

Matthew

I stared unblinkingly at the pastel-green seventh grade course card. It stared right back at me. Indecision rendered my brain indifferent to the myriad possibilities lying in neatly arranged columns before me. I scanned the electives section passively. Home economics- eh. Art- terrible at it. Yearbook- nah. Spanish-

Spanish.

Why not?

It might come in handy, I thought, living in a state where Spanish is the first language of a third of the population. Besides, if anything, it'll give me an advance on my high school credits. Since I already knew a little Spanish from my elementary school years, I figured the class wouldn't stress me out of my mind either. My pen quickly drew a check in the box next to the "Spanish 1A" course. I turned it in the next morning and soon forgot about it.

Five months passed, and I found myself in a classroom perfumed with pencil shavings and cheap air fresheners. Blanketing the four walls were posters filled with words and phrases utterly foreign to me. The petite teacher introduced herself as Señorita Konjevich, then went through the motions of explaining the syllabus, discussing class rules, and laying out her expectations. Except, everything she said to us was said in Spanish. Although I could catch bits and pieces of it, I spent that night reading her information sheets, written in English, to apprehend everything she had explained that day.

As I spent more time in the class, the mechanisms of the Spanish language began to reveal themselves to me. I learned that Spanish, unlike English, doesn't always require a noun in a sentence, only a verb, and that adverbs are formed by adding a suffix, as in English. Interestingly enough, the more I learned about the structure of the *lenguaje español*, the more I realized about the English language, especially its innumerable irregularities. It occurred to me that it must be incredibly difficult for non-native speakers to learn English, because there are often more exceptions of a grammatical rule than examples. Suddenly, the frustration toward foreigners who struggle with our language, a frustration which my collective community exhibits, seemed close-minded and prejudiced.

Seventh and then eighth grade came and went, and the entirety of the Spanish 1 curriculum with it. At the end of my middle school career, I felt decently confident in my Spanish-speaking abilities, even though I mostly got blank stares from Hispanics when I tried to speak to them— not because they disapproved, but because they just couldn't understand what I was saying.

The following year, my freshman year of high school, I found myself in a classroom with Puerto Rican artifacts sitting on tables and cabinets, as well as more posters, this time sporting attractive pictures of various Spanish-speaking countries. My teacher was another petite woman named Señora Muñoz. In the same manner as Srta. Konjevich, she stood at the front of the room on the first day and discussed her course completely in Spanish. This time, however, I could understand most of what she said, and those things that did escape me I was able to infer.

Sra. Muñoz was a bit... unorthodox, for lack of a better word, in her teaching style, but, nevertheless, I learned quite a bit of basic as well as higher-level Spanish from her, including the frightening grammatical menace known as the subjunctive mood. As I learned to cast away all of my predispositions and hesitations towards the Spanish language, I realized something potentially life-changing: not only was learning a language something I had a talent for, but it was something I thoroughly enjoyed. The intricacies of a tongue different than my own revealed so much about the regions and people from which it came: its culture, mindset, and history. For example, in Spanish, the phrase *ojalá*, which roughly translates as “may God grant it that”, is derived from the Arabic phrase *insha’Allah*, of the same meaning, an etymology which reflects the Arabic presence in Spain, a major factor in the history of the country.

My entire Spanish learning experience came to a head in April of 2008. A cool, damp spring morning provided the perfect weather for participating in the neighborhood garage sale. Our clientele that day was a surprising mix of socioeconomic and racial demographics, despite our family’s location in a homogeneous middle-class suburb on the outskirts of Dallas. The majority of our customers were, in fact, Hispanics. Their *modus operandi* consisted of stopping at each house, driving a hard bargain for anything perceived as valuable, then piling as much as could fit into their pickup trucks and leaving, repeating the process at the next sale.

A few minutes after my family and I finished setting everything up in our driveway, a Hispanic family arrived and began sorting through all of the items we had decided to sell. They went about their browsing mostly in silence, occasionally speaking Spanish to one another, but never English, and never to anyone outside the family. The only exception came when the mother of the family negotiated a payment in broken English with my mother. Throughout their shopping, the family gazed with what appeared to be fascination at the suburban houses, the mild luxury, the copious amount of things we owned—a life so entirely different than their own.

As they loaded various tables and chairs into their truck, I noticed they weren’t fastened to the truck bed. I approached a kid in the family who looked about my age and asked him, rather timidly, “*¿Necesitan ustedes un trozo de cuerda?*” “Do you need some rope?”

The look that spread across his face after I spoke such a simple sentence to him will stay with me for the rest of my life. He looked, at the same time, confused and elated that a relatively well-off *gringo* like me would take the initiative to speak a language so denigrated by the people of my community with whom he had come into contact. In an instant, every little prejudice that we had held towards each other, subconscious or otherwise, faded away. He was no longer a poor, foreign Mexican kid, and I no longer felt like a spoiled, sheltered white kid. We were just two kids.

He replied with a “*Sí, gracias,*” I gave him a length of rope, and the family tied down their things and left. The encounter left me mentally reeling. I had transcended more than just a language barrier; I had bridged two extremely different and separate worlds. The exhilaration that came with such a feat effected a change in me. As more Hispanic shoppers came around, and as I spoke more and more Spanish to them, it became apparent to me that, no matter what I did with my future, I would be most happy using it to break through the

walls of language and prejudice that divide us.

From then on, I spoke Spanish at every opportunity that came around, whether with kids at my school who were from Spanish-speaking countries; with construction workers who came by the Sonic where I was working for a fundraiser; or with a man who couldn't figure out how to buy train tickets in English. In every single instance, I've elicited surprise for my proficiency, and in every single instance, I get that same rewarding feeling of having overcome linguistic and cultural differences to communicate with another human being, a feeling I want to follow me for the rest of my life.