ESSAY

# ESOL Kid

by Madari Pendas




"Welcome" by Frances Fish

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“Wild tongues can’t be tamed; they can only be cut out.”
? Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

I didn’t speak English when I started elementary school, so when I matriculated, I was placed in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and could later re-integrate into the regular classes once I knew enough English to pass my courses. There were some classes I was allowed to attend with the “regular” students, like physical education, art, and music. But most of the day was spent in ESOL. We needed to catch up to our peers to not lower the school’s test scores. We needed to catch up to not lose opportunities. We needed to catch up if we wanted to integrate into American society.

We shuffled into a poky, dimly lit room where a tall woman lifted her eyes briefly from her desk as each of us lined up in her office. The fabric curtains were drawn, but a thin beam of light cut through the room. It split her desk from the chairs stacked against the opposite wall. The space didn’t invite visitors. If one wanted to sit, they’d have to pull their chair out of the stack and drag it to the other end of her desk — they’d have to go to *her*.

She continued writing whatever it was that she had begun before our arrival, while listening to the secretary. The secretary who had corralled us spoke to her — we didn’t know English yet, so the words could have been magical incantations or a curse or some long held complaint about public school pensions. We wouldn’t have known.

When the secretary left, the woman rose slowly from her desk, her eyes still on the paper, and introduced herself.

“Yo soy Ms. Greene,” she said. Then followed it up with an English sentence that must have been her introduction in English. At the time it sounded like gibberish, and I suppressed my laughter. Her expression was cold and detached, mind elsewhere. She didn’t want to be there. It was clear she wasn’t happy to work with us and we inspired little hope.

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The United States has no official language. None. There are some countries that require a basic level of language proficiency in order to even take the citizenship exam. Not the U.S. How could there be *no* official language? John Adams, in 1780, attempted to pass a bill to make English the official language, but it was struck down. His opponents had varied


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reasons. Some said codifying English would be a threat to individual liberties, while others said it could offend our foreign allies who helped us defeat the British in the first place.

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While working the register at Burger King, I saw a man who leaned towards his friend, looked at me, and said, “Watch this.”

When he came up to the counter, I said, “Can I take your order?”

His eyes went wide, and he turned to look at his pal, who simply shrugged. Then the man returned his attention back to me.

Had I done something wrong? Did he get to the front of the line and realize he was at the wrong restaurant? It happened frequently, since we were next door to a Wendy’s. “Wow, your English is so good,” he said.

I took his order and wondered if he had planned to humiliate me. All that whispering did not sit right with me. He was expecting my English to be broken, and then — maybe he planned to tell me to learn it or to leave the country or maybe he would have aped the heavy accent he expected me to have. He had been planning to turn me into a joke. Perhaps he’d already done this to other Latinos.

I tried to discuss this with one of my co-workers, but they insisted it was a compliment. “Feel good about it,” she said.

It was a compliment, in a technical way — and I had worked hard in school on my enunciation and pronunciation, even taking theater classes to develop a neutral accent — but it came from a place of lowered expectations.

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From Ms. Greene’s office, I looked out at the large, barred window. I saw my classmates, the regular students, filing into a line to go to the computer lab, laughing and dancing. I wanted to be there, to be normal. Every day that I saw them, I hated Spanish even more. I



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felt dumb, and like I would never learn English. Sometimes I'd touch the iron bars on the window, cool to the touch (almost wet), and promise myself that I would be with them one day. Even if that meant forsaking all the things I knew.

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Researchers in Stockholm learned that multilingual people have different personalities in different languages. So if someone speaks three languages, in each one they will have a slightly varied persona. I have noticed this in myself. In Spanish, I am sillier, a jokester, more aggressive, and quick to call something a commemierdad.

While in English, I am more reserved, uncertain, timid, and will immediately apologize, even if that apology is directed at an end table I just bumped. In French, the language I've been

learning for the last five years, after living and working in Paris, I am more questioning and curious about others' opinions and critiques.

Does a language allow certain elements of ourselves to exist? Or invite hidden traits? Can one develop a syncretic approach to language, borrowing from all known words regardless of what language they pertain to? What if we need to say something and do not have the right language to express it? Where do those feelings go?

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At home, I felt dumb. Truthfully, I had not only internalized a sense of worthlessness because of my difficulty learning English, but also from how others perceived me. It felt like teachers and the parents of other students didn't think I'd amount to much. And for years I thought they were right. I was a Latina, from a working-class background, without connections — where did I think I could go? I didn't dare dream aloud.

Once, when I told a classmate (one from a more privileged background) that I wanted to learn to play the piano she cackled and said, "You?"



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I can still see her taunting expression, her finger pointed at my chest, my heart, letting me know that I needed to know my place.

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A consistent effort has been made throughout U.S. history for English-only laws and they have even been supported by presidents like Theodore Roosevelt. In the late 1890s, English became the official language used to school children in Hawaii. And after the Spanish-American War and Philippine-American War, English was declared the official language in Puerto Rico and the Philippines.

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When my dad sat with me at the kitchen table to help me with my math homework, he'd pound his fists on the table and scream, "No, that's wrong!" He had explained the steps over and over again.

My mother would come over and scold me when my dad needed a break. "Your father worked all day. Échale ganas." If I wasn't good at language arts or math, then what was I supposed to be good at? I thought genius would appear somewhere. Some day. I expected my math competency to be higher because of how much I struggled with English. The universe would balance out, I thought. A gift for a flaw. But, I was awful at both subjects. The universe didn't seem interested in throwing me a bone.

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One of the longest words in the English language is pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis. It contains forty-five letters, and describes lung diseases caused by inhaling silica dust, usually from a volcano. Most doctors don't bother pronouncing the word, and instead simply say silicosis.



