

MY EXPERIENCE AS A (NON)-NATIVE SPEAKER OF ENGLISH

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The English language is close to my heart. I use it every day to communicate with close friends, to understand technology and get through my college career. I have gone through many experiences where I have needed to speak English. There are thoughts I could only be able to express in English... If anything, it has served me as a tool. English has helped me bond with people I otherwise would not have met, in places I never would have dreamed of visiting.

Living in Puerto Rico, I have been studying English my whole life, but I have not always spoken it. It wasn't until I moved abroad for the first time that I experienced speaking the language first hand. This is where I consider my journey as a (non)-native speaker began.

It did not all start off peaches and cream. My siblings had been born and raised in Miami, and despite my dad claiming they were bilingual, we only communicated in English. This however, prepared me for my new school. On my first day at Lake Stevens Middle School there seemed to be something wrong with my paperwork, so I had been called out to the counselor's office. Being that I was by myself and had no one to translate for me, I told the lady, "I don't speak English". She responded with a "You certainly do. You just spoke it." She was not wrong, I did, but I did not entirely agree with her. I do not remember there being a Spanish translator, but somehow I managed to solve the problem. As time passed, I realized I had gained a standard American accent, influenced by my peers, siblings and the media. Thanks to this, my vocabulary had definitely expanded, and I was beginning to feel part of the community.

After spending a year in Miami, I moved back to Puerto Rico. I spent two years on the island before leaving for the United States again, this time Baltimore, Maryland. Luckily, when I was in school in Puerto Rico, I had an amazing English

teacher who helped me regain my fluency in English. It was thanks to her how this time, I was top and the most advanced student in my ESOL classes. I would participate constantly and often my classmates would comment on my knowledge of English. I would say, "I am from Puerto Rico. We speak English there, too." "So, why are you in ESOL?" I do not remember having an answer for their question.

I was a smart girl at Owings Mills High School. In my sophomore year I was placed in two honor classes, Biology and even English10, and was no longer in the ESOL program. Many kids were jealous of how I passed ESOL on my first year, when most of them had been studying in the US for years! Despite being treated equally, I still felt like my English was not good enough. I did not sound like everyone else. I was different and I discovered I was not letting myself in, as it occurred to me one day in my Biology class. During a group oral presentation, I was too afraid to speak, in fear that my classmates would not understand me because of my accent. When the teacher called me out during the oral report for remaining quiet, I explained to her my dilemma. Worried that this would affect my grade, I participated in the presentation. When I finished reading, the teacher asked the class if they were able to successfully understand my English, to what they replied with a collective "yes". This small step meant a big achievement for me. It led me to being more confident and self-accepting, at least in that class.

Puerto Ricans are ashamed of speaking English. If you were to ask a Puerto Rican, living on the island, if they were bilingual, you would get a response of "yo me defiendo". Which is not a *yes*, but is not a *no* either. The line between being bilingual and knowing English is very thin. We have been learning English since a young age, but most, if not all, do not have a high proficiency in the language, which is why we are scared to say, "Yes, I am bilingual". Nonetheless, to say all Puerto Ricans are fully bilingual, would be inaccurate, but we can agree that the majority comes in contact with English daily, whether it be through the media, restaurant menus, clothing, etc. Therefore, I am led to think we are too hard on ourselves and underestimate our knowledge of this second language. Moreover, I think we are not conscious of what we know; our vocabulary is full of Anglicisms! We may not feel confident about our English because it does not sound "American" (whatever that means), but we refuse to acknowledge that there is such thing as "Puerto Rican English".

By definition, Puerto Ricans are native speakers of English. However, it would be difficult to confirm this, given the social class and economic aspects, which play a role in the level of bilingualism. The truth of the matter is that Spanish is the most dominant language among the citizens. After all, as of

September 4th of this year, English is no longer an official language on the island, reversing the 1993 law that put both languages on an equal footing. At the end of the day, labels are quite complex and often irritate many.

I used to share the mentality that most Puerto Ricans on the island spoke bad English because it did not sound Caucasian. Being taught in American schools by Caucasian teachers, whenever I felt my accent was changing, I felt like I was forgetting English as well, when in fact, I was not. I had been taught to sound “American” and I had failed to believe that was the “right” way. In truth, I adopted the *American Standard English* without any choice.

My experience in Europe was totally different from the one in the United States. People are not obsessed with accents and do not try hard to sound like something, at least not American, which in turn, gave me a peace of mind when it came to my accent. When I studied abroad last semester in France, I had to adapt myself into speaking and practicing French. Once again my English accent had drastically changed. It was now much bolder and I often found myself using advanced vocabulary, which their roots were closer to the French language. My English seems to be forever evolving with each change in my life, and French has helped me make these connections to the history of English.

If it was not for English, I would not know how I could have survived in unknown places, like Hungary or Czech Republic. English has opened many doors especially put me in contact with amazing people that I could not have gotten to know if it was not for our lingua franca. I have befriended people from different cultures and backgrounds, people whom I learned from and highly appreciate. In my travels, thanks to my knowledge of English, I have represented incredible relief for many people everywhere, from student aid to the new international students in high school, help desperately lost tourists with directions, and even serve as interpreter to an Australian couple in a Parisian police station. I have had incredible experiences and opportunities, and for this I am grateful to the English language.

Many years have passed since I was first exposed to English. Now, in my fourth year of college, I have reached a level of maturity and I have come to understand that there is nothing wrong with being different. In fact, I enjoy it. Why hide all the influences in me that can be heard when I speak? Looking back, I do not understand why I was so opposed to English not sounding “American,” when I am all about diversity when it comes to foreign languages and meeting people internationally! This, of course did not change overnight. Being taught in American schools, I was led to believe that the *American Standard English* was

what worked for me, when in reality it was keeping me from accepting others and myself.

I graduate in a year and it has crossed my mind to become an ESL, if not a foreign language teacher. I would promote dialectal diversity among my students, and I will encourage them in their pursuit of learning a foreign language. Most importantly, I would give them credit for what they know in their vernacular languages, and insist that they should never be shy to express what they know. Just like Mrs. Kennedy, my most influential teacher did, I would not use English as a barrier nor a torment to my students. Instead, I would encourage them to see the language as a tool to spread great ideas.

I must say the course *Development of Modern English*, with professor Marisol Joseph, a native speaker of *Limonese Creole*, helped me come to terms with my English. I learned variety and mixture is what English is made out of. English would not be what it is today if it were not for all the changes and history it carries. As my Linguistics professor Vergne, said “el inglés es la prosti de todas”. So, my own mix of what my English is, is not wrong at all; the French in my English, the Spanish in my English. It is perfectly fine and it does not make me less than anyone. My English carries its own history and traces of me that I simply cannot ignore and will not change for anything in the world.