October 2017

Hey little Renata Zacarias,

I am certain this will sound like basic story of a girl learning a new language but it is our story, this is more than a story it is the key to many connections you will come across in life. Here is a story about your learning of tongues. Language will allow you to make connections with people through practice, through conversing with others. This is something you’ll understand much better when you’re older, and learn to appreciate in life. I’ll write it in my perspective so you won’t get all inception on me, well myself, you? Oh wait, ahhh, you know what. Here it goes.

I grew up in a home where Spanish was the language you had to know. I knew it as my first language, spoken not written. I had this very special talent of speaking Spanish through the ages of five and ten. I had a whole 5 years of a special talent. It took much effort to learn. It was a process of embarrassment, then correction from relatives, parents, and close adults. The skill was lost, school overtook my talent and turned me to English. Greaaattt, just perfect. All this hard work ended up being replaced with English, this embarrassment process had to be started up again. The Spanish continued at home though, thankfully. Unfortunately my Spanish was limited to household items, chores, and the responses ‘si,’ ‘no,’ and ‘mande?’ This limited Spanish seemed enough for my parents to think my brothers and I could have conversations in Spanish with our relatives in Guatemala. I hoped it was as easy as the responses at home. Off we flew to Guatemala when I was thirteen. I was excited to see my family in Guate because I had remembered they were such loving people and I always had a great time with them. But that was when I could hold a true conversation, as opposed to a yes or no interview with each of them, which is what happened. For most of the two weeks there my answers were yes or no, and sometimes a please with an occasional true answer when it was a one on one quiet conversation. I wished I could translate for myself and was rudely surprised to find I couldn’t. Most of the time I felt like an outsider with hints into Spanish speakers’ conversations. I wanted to feel that joy I had in the past with my family in Guate when we started going so I asked my parents to up the dosage of Spanish at home to prep so next time we went I would actually be part of my family gatherings.

My parents supplied Spanish vocabulary and phrases for a year. They were my walking talking dictionary, and thesaurus for words I didn’t know. At the age of fourteen I entered a high school Spanish course. I didn’t choose this class, but it was for my benefit, considering how my conversational skills had gone with my family in Guate. In class I learned how to speak, read, and write Spanish in an academic setting. Those teachings were useful, but for as for casual conversation I could be easily confused with a formal style; Such as the difference when speaking to a teacher than to a family member. While I was in the class I was taught how to use ‘you’ in a casual conversation, ‘tu,’ and formal, serious situations, ‘usted.’ I began talking to my family in Guate and found I’d forgotten which you to use. I chose the formal, serious situation because the matter we were speaking about was serious. My cousin then asked me why I distanced myself from the situation because I used ‘usted.’ Why was I apart from the circle, watching in as an outsider? I should’ve known to pay careful attention in Spanish, it could become a bit slippery. Choice of words was something I had to keep in mind when speaking in a friendly, non-academic setting. I had fallen on the slipperiness, but I had learned from it. Luckily I was not discouraged like some people, where if it doesn’t work they give up and think it isn’t for them. Of course Spanish was for me, I grew up with Spanish in my blood, Spanish was the wheels to move me in every conversation, academic and casual, and even if there was no straight translation you knew how to use the word(s) or sing to the music.

When I was fifteen years old my parents and I planned to have my Quince or ‘fifteen.’ The event where the Spanish culture deems you ready to come out as a young lady to the world, but now it was considered just a big birthday party. I had the party at my house, it was cozy, many of the people I knew and trusted were there. I practiced most of ‘friendly-Spanish’ in that event, I learned how to greet and converse with people I had not seen in awhile. I followed my parents lead, a hug, kiss on the cheek, and a ‘Hola, como estas? [Hi how are you?]’ as custom requires when greeting close people or family, or at this event, everyone. This event pushed me, to greet distant relatives who I had only seen as a baby, and then to tread carefully, as not to show that my Spanish wasn’t well-versed. At end, I didn’t have the same experience when I was 5, where I had to go through the embarrassment-correction process of adults and relatives, that would have pushed me back into comfortable English if it had happened during the party. After the party, my parents told me that that year we were going to Guate. I could then really flex my Spanish talker muscles, and reconnect with my family in Guate. How exciting!

