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English 101: Living Multilingualism

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Native Tongue-Twist

My experience with multilingualism was one I faced everyday growing up in my household. During the Initial years of my life I only spoke Spanish yet lived and went to school in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The reason for me not knowing English was because my parents were the first of their family’s' to move from the Dominican Republic to the United States and even as of today they still cannot speak the language. Surely having been in the United States for over a decade they can at least understand some of it, but like a lot of immigrants actually using it was hard for them to do. Moreover, Lawrence isn’t like most cities in Massachusetts being that over ninety percent of the population is Hispanic so the need for English is not as prominent as it is in other regions. I used this aspect as a scapegoat, hanging around with mostly Spanish speakers and avoiding the inevitable responsibility that I would soon have to face. It was not until about the age of six that I started picking up phrases and of course, what anyone learning a language would learn first, the swears. Having an older brother and sister who knew more than I did provided me with the opportunity to practice every day. However, they weren’t always around so I had to fend for myself which is when I decided to leave my house despite the fact that my parents did not want me to interact with the Puerto Ricans on my block.

At this point of time in Lawrence, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans did not get along, period. We both are very prideful races and sometimes that creates conflict and debate as to which race is better. Unlike in the Dominican Republic, English is required in Puerto Rico, meaning I could facilitate my assimilation through my neighbors. However, the real problem was whether or not they would talk to me given the fact my family was one of three households in the whole street that was Dominican. To my surprise I was actually welcomed to hang out by many of them. It wasn't long until I learned English and became what my parents call "Americanized". This process includes losing part of one’s own culture and adapting to the American way of living. In my case it meant that I started speaking less Spanish, which made it more difficult to convey messages to my parents, therefor hindering our relationship. This transition is unique given the fact that I practically swapped the adversity of not knowing English for a less understanding of my own native tongue. Although this outcome was inauspicious for my parents, it was necessary in order for me to gain a decent education in the United States.

As i began to learn more English and grown accustomed to the culture in the United States I noticed that other things changed as well. I fell in love with the school cafeteria’s food and started to dislike my mom’s cooking so I stopped eating it. This is very insulting To a Dominican woman and because of it my parents started calling me a “gringo”. My mother would ask me every day if I was going to eat dinner and my response would always be “Que hiciste”, to which she would reply “arroz con habichuela y carne frita”. She knew as soon as I heard that I would say no, and when I did, both of my parents would join in and say “Dejalo quieto que ya el se prive en gringo. Cocinale Macaroni and Cheese para que vea lo rapido que se lo comiera”. To my own demise i would sometimes ask them what they said which would make them even angrier since not only am i not eating their food anymore, but also starting to lack an understanding of Spanish.

Learning English was probably one of the most difficult obstacles I had to overcome while growing up in Lawrence. A city where everyone speaks Spanish does not provide much help given that everyone chose the easy route by adhering to their native language. Furthermore, I had no way of learning in my household and anything outside of that was prohibited. However, I chose to not abide by those rules and it is because of that decision that I am now bilingual. Knowing both English and Spanish has played an enormous role in my life. From helping my parents with translations to making connections in both the English and Spanish world, knowing two languages will prove to be my most useful skill in my arsenal. And because of that, puedo escribir oraciones como esta.

Translations

‘’Gringo” – White American

“Que hiciste” – What did you make

“Arroz con habichuela y carne frita” – Pinto beans on rice and fried chicken

“Dejalo quieto que ya el se prive en gringo. Cocinale Macaroni and Cheese para que vea lo rapido que se lo comiera” – Leave him, he thinks hes White now. Make him Macaroni and cheese and watch how fast he would eat it.

“Puedo escribir oraciones como esta” – I can write sentences like this one.