

Topic: Learning a New Language

Abstract: Moving to the United States from Mexico was an important moment in my life, that would define the person I would want to become. In order to be successful in this country I had to learn the official language, English. The process of learning English was not easy, and along the way I learned of my passion for my native language. As I grew up I spoke English most of the time in school and with friends, this made me forget Spanish. Now in college, I have decided to major in Spanish because I am passionate about languages and my culture.

Keywords: English, Spanish, change, adjustment, disconnected, education, language, family

Ethnic Designation: *Mexicano*

Cultural Category: Language: Becoming bilingual, Education

Learning English, then Spanish

My family and I immigrated to the United States from Mexico when I was six years old. The American dream; better opportunities, education, a prosperous life brought my family and I here. When we first arrived in Gilroy I was excited, my family was once again reunited after four months without my dad, who came to California four months before to find a job and a place to settle in. We received our green cards through amnesty or something like that, after that my parents decided to move here and start a better life. Crossing the bridge that connects my birth city Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, Texas I did not know how my life was about to change.

We first arrived in Los Angeles via Greyhound where my dad picked us up, we spent a day in Los Angeles with family and then, finally made our way to what would become my hometown; Gilroy, California. At this point, Spanish was still my main language, we lived

out in the country with other farmworkers and their families as our neighbors, and their main language was also Spanish nothing was difficult for me.

I entered school a couple of weeks after our arrival, we had to take some test at the district office, get some shots, and the finally the first day of school arrived. I was terrified. My parents took my brother and I to school our first day, after that we would have to ride the bus to and from school. I did not know English; I don't even think I had heard it spoken before when some kids were conversing outside my classroom. This was when panic and fear kicked in, What if everyone spoke only English? What would happen if I needed to go to the restroom? These and many other questions went through my head as I stepped in the classroom. Luckily for me, many of my classmates were Mexicans and spoke Spanish. I was relieved; fear no longer in my system. Many of those classmates would be in my classes for the next twelve years.

Later on, I came to know that the school I was attending was a double immersion school. From first through third grade my classes were in Spanish, my teachers were Latinas that made feel comfortable at school. In these classes I learned the basics; reading, writing, and math, but in Spanish. This was not a big change from the schools I attended back in Mexico. When I started my fourth grade, it all changed. My teacher as Caucasian, as were many of my classmates, and the class was taught completely in English. I did not know what was going on half the time, the only thing I looked forward was when a Migrant Education person would come in and work with us non-English speakers and help us understand the lesson of the day. From then on, I remember us non-English speakers constantly being tested on reading and comprehension often. I did not feel left out because I as not alone. From fourth grade on is when I really started learning the English language,

every year we would take a test that would determine if we were officially bilingual. I did not pass that test till seventh grade; it was a very important moment in my education I must say. That year I was also placed in a grade level language arts class, it made feel like I was part of the norm, but also disconnected from some of the students I had known for so long that were still in lower level classes, and that I would no longer have class with. When I became “bilingual”, I gained more confidence in school. I took on honors classes and my grades were not bad, it made me feel equal to the native English speakers.

In high school, when I decided to take Spanish as my choice of “foreign language” I realized that I had forgotten to speak Spanish properly, and that I did not know my native tongue from its core. I did not know Spanish the way I knew English, I could no longer express my self the way I did in English. I took AP Spanish classes in high school and I enjoyed them, the readings, the culture, the speaking, this is when my interest in Spanish started. Now in college, I am working on my AA in Spanish and I can say that it was the right choice.

Looking at where I came from, I can say that language plays an important part for the culture of mexicanos living in the United States. Spanish is becoming Spanglish, and in order for us to succeed in this country we must adapt to it and become successful at mastering the English language.