

No Entiendo

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I couldn't tell you what's worse: understanding your parent's first language without being able to confidently speak much of it, or simply not understanding the words at all. Sometimes I wish I didn't understand, so when my family asked me questions about my life I could give them genuine blank stares rather than a look of understanding with no response.

Maybe it's because of my perfectionism that I pour into every single thing I do. I never wanted to sound like a fool when speaking Spanish because that was a language, along with English, I grew up speaking. At one point, I had been able to speak my Spanish nearly as well as my English. So how did I forget, after years of conversing in Spanish, to get the sentences around my tongue?

I didn't want to disappoint my family, especially my grandparents, so I tried my best not to put myself in a situation where I had to speak Spanish without help.

Every text message I send to my grandma with deep black short hair, I use Google Translate (even if I was right, to begin with). After I'm hit with "Hola, ¿cómo estás?" I respond, "Bien y tu?" That is how most of my conversations started and ended in Spanish.

It's easier to start conversations in a language you do not speak often than to end them. I can ask basic questions. "¿Qué haces? ¿Qué es esto? ¿Quieres agua?" *What are you doing? What's that? Do you want water?* Asking questions and starting conversations were easy because they almost never changed. The answers to these questions, however, varied. For the most part, I did keep my own answers the same. "Nada. Yo no se. No." *Nothing. I don't know. No.*

My short, unwavering replies began when I started school. The classroom had bright and colorful posters all around its four walls. The tops of the tables were blue, yellow, red, and green. Little kids giggled and

played pretend in the center of the classroom, while other's lips trembled as they were already crying out for their parents. I had multiple colored markers fisted in my hand, drawing a rainbow on a blank sheet of paper. I got a whiff of the combination of sweet yet salty, slightly musky, vanilla-like scent of Play-Doh kids next to me rolled out on their desks.

Children's chatter could be heard from every corner of the room, but I didn't hear any of them speak Spanish.

Back at home, I could switch from Spanish to English like a light switch. But in the elementary school, I never needed to flip that switch. I was always stuck on English from the moment I stepped into the school to the moment I stepped out.

This switch that stayed on one side for the majority of my day didn't change my bilingual abilities for the first few months. But then, day by day, that switch felt heavier each time I went from language to language.

As time passed, I couldn't complete sentences the way I normally would have. I became frustrated with myself. Spanish wasn't something I wanted to intentionally lose parts of, but the more time I spent at school and with friends, the more I forgot how fortunate I was to be bilingual.

In recent years, with most of my grandparents and relatives who understand little to no English, there have been times where I've pretended I didn't understand or that I did not know they were talking to me.

"Como va la escuela?" my grandma asked while her aged, tanned hands worked on the pile of dirty dishes after a meal of arroz con pollo.

"Bien," I replied, my eyes glued to her hands. I wanted to go into more detail about my day, whether it was the best one or the worst. If I had given her an answer in English, she would have understood bits and pieces. She would have been satisfied with an English-spoken

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"Moments," Photoshop digital collage by Grace Fragakis

answer because even though she may not pick up on every word, I was having a conversation with her. But I would not have been satisfied. I wanted to confidently have a full-blown conversation with her in Spanish.

"Que Bueno," she'd say, smiling at me.

I sometimes wish my ability to understand had gone away with my ability to speak the phrases in Spanish I knew.

I feel ashamed for not keeping up with the language that connects me to my grandparents. I feel embarrassed that I didn't ask for help as much as I could have when I was younger, or that I did not at least try before becoming frustrated.

However, more recently, I have been spending more time with my grandparents and trying to have more conversations with them in Spanish.

My face still flushes sometimes when I'm asked something and I don't know how to respond, but now I'm not looking to my parents as much anymore for them to answer the questions for me.

I'm proud of myself and the progress I have made, along with the effort I am putting into making a change.

But if only I had kept up with my Spanish at a younger age, not being able to communicate certain phrases wouldn't have been a problem to begin with.