the history of my language

Bienvenido! Welcome!

Hola? Hello? Which side do I choose?

These were the thoughts that passed through my mind as I grew up. Because I was born into a Mexican household, Spanish was my first language. If someone approached me, I would react in Espanol, my native tongue.

Until kindergarten, that is.

I entered our little classroom, where a foreign language greeted my ears–English–and at first it was my enemy. For example, why are there so many words that sound the same yet mean different things? In case you're wondering, they're called homophones. Why did the letters sound so different? My four-year-old brain was panicking, wondering how I would ever catch up to the other runners in the race. I was soon enrolled in ESL, English-Spanish Learning, and I'd return home with English homework. My teachers had no idea they were assigning work for the entire family. We all gathered trying to master the puzzling combinations of letters that would eventually transform into words and, later, paragraphs. My Mama and I had no choice but to study; else, we'd be left behind. So we sat there every night, reading for hours upon hours. Imprinting the new language of this place, America, in my mind. This would be one of many expectations placed on me in order for me to fit in with this American culture.

Now, don’t mistake expectations with burdens.

Every summer when I visited my family in Mexico, I brought back more family history. They bore the true weight. Everyone gathered around the table to hear stories from my Abuela, and how she would shoulder the duty of providing for her family when she was just a teenager. The daily food on their table, if any, was thanks to her hard work on the streets and throughout town. We must remind ourselves daily to never take for granted what our elders gave to us. They paved a path for us to walk, therefore we must continue even when the road begins on a steep hill to climb up.

Mama had carried a similar burden as the eldest child in her household. Taking care of her sisters along with the many other younger cousins.  She was the primary caretaker, the one who drove them to school in between lunches. Or cooked their dinner every night. The one who would help them with schoolwork while she tried to complete her own.  She spared both my sister and me from the same burden. Mama tells me all I know about my Mexican culture. She shows me how to create ethnic cuisine from the country where she grew up. Every Christmas, we cook tamales, pozole, or chiles rellenos. She ensures that my sister and I remember where we come from while still appreciating where we are today.

It is expected of me in America, to go to school and get an education in order to better my future. It was never required of me to balance the roles of caretaker and student. So, while my American and Mexican cultures have blended, the difficulties my mother had to bear as a young adult are not ones I bear now. Instead, I am handed new expectations, to continue my education. An amazing opportunity that many in our native country don't have.

Learning English was one of my steep hills, but, once I mastered both languages, being a translator for my Mama was never a burden. It is instinctual. I sat at our dining table every day with new stories to share. She is amazed that I was learning basic coding at school, among many other fascinating things.

The ability to communicate in both languages enabled me to integrate both cultures in my home while also broadening my perspective of the world around me. I encourage individuals to go back into their family history because it often humbles and overwhelms us with respect for their perseverance to achieve. Future generations should embrace their history and culture because it can bond people closer together, just like learning English did for me and my family.