culturing" us. I looked at my sister, who was three years older than me, in confusion. Her face was equally confused. I thought my family spoke Spanish. I didn't understand why I was wrong. I couldn't seem to speak English or Spanish correctly. I was so embarrassed and wished that I had never raised my hand.

I was so flustered and shaken by this and other similar events that I stopped speaking Spanish all together to ensure that I would never be misunderstood again. I wish my parents would have forced me to keep speaking Spanish, but I think it was hard for them because my sisters and I took a unified stand against it. We didn't want to be "weird and different." We were embarrassed when they spoke Spanish to us in public, which only made them speak it louder. I understood everything my parents would say but I did not dare answer back in Spanish. The threat of being wrong or misunderstood was too great a risk.

As an adult, I realized what a valuable thing I threw away and I decided to pursue a degree in Spanish to relearn my native language and try to reconnect with my roots. It was not until two years into college that I realized that I hadn't actually been saying everything wrong my whole life. I had just been code-switching and sometimes using Chilean words instead of the mainstream phrases that are usually taught. I was always spelling and saying things wrong. I later realized that I had been spelling words the way that I was used to hearing them—the Chilean way. I would omit a *d* or *s*, for example, because these sounds are commonly omitted when spoken by *chilenos*. It took me a long time to realize that I wasn't really that weird. My "errors" just reflected where I was from. My story is not uncommon. I have met many who are now studying Spanish as an adult because they were shamed out of speaking it as a child in the name of assimilation.

In hindsight, I realize that while the daycare teacher was just trying to widen our scope of the world, my world actually had to shrink in order for me to fit into hers. Even though I wish I could have had a more bilingually supportive childhood, I have learned from these experiences which have instilled in me the desire to support bilingual education. I hope to one day become an inspiring bilingual teacher who can embrace diversity and teach children to value their language and heritage as an asset rather than as a burden. I believe that diversity is vital and that embracing these qualities in others can help them to further succeed in life.



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