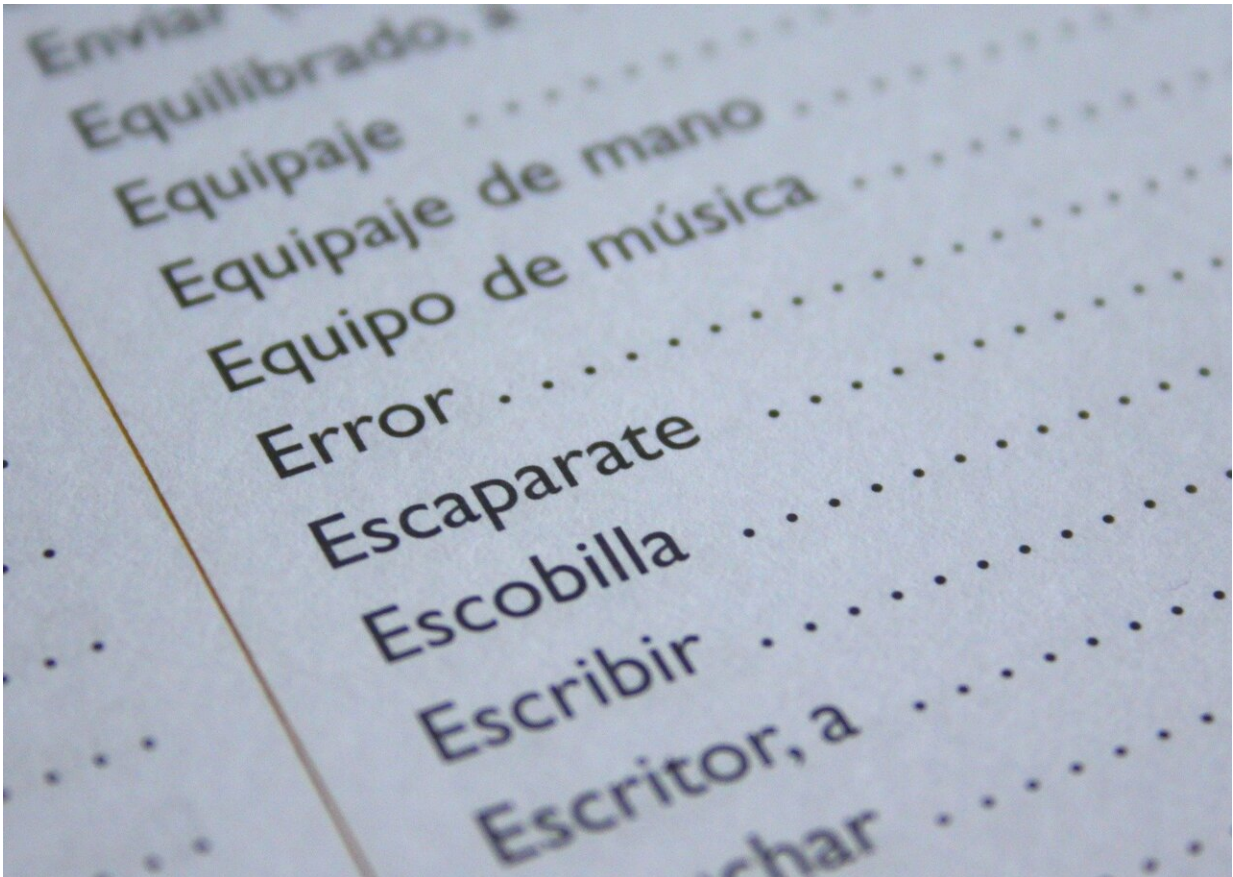


# 'It makes you question your identity': What it means for Latinos to lose Spanish fluency

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Ana Gore grew up learning English and Spanish simultaneously. At home, her Peruvian mother would primarily talk to her in Spanish, while

her American father spoke to her in English.

But early on in life, Gore lost her fluency in Spanish. Her family in Peru didn't expect her to speak the language, and when she did, it was "a big deal—it was just not the kind of attention that I wanted." And she compared her level of fluency to her older sister's Spanish.

"She kind of had this basically, like, perfect Spanish and I was far enough behind that it was kind of that feeling of like shame that, if I wasn't able to do it perfectly, I shouldn't do it at all," said Gore, a 20-year-old college student in Chicago.

Many U.S.-born Latinos like Gore face the pressure and expectation to speak fluent Spanish. But many factors, including English dominance and language discrimination, make maintaining Spanish difficult for many Latino families in the United States.

Even though the number of Latinos who speak Spanish at home has been growing, the share has declined—from 78% in 2000 to 68% in 2021, according to the Pew Research Center. Among U.S.-born Latinos, the share has decreased from 66% to 55%.