Talk, talk, talk, blah, blah blah, spanish words here, and there. I used the four months between my birthday and the flight to rehearse phrases, and study vocabulary, for what will most likely be used. I practiced with my brothers and parents, it helped somewhat. I began to memorize words and imagine scenarios where the words would fit in perfectly. We were a few hours away from landing in Guatemala, Spanish couldn’t wait to be here and at the same time didn’t want to come out. We were kindly directed to the pick up station outside the airport, I saw the family I longed to be part of, we then all hugged one another, this was the first greeting with family, and it was a complete success! Thank you, Spanish 1 from high school. Then it was game time, it was time for the rest of the family over the next two weeks.

I am pleased to tell you, Little Renata, that it went pretty well. Of course I had moments where I could not respond to my best ability, so I just sat there, laughed and hoped it wasn’t a question. Through the two weeks I got a chance to really explore my capabilities as a Spanish speaking individual and even if I couldn’t understand everything I was able to share the little knowledge I had with my brothers. I helped my brothers by translating or assisting them with words, which reinforced what I had used in various conversations. I had become my parents--I was their walking, talking dictionary, and even translator. Fortunately for them, slips were easily taken care of by a “Just ask and you will know,” but not for me, I was the older sister I was expected to know. I was somewhat annoyed by the lack of challenges they faced, like not having to go through the embarrassment-correction process, but I was also saddened by the fact that they may not speak Spanish as fluently as my parents or myself, leading me to think that they would drift away from our family in Guate and our culture. By the time we said our goodbyes before flying back to the United States, I felt ‘graduated’. I felt graduated in the sense that I knew what I was doing when speaking in Spanish.

My graduation gift was that acceptance into the University of California, Davis. In the spring of my first year I turned 19 years old, and the prospect of my birthday made me feel farther away from my home in SoCal than ever before. I really didn’t expect much from the day of my birth. I was up at 9 am heading to the gym I listened to music while I strolled toward the ARC. My mother then sent me a picture of the freeway signs, one of them saying San Francisco, she then told me that her, my dad, and brothers were coming to see me. I was thrilled to see all of them since we had such a close relationship. So I went back to my dorm, changed, and got ready to go out with them. On their arrival they had another surprise, my cousin and aunt from Guate had also came to see me, and I was in shock. I had only English words to express my joy. Spanish could not find a way out to say hello until I took a moment to really think of the few words that made it out to greet and start a conversation, like “Hola buenas [Hello good morning]; Como estas? [How are you]; No te ha mirado en tanto tiempo [I haven’t seen you in a long time].” I was surprised that I could think so carefully in a moment of shock. That was an event of triumph, the distinction of formalities and its conversation content was something I had struggled in my childhood and teen years but now I had seemed to understand it even under pressure; as opposed to prepping for a couple of months in advance.

Now, to recent events, as in some months ago I find myself back home, touring my own city, Los Angeles. It is summer and a beautiful day to go out with my significant other. Of course he and I do not drive and therefore we must take the train and public transportation. Through our route we always come across tourists and people who are simply trying to get to home, work, or school. The transportation administration had made a few adjustments to how the trains route were positioned, which meant the trains were on different tracks as opposed to sharing one track like they did before. I hear a group of strangers talking loudly, but one voice stands out. It is a Spanish speaking lady asking how to get to the platform to take the other train. I speak to her and give her directions on where to go. I have graduated. I spoke to a stranger, which I had never done before, and I spoke confidently. I could barely speak confidently with family members but with my experience and its local language, this small, almost meaningless exchange had been my diploma. I could now pick and choose words to form a sentence, and even better, have a conversation, either with family or strangers who perhaps need guidance. Spanish was part of my life, when it was then replaced, it was even harder to regain it. After I regained it, it was back and ready to be used in my everyday situations, that I am thankful for.

Unlike some other types of education, I actually use and share my values of the Spanish language every day. I use it while singing to music, or talking about certain people. This last example is a reference to my college roommate, Ludy and I, where we understand each other and form a real connection. The real connection referring to how some people may understand each other through similar hobbies or likes and dislikes, we are basically sisters, where we share same attitudes despite growing up in different geographical locations. She and I are best friends, thank goodness for her. With a background in Spanish I have yet to master English writing, where the words or phrases may become reversed to Spanish, through schooling the English language is slowly replacing my Spanish but with Ludy, there is a different Spanish lesson everyday. Since my background has influenced me immensely I probably would not have stayed in college if I did not have some piece of our customs within her and myself to partake in.

With much love,

Renata