

Olivia Roth

Linguistics 101

Professor Lillehaugen

30 March 2017

Benevolence Through Bilingualism

Olivia is an 18-year-old speaker of English and Spanish (1, 2, 4). She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and has lived there her whole life (3). She learned Spanish five years ago, through daily interactions with Michelle, a young girl from Ecuador who was temporarily living in the United States (5). They still communicate on a regular basis (8). Olivia speaks fluent Spanish on school breaks when she completes extended trips to Mexico and Ecuador and through daily voice messages with her Ecuadorian friend, Michelle (6, 8). She speaks English at most other times, as it is the language she has grown up learning (9, 10). Olivia loves being bilingual, and while she considers English her dominant language, she looks forward to focusing on Spanish during college and using it to build relationships for the rest of her life (7).

Olivia's bedroom is filled with memorabilia. Her walls are covered with mementoes from her favorite Broadway musicals and paintings done by children living on the street who she worked with in Mexico. A brown map of the world stands out on the baby blue wall across from me; the russet continents float in seas of beige. X's dot each city she has visited. Gazing around her bedroom, it's clear that Olivia is fond of the time she has spent abroad and proud of the friendships she has made and the lives that she has impacted.

Olivia has lived in the suburb of Solon, Ohio her entire life (3). Now, as her senior year of high school begins to wrap up, she is looking forward to the next chapter of her life. After months of deliberating, she has finally chosen to attend Taylor University in Indiana. Her main criteria for picking a college was that it had Spanish and theater departments. Taylor not only checked these two boxes, but would also allow Olivia to participate in a year-long study abroad program in Ecuador. She is ecstatic.

Despite her love for the Spanish language and culture, a smile breaks across Olivia's face, when she explains that her Spanish "would not be at the same level of fluency that [it is] now," if it weren't for the relationships that she made over the last five years (5, 11). Olivia began learning Spanish in seventh grade—when the local middle school required all students to start taking French, Spanish, or Chinese. She had originally chosen to study Spanish, so that she could one day visit and communicate with the twelve-year-old girl that her family was sponsoring in Nicaragua (5, 11), and Olivia fostered her friendship with the young girl by sending monthly letters and drawings. While she is now doubtful that they will ever meet, Olivia does not regret her relationship and its influence on her eventual decision to learn Spanish, because the language has positively shaped the course of her life and given her many unique experiences.

Olivia recounts that she wasn't learning much in her Spanish class apart from the basic, "Me llamo Olivia" (12), which means "My name is Olivia." However, her education improved drastically when a young Ecuadorian girl moved to Solon, and began taking all the same classes as Olivia. The girl, Michelle, barely knew a lick of English when she moved to Solon, but the two girls became fast friends. "With the help of google translate, Michelle's minimal knowledge of English and [Olivia's] minimal knowledge of Spanish improved" until the point that they considered themselves Spanish and English bilinguals (11). Every day, Olivia and Michelle would use their phones to communicate by translating sentences from one native language to the other. These exchanges continued, and eventually Olivia and Michelle could hold conversations without the aid of technology. As their relationship strengthened, so did Olivia's knowledge and love of Spanish. While Michelle moved back to Ecuador three years ago, she is still Olivia's best friend, and despite living 3000 miles apart, they are in almost constant communication (8).

Although Olivia does not consider herself a native speaker of Spanish, she tries to immerse herself in Spanish speaking cultures as often as possible (18). Over almost every school break for the past two years, Olivia has visited either Ecuador or Mexico to volunteer or to reconnect with old friends, and has spoken Spanish the duration of her trips (8). She watches, what she calls, "my Spanish TV shows" every week and has even changed the language of her phone to Spanish (8). Olivia does not let the lack of Spanish language and culture in her hometown upset her, and has successfully sought out ways to incorporate her love of the

language into everyday life. The relationships and opportunities that she has made for herself around the globe, as well in her hometown, have allowed Olivia to continue learning all that she can about the Spanish language and culture.

Despite her passion for Spanish, Olivia regards English as her dominant language (7). Not only was English the language she learned when growing up (5), but Olivia also considers herself “extra-fluent” because of the extensive SAT and higher level vocabulary that she knows solely in English. Additionally, neither of her parents know any Spanish, and even with her brother’s three years of Spanish education, the only time they ever speak in Spanish is to complain about their parents (8, 9, 10).

Olivia explains that being bilingual has given her the best of both worlds, and she would not be where she is without her friends in other countries, as they allow her to immerse herself in the new language and culture. Through her friends in Mexico and Ecuador, “[she] can live in a normal English-speaking environment, but then have this whole other life and set of relationships” (19). Olivia’s knowledge of Spanish and English has also allowed her to approach problems from two different perspectives. As we’ve been talking, Olivia tosses around a small leather-bound notebook, and eventually explains its purpose: “When I’m trying to figure out a situation or really stressed, I’ll write about it in Spanish and then in English.” This lets her “get away from the English environment,” and consider each problem with a new frame of mind.

Describing her experience as a bilingual, both in America and abroad, Olivia explained that there was an obvious difference in the way strangers received her. In America, people are often more skeptical of her fluency. Olivia makes a sour and haughty face as she imitates teachers and strangers who have second guessed her ability to speak, read, and write in a language that is now second nature. In Mexico, she reasons, most people have much darker skin, so she is almost always thought of as a foreigner. However, once she speaks in Spanish, people have little reason or desire to doubt her claim to bilingualism. Finally, she proudly remarks, in Ecuador, where citizens have lighter skin, she has met and carried on whole discussions with strangers who could not believe she was American when her nationality eventually came up in conversation (32).

When I asked Olivia what the two languages meant to her, she was quick to answer: “English, I associate with my family, and Spanish, I associate with my calling” (20). Olivia’s

eyes twinkle as she explains her post-college goals: She plans to create an organization that provides theater opportunities for underprivileged kids in Spanish speaking countries. Not only would this organization let her to pursue her passion for theater and Spanish, but it would also allow Olivia to continue building strong relationships and improving the lives of those around her. While she knows that this is a large undertaking, Olivia describes her future organization with excitement. It is clear she enjoys being able to indulge in both languages and cultures, but her enthusiasm is evident as she explains, “Spanish is my future” (20).

Being bilingual has opened many doors for Olivia. Not only has it given her the tools to pursue her dreams and travel across continents, but it has also given her the ability to improve the lives of those around her and the friendships that she dearly treasures. Olivia’s plans for the future extend far beyond the scope of her small Ohio suburb, and she explains with confidence and excitement, “In the end, I’ll leave behind English, and move forward with my Spanish-speaking life.”