The drop in the share of Latinos speaking Spanish at home is because the growth of the Latino population has been driven by births as immigration from Latin America has slowed. In 2020 and 2021, virtually all Hispanic population growth came from births, according to Pew.

"We're talking about the share of Latinx people in the United States who speak Spanish the share is decreasing because the language is being lost among the U.S. born," said Phillip Carter, a professor of linguistics at Florida International University.

Language abilities tend to diminish across generations. In the United

States, immigrant languages that aren't English are usually lost after three generations. According to a 2017 report by Pew, about half of second-generation Latinos are bilingual. The share drops to 24% among third or higher generation Latinos.

Spanish, however, may be retained longer than other languages in areas of the country like Florida's Miami-Dade County, where there's a large percentage of Spanish speakers, or Texas, where the language has a historical presence, Carter said.

"On the one hand, Spanish can, depending on the region, hang on longer than other languages," Carter said. "On the other hand, Spanish can be exceptionally stigmatized in certain parts of the country, and linked, because of political discourses, to toxic identities, identities that are constructed as criminal."

## **Language discrimination**

For many Latinos, it takes "an extraordinary effort" to preserve their Spanish, said Lourdes Torres, a professor in DePaul University's Department of Latin American and Latino Studies in Chicago.

The loss of Spanish is not due to an individual problem of Latinos not wanting to learn or maintain the language but rather the "really hostile context in the U.S. against other languages, especially Spanish and indigenous languages, languages that aren't considered prestigious, and the people who speak it," Torres said.

During the first year of the pandemic, half of Latinos in the United States reported experiencing some form of discrimination and about 23% said they were criticized for speaking Spanish in public, according to Pew.

"First generation parents, for example, suffer a lot when they get here because they don't speak English or they don't speak English well," said Torres, whose book on Spanish language use in Chicago comes out next year. "And they don't want the same thing for their kids. Instead of promoting bilingualism, often, parents— to save their own kids from the agony that they had, the discrimination that they felt because of the language— they push them to just learn English."

It wasn't until Gore enrolled in a course for heritage speakers of Spanish at DePaul that she was able to regain a lot of her fluency. She took the class to challenge herself and because her mom always wanted her to have a connection to the language.

"I had a very hard relationship with Spanish for years," Gore said. "I almost couldn't make the words come out of my mouth. I could think them and I understood what people were saying, but I just couldn't get the words to come out because I was just terrified of speaking it."

Some Latino families do emphasize Spanish or speak only Spanish at home, Torres said. But once the child starts school, the curriculum is entirely in English, making it hard to maintain the language.

In the early 20th century, English-only curriculums in schools were the norm, even though there's no official language in the United States, said Laura K. Muñoz, an assistant professor of history and ethnic studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"We have an expectation that these children will be truly assimilated into the English language to the detriment of their own native language, because the goal here is to strip them of Spanish, ideally to strip them of their cultural ways to Americanize them," Muñoz said.

By the late 19th century, Arizona, for instance, required English-only

instruction in every school in the territory, Muñoz said. And in California, it wasn't until 1947 that a [federal court](#) ruled to end segregated schools for Mexican children—the first federal school desegregation decision in the country.

"We assume that this failure to maintain the language has something to do with us—with the way that we were raised, with the inability of our parents to succeed at teaching Spanish—when in fact there are so many other pressures coming at both the parents and the children," Muñoz said. "When I think about Spanish language loss, the big word is *lástima*."

## **Preserving the language**

For Muñoz, the loss of Spanish makes many Latinos question their own identity. The big question many who have lost their Spanish ask themselves, she said, is, "Am I truly Latino?"

"We believe (Spanish) is a marker of identity because people on the outside are telling us 'Oh, well, you're not a true Latinx if you don't speak Spanish,'" Muñoz said. "We've been in American school systems that have told us 'Well, you're not a true American and you don't speak English.' So when you're caught between that sort of rock and a hard place, it makes you question your identity."

For many younger Latinos, however, not speaking Spanish doesn't strip them of their identity.

"There's a lot of judgment if you're a Latino who doesn't speak Spanish," Gore said. "It's very stigmatized, and I think that it probably shouldn't be because, you know, it's not because of the child."

Losing a language at a certain point in one's life doesn't mean it's lost

forever. With the right motivation and encouragement, people can regain comfort in the language, Torres said.

"Languages can be revived," Torres said. "All it takes is desire and the right context, and people can reconnect with their [language](#)."

For Gore, regaining her Spanish fluency has been a relief. Her connection to Spanish, she said, is now at a point of healing.

"I've had a lot of kind of emotional turmoil and kind of trauma related to it," Gore said. "But now it's much safer and more of a haven where I feel comfortable with myself and not just being half Latino, but being a full person with multiple languages and multiple cultures and those things don't need to split me up as a person."

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