

## A Barrier Within and Out

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**Abstract:** Kimberly Rodriguez Aguilar has high hopes for her herself, despite the pressures and uncertainties she faces as a first-generation college student. In this narrative, Rodriguez Aguilar reflects on language difference and academic achievement, offering insight into the ways in which a college education can sometimes come at the cost of personal identity.

I have always had high hopes for myself and I still do, but I haven't been seeing the great in myself, despite my parent's assurances. My identity as the firstborn daughter is already hard enough when it comes to school. Plus having the pressure to succeed and make a name for yourself. There have been many times in my life where I question my choices and actions and if I am taking the right steps for myself. "Is this where I want to go? Is this really what I want to do?" Yet, the real question I should have started with is this: "Why did English and Spanish screw me over?"

To start off, I couldn't, wouldn't, or maybe I didn't know (perhaps) how to speak in English or Spanish. One would assume that, at the bare minimum, I should have known English growing up as a (Mexican) American. However, I couldn't speak either language for the first few years of my life. At the time, I didn't realize how much it affected me or my way of perceiving the language. I assumed it was normal seeing your parents being frustrated when you refused to read or repeat words. My parents used to try to get me to read signs from passing highways, book titles, or songs I wanted to hear from my mom's Cri-Cri collection. I didn't realize that my lack of speech caused trouble for those around me. My parents took it to heart. They tried to get me to talk to them with at least "Hola," but for some reason, I wouldn't do it.

As I grew older, I saw how my childhood had shaped the way I felt out of place. I wasn't on the same level as the other kids and it showed when I had to be called out for a speech session. I still can't comprehend why they couldn't call me over when it was lunchtime. Probably so I don't "miss lunch." Yet they were perfectly fine with me missing my math lessons. Perhaps that explains why I only end up with Cs in math now.

I don't remember why I couldn't speak, and I doubt my parents want me to know why or how it started. All I remember is speaking simple English phrases to do my own thing. My mother said that instead of asking her to "give me juice," I would go to the fridge, grab the juice, and pour it. Even if I spilled juice, I never asked for help. It wasn't until they realized that my "stubbornness" was actually a speech problem that they decided to help me.

The therapist recommended they learn English and used the same phrases I learned from school. My parents would use my homework in order to learn English and I would try my best to understand their music. All I could remember is the troubled looks and the hushed whispers between my parents and my speech therapist. A dark room, staring at the mirror, nitpicking my faults. Some days, my nightmares consist of suddenly being mute and nobody understanding me as I struggle to voice my thoughts. It hurts more to dream about being taken away by the speech therapist. I can sometimes hear my speech therapist repeating the same lines: "Your daughter will struggle to speak English, so don't expect her to be able to speak in Spanish."

Life continued, going and leaving speech sessions. I hated them. It always took too long. They got me to listen to multiple tapes. Repeating them over and over. I felt like a broken vinyl, scratching the same line again and again. It was around middle school when I questioned my

identity as I looked at the kids who could speak Spanish so efficiently and effortlessly. Never missing a score on accents or misusing “vosotros.” As I watched them, I felt like an outsider, despite them being just like me: an American kid with Hispanic parents. The only difference is, instead of struggling to perfect Spanish, I struggled to speak in either language. It was my border to their own border. I faced the walls of speaking as I saw how it affected my education.

It was awful knowing I was behind the other kids. Even with me studying and trying to catch up, I end up seeing red marks. Some nights wondering if I could achieve my parents’ dream: their first kid going to a good university. I felt like a disappointment to them, but I still dreamt big for them. Their dream became my dream. Their endless support means the world to me. (Maybe that explains why I stress too much).

Even with their support, though, I couldn’t bring myself to see myself as a proud Mexican American who is achieving the American dream. All I saw was an imposter, someone taking up space from a kid who deserves a better future. Some other kid, some other Mexican American kid should be in my place. They could be a better fit than me. They could have a better chance at college, a better chance for their resume, a better chance of writing their story. A better first-generation kid to go to college. Someone who my parents deserved. I felt that it couldn’t be me.

My thoughts only began to change after I was considered “cured.” This happened when my teachers saw my marks at school start to change. My understanding of the two languages started to pay off. I began being able to express myself in English and Spanish to the point it surprised my parents. I spent time working hard to study. To be the person I used to doubt myself to be. To achieve being the first-generation kid in my family to go to university. Throughout high school, I was able to find love in writing and reading. Even when I realized my lack of speech was not a bad thing, it did take a toll on my identity. I often still felt like an outsider. Was I finally good enough to be a “normal kid?” I worked hard in middle school and high school, pushing my limits and doubts. I tried to read and write and repeat words as I made my way to the top. I may not be the brightest crayon, but I made it through.

Although I do still find myself struggling to speak out, my language-learning experience changed me to view the world differently and myself. I may not have the stereotypical accent, the stereotypical story, nor the stereotypical parents who pressure their kid to just focus on school (in order to get them bragging rights). I thank my parents for being the patient ones who realized where to help me. Even if I do sometimes still feel like an imposter trying to make sense of hidden curriculum in classes, the journey has made me stronger and more appreciative of speaking. Through hard work and (semi-forced) determination, I’m one step closer to my own American dream: to pursue my higher education and what it takes to be a better me.