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I struggled to get my mouth to make the right shapes, trying to imitate Ms. Greene's lips and tongue. In my head I sounded right. But something happened when I tried to speak aloud. All the sounds were wrong and made Ms. Greene frowned and repeated herself — our voices were in a discordant battle, echoing shrieks.

It was as if my mouth was misshapen, not made for English.

I thought Ms. Greene disliked us because she, like us, wanted to be in the main classroom, teaching kids who didn't have accents, kids whose parents she could converse with, kids who looked like her.

Every day that I went to ESOL, I felt like a piece of clay that would not transform in a kiln. I watched out the window and studied the girls in the other classes, they knew English, they knew it so naturally, and could sit in the big classrooms with regular desks, the ones that you could lift up and stuff with books or Beanie Babies or packets of Hubba Bubba. This is where my complex about my intelligence began. Here. In a room so cramped that you could hear everyone's out-of-sync breathing, near gasps.

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In 1918, Texas enacted a law that penalized and forbade students from speaking Spanish in public schools. Texas, the state which had originally been part of the Spanish-speaking country, Mexico, tried to wipe the language out. Other U.S. states followed suit, and the laws were only lifted in 1968.

Imagine you slipped up, just for a second, or you couldn't remember the English word for pupitre (desk). Your throat, tongue, mouth, and lips forgot where you were and you said the "wrong" word — not even the wrong word, but a variation of the word, a counterpart. Rojo instead of red. Amor instead of love. Ayúdame instead of help me.



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Ms. Greene didn’t speak Spanish. She knew a few words and phrases, the stuff you pick up from simply living in Miami long enough. But she didn’t know enough to comfort or encourage us. Sometimes we’d resort to elaborate hand gestures to get our points across. When I

wanted to go to the bathroom, I’d point at the crotch of my pants and then to the water bottle on Ms. Greene’s desk. Or if I wanted my snack, a bag of gushers, I’d point at my mouth. “Go ahead,” she’d say, flatly.

Once, my mother tried to approach her. She wanted to know how I was progressing, when I’d be able to move up, and if there was anything she could do. My mom had rehearsed what she was going to say, repeating it back to her brother on the phone, over pronouncing the words.

My mother flagged down Ms. Greene, walking to her car.

“Wait,” my mother said. “I have to talk to ju.”

I followed behind.

But Ms. Greene shook her head and got in her car, peeling out of the lot quickly, her sunglasses already over her eyes, black spots like the sap on poisonwood trees. “Wait,” my mother said softly.

Perhaps as a public-school employee she was also not financially incentivized to go beyond or was already so overworked she couldn’t take on anything else, especially a parent’s emotional questions.

We waited in the lot for a while, under the flowering red royal poinciana, the light fragmenting through its jagged leaves. Maybe my mom was hoping Ms. Greene would come back. Maybe she was just trying to figure out the English word for decepcionada.

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In 2016 Donald Trump said, “This is a country where we speak English. It’s English. You have to speak English!”



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I went to graduate school to prove something. That this unnatural tongue *is* mine, earned, and mastered. It was a challenging three years, especially since for one and a half years all classes were remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In one of my practicums, I met a Gringa who used me to practice her Spanish. She'd taken some classes in high school and thought herself fluent. Sometimes I couldn't distinguish if she appreciated the culture or wanted it as her own, a possession or a marker of worldliness. After a few months, she started sending me text messages and emails in Spanish. And in class, when we would discuss issues facing Latinos, she'd speak for and about us.

Every time we were together, she would try to code mesh, calling someone pobresito or saying gracias instead of thank you to me. Once, after our practicum, she asked me, "How are you Caribbean if you don't like coconut?"

What was going on? And why did I suddenly feel defensive about my language?

In the Gringa's presence I learned to protect Spanish, to keep it safe, to keep myself from being used. Our interactions felt like what Ms. Greene had tried to do: take Spanish from me. In Ms. Greene's case, she wanted to take it from me to replace it with English. With the Grad School Gringa, she wanted to take it from me and *wear* it, to perform her version of Latinidad, to seem more exotic.

I never replied back in Spanish. I wouldn't give her that or correct her messages where she'd talk about the carnicero or a neighbor. Or invite her to a Noche Buena party. I wasn't a free tutor or a passport for her to explore a fun, new culture only to drop it once she found something new. Jamás le di lo que ella quiera. Jamás.

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I struggled with the word "mirror." The English R tripped me up for years, especially with words like "water" and "murder." Ms. Greene had pulled out her compact and pointed the mirror at me. There I was: small, round-cheeked, with unevenly cut brown bangs. "Mirror,"



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she said, exaggerating her mouth so we could mimic her.

She brought the mirror closer to my face. A splattering of freckles, a singular dimple in the shape of a crescent, a beauty mark near my nose, and dark brown eyes. There I was. “Mirror,” she repeated.

I didn’t know what was wrong with my pronunciation. In my head I sounded exactly like Ms. Greene. But she kept shaking her head.

“Mirror!”

I didn’t want to see my reflection anymore. Instead, I looked out the window towards the normal classrooms. A zebra longwing fluttered across the frame, landing on one of the croton bushes across from our class. Through the semi-sheer curtains I saw one girl run up to the teacher, showing her a picture. And what surprised me the most was the teacher’s reaction. She didn’t wave the girl off or neutrally nod and move on to something else. The teacher squatted to meet the girl at eye level, took the picture, and then said what I imagined was “good job.” The words were accompanied by a deep smile, one that held even after the little girl had turned her back and walked away.

Ms. Greene snapped her fingers to get my attention, but I was still watching the scene, waiting for the teacher’s smile to disappear, retract, melt. She must have been pretending, I thought. She must have. But her lips did not change, and eventually I turned back to my world, to my teacher, to the disappointed mouths that waited for me.



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