Growing up, my relationship with Spanish was complicated. My mom is from Mexico, and my dad is from the United States, but Spanish never really felt like my language. I was told that my first words were in Spanish, but I honestly do not remember ever speaking it as a child. It just does not make sense to me that Spanish was my first language. If it were truly my first language, wouldn't it have stuck with me?

My mom mainly spoke to me in English when I was young. Every now and then, she would switch to Spanish for simple use, like asking if I wanted to go to the store or reminding me to do something. But most of our conversations were in English. As I grew older, it seemed like she started speaking more Spanish, which felt odd. I would think to myself, "Why did she not speak to me more in Spanish when I was younger?" By the time I was in high school, she used more Spanish at home, but by then, I was already accustomed to using English only.

When I started high school, I took two Spanish language courses. We learned basic greetings, the alphabet, numbers, and some grammar. I noticed, however, that the Spanish we learned at school was quite different from the one my mother spoke at home. The Spanish we learned at school was formal, while my mother's was casual and full of slang. It also did not help that my Spanish teacher was a white man who was also our sports coach, who, in my opinion, barely spoke Spanish himself. How was I supposed to take these classes seriously when he did not sound like a native Spanish speaker?

At home, my mother would speak to me in Spanish, and I could understand her, but I always replied in English. I just did not know how to express myself properly in Spanish. Forming sentences felt like a struggle. I would struggle with word order because it is backward from English. Even in my first language, English, I found grammar confusing. Speaking Spanish felt so foreign to me, even though it was supposed to be a part of my identity.

My family from my mother's side only ever spoke to me in Spanish, and that created a lot of tension in family gatherings. I found it frustrating because I could not always understand them because they spoke so fast. My uncles, in particular, would try and force me to speak Spanish. They would constantly correct me or make me repeat phrases. Sometimes when I tried to speak, they would laugh at my mistakes instead of just telling me the right way to say things. This made me want to speak Spanish even less.

I often felt judged and sometimes degraded by my family for my inability to speak Spanish fluently, no matter how hard I tried. Even my sister, who has been studying Spanish up to the graduate level and got her bachelor's degree with a 4.0 GPA, still faces criticism from one of my aunts, who still tells her she does not know how to speak Spanish. It feels like no matter how much effort we put in, it is never enough for them. This kind of judgment makes me feel disconnected from Spanish and some of my family members. If I ever become fluent in Spanish, I feel that half of my family would finally be proud, while the other half would still find something to criticize.

There were moments when I wished I knew Spanish better. When I lived in El Paso for three months, right on the border of Mexico, I constantly encountered people who only spoke Spanish. I worked doing deliveries, and sometimes people would ask me for help in Spanish. I could not understand them, and they could not understand me. I remember one time, a lady was asking for a specific type of product at Walmart, and all I could manage to say was "grande o chiquito?" Thankfully, she showed me a picture of what she needed, and I was able to help her. That experience made me realize how much easier life would be if I were fluent in Spanish. I want my children to be bilingual and speak Spanish to communicate with my family, and hopefully at that point I'll be doing that as well.

Despite these experiences, I still do not speak Spanish comfortably. I can understand basic questions and give one-word answers like "yes" or "no," but when it comes to forming complete thoughts or asking questions, I struggle. I think a big part of the problem is that I am just not used to it. I have never spent a full day speaking only Spanish, and the idea of doing so feels overwhelming. I worry about sounding stupid or making mistakes. For me, understanding Spanish and speaking it are two completely different things, and the latter feels nearly impossible.

At this point, I have accepted that I might always feel like an outsider when it comes to Spanish. I know my family relationships would probably be better if I were fluent, but the pressure and the criticism make it harder for me to want to learn. Sometimes, it feels easier to just exclude myself from conversations rather than struggle to find the right words. I wish things were different, but for now, this is where I stand with my heritage language.