Being a 'no sabo' kid isn't a crime



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I'm so tired of hearing people belittle others for not knowing their ancestral language. It seems everyone just forgets that colonization and migration are a thing.

I've watched the same community that failed to teach us shame countless women for not speaking Spanish. Family members, peers and even celebrities are beaten down with cruel comments and savage jesting because they don't speak a language that was never taught to them.

Most of Latin America has already won its wars for independence, so leave the language policing to the dead conquistadors.

According to the Mirriam-Webster Dictionary, a conquistador is a leader of a Spaniard conquest.

Not speaking Spanish feels similar to a certain scarlet letter, announcing our shame to an entire population. Being a "no sabo" kid is like having a misspelled tattoo on your forehead, no one will ever let you forget it.

A "no sabo" kid refers to someone who does not speak Spanish, according to a May 23, 2022 article from Refinery29.

This toxic ideology once again presented itself, now on the world stage.

A short video of four celebrities, Anya Taylor-Joy, Jenna Ortega, Rachel Zegler, and Rosalía, taken at Dior fashion show on Sept. 26 caused a frenzy on social media, once again throwing the "no sabo kid" label around.

In the video, Taylor-Joy introduced her husband to Rosalía and Ortega in Spanish, with Ortega responding back in English.

Taylor-Joy, Ortega and Zegler all have some sort of Latin heritage, but Taylor-Joy is the only one who speaks Spanish, according to a Sept. 29 article from Vogue.

What is both hilarious and distraughtly terrifying is that Zegler wasn't even involved in the dialogue, simply existing in the background chatting with Jennifer Lawrence, but she was still dragged into the criticism according to the same article.

X and TikTok users began their vicious attack on the two Latinas that didn't speak Spanish, saying that the whitest one, Taylor-Joy, was more of a Latina than Ortega and Zegler.

Skin color has nothing to do with being Latina. Taylor-Joy, who is half Argentinian according to the Vogue article, is pale and white passing, but that does not make her ability to speak Spanish surprising.

Maintaining the ideology that all Latinos have stereotypical features such as dark hair and tanned skin similar to Zegler and Ortega perpetuates harmful stereotypes and alienates Latinos that do not fit into such a small box.

Speaking Spanish is not as common as many think when it comes to Hispanic and Latino culture in the United States. About 54% of Hispanics that don't speak Spanish have been shamed for it, according to a Sept. 20 article by the Pew Research Center.

Speaking your native language doesn't make your identity more or less valid. Speaking Mandarin doesn't make you Chinese, speaking Tagalog doesn't make you Filipino, so why should speaking Spanish be a benchmark for a true Latino?

If Tejano queen Selena Quintanilla can be a Mexican icon without speaking the language, nothing is stopping a kid who doesn't know the difference between estar and ser from being considered Latin.

Around 24% of Latinos said that they could only speak conversational Spanish, if any at all. Third and higher-generation Latinos speak even less Spanish, according to the same article.

If speaking Spanish is the standard for being considered Latino or Hispanic, we should be scared. The two groups are apparently dying out due to our own bias and hatred toward our monolingual counterparts. Funny, it looks like the conquistadors did win in the end, since we're turning against our own people like they hoped.

Jacqueline Delgadillo, who wrote an article on this topic for Refinery29, summed up the issue of taunting people for their lack of fluency in a perfect way.

"Language proficiency is another form of gatekeeping Latinidad," Delgadillo wrote in her article.

According to Oxford Reference, Latinidad refers to an overall sense of Latin identity.

The idea that a person is lesser and has no right to claim their heritage based solely on their ability to speak a language that is foreign to them is disgusting. All this ideology does is further separate Latinos from cultures that are already struggling.

Further insult to injury is that Spanish is not the only language spoken in Latin countries.

"There are also myriad indigenous languages that survived this violent history (of colonization) and are still spoken throughout South America, Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean," Degadillo wrote in her article.

Expecting all Latinos to speak Spanish is unrealistic and erases centuries of culture that thrived before colonization.

This idiotic label only deters and isolates those who don't already know the Spanish language even more.

I was terrified to actually learn the language because of how I was treated by my own community. I had resigned myself to relying on a translator for the rest of my life for years before I moved to San José for college.

When I was a child, I sat in my grandfather's living room every year with the same well-practiced smile and nod while words I could barely comprehend flew by me. I had to stumble through asking family members to help translate for me, half expecting to be met with the disappointed glare some of my elders always responded with.

My family didn't outwardly criticize me for not speaking Spanish when I was a child, but the judgment was always there. The subtle jabs from them were enough to make me feel like a worthless idiot every time my grandfather told me "te quiero."

The hypocrisy is what enraged me though. How dare my community judge me when not only did they never offer a crumb of effort to teach me the language, but go as far as to humiliate me every time I tried to learn.

My ex-boyfriend was the worst in this, constantly calling me a fake Mexican because my pronunciation was subpar and I couldn't conjugate a verb properly. Neither could he actually, so I don't know where that judgment came from.

It's disheartening to see this toxic ideology on a massive scale, further reminding those unlucky enough to be born into a family that won't teach them Spanish that they will never be enough.

Instead of our community recognizing that the resources to learn aren't as available as we may think, we instead belittle each other into remaining silent.

I resorted to relying on my Spanish classes in middle and high school. I marched into the overcrowded classroom every day to listen to a non-Latino teach me the most useless words.

I took four years of these hellish classes, passing with flying colors in all them while barely being able to understand a sentence. I asked my family to help me with these classes, to practice speaking Spanish with me since they were all fluent. All I ever got was a response back in English every time I asked "como estas?"

My family, like many others, fell into the cycle of criticism without reflection. I even found myself falling into it when I finally began to understand my native language.

The hours-long hangouts with my cousin and aunt taught me the basics of Spanish, and I quickly picked up the language after my first year studying in San José. I was so proud to finally understand my grandfather when he spoke to me, but that pride morphed into judgment.

I found myself judging people around me who had Latin last names but didn't respond to my little quips in Spanish. I finally realized that I was turning into another bystander perpetuating this harmful cycle when I was slammed back into reality.

I realized I could barely understand one of my dance teachers, he spoke too fast and the Spanish words blended together once again, just as they did when I was a child.

I never judged someone again after that. Everyone is on their own journey with learning a new language. With the American education system being in the state it is in currently, we can only rely on our community members to teach us.

I desperately hope that my community, our community, begins to treat our language as what it is: something that can connect us, instead of yet another border.

I no longer identify as a "no sabo" kid.

I am and forever will be an "estoy aprendiendo" kid, and I'll wear that badge with pride.

Follow Alicia on X (formerly Twitter) @alicialvarez02

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GRAPHIC BY ALICIA ALVAREZ