

BEFORE YOU READ

How many languages do you know? Can you understand some words in another language? How does mastery of a language help you? This story is about a girl who learns the importance of speaking Spanish, her mother's native language, when she moves from Brooklyn, New York, to Panama.

Here are some details you should know before you read this story, which is part of a novel titled *Marisol and Magdalena*.

- Panama is a small country located in Central America. Spanish is the main language spoken there. *Abuela* means "grandmother" in Spanish.
- Marisol is a teenager from Brooklyn, New York. Her best friend there is Magdalena, or Magda. Marisol is sent by her mother to Panama to visit her grandmother (Abuela) for a year. Marisol's mother hopes that Marisol will learn more about Panama.



Reading Standard 3.3
Analyze characterization as delineated through a character's thoughts, words, speech patterns, and actions; the narrator's description; and the thoughts, words, and actions of other characters.

from *Marisol and Magdalena*

Learning to Float

Veronica Chambers

IDENTIFY

Who is telling you this story—who is the narrator?

Abuela woke me up early. "We have to go to the market," she said, shaking me gently. "We don't have all day."

"Abuela, please," I begged. "Five more minutes."

"Forget about it," she said, flipping on the lights and turning on the clock radio full blast. "I hope you like pancakes."

I sat up in the bed, groggy but hungry. "With blueberries?" I asked.

From *Marisol and Magdalena: The Sound of Our Sisterhood* by Veronica Chambers. Copyright © 1998 by Veronica Chambers. Reprinted by permission of *Hyperion*, a division of *Disney Book Publishing, Inc.*

10 “You’re in Panama,” Abuela said, laughing. “Bananas or coconut?”

Banana pancakes? Coconut pancakes? They both sounded pretty strange. “Can I get them mixed together?” I asked.

“Definitely,” she said. “Now don’t take all day in the shower.”

I picked up the neatly folded pink towel that Abuela laid on my bed.

“You know, Mami was worried that you might be too poor to have an extra towel,” I said.

20 “I can afford extra towels,” Abuela said, waving her hand as if to dismiss the idea. “My retirement check isn’t much, but I manage.”

“Why don’t you move to America?” I asked. “You could live with me and Mami.”

“Why don’t you move to Panama?” Abuela asked, placing her hand on her hip.

“I just *did*,” I reminded her.

Abuela didn’t say anything at first. She looked at me with a faraway look in her eye, then she nodded her head.

30 “I guess that’s true,” she said, smiling. “Now, don’t be all day in the shower.”

My banana-coconut pancakes were delicious, the best I’d ever had. And by eight o’clock Abuela and I were out the door. The market wasn’t a grocery store as I had imagined it to be. It was more like a street fair, with people selling everything from spices to fruit and rice from stalls. Walking past the different *vendedores* selling their wares, I wondered if they could tell I was American. I was dressed in my favorite pair of jeans and my “Girls Rule” T-shirt. Most of

INFER

Re-read lines 7–10, and underline the names of fruits. What do you know about these fruits? How does Marisol’s choice show that she has not been in Panama before?

FLUENCY

Take the role of Marisol or Abuela, and read and act out the boxed passage with another student. Underline the words that you will emphasize, or say in a louder voice.

DECODING TIP

Circle the word *vendors*. Then find and circle the word that looks almost like *vendors* printed in italics in the previous paragraph. Read the words nearby that help explain its meaning. *Vendors* and *vendedores* have the same meaning. What does *vendors* mean?

DECODING TIP

Circle the word *practicando*. Draw a line from this word to another word in the paragraph that resembles it. What might *practicando* mean?

INFER

Look through the part of the story you have read so far. Box words and phrases that reveal Marisol's problems with speaking Spanish. How would you feel in her place?

40 the other girls I saw wore brightly colored sundresses, like the one Ana had worn the day before.

When we stopped to buy rice or fruit, the vendors always greeted me in Spanish and expected me to understand. I did, for the most part, but I was still nervous about trying to use my Spanish. So when people spoke to me, I nodded and smiled.

"You're going to have to speak Spanish at some point," Abuela said. I was surprised that she had noticed that I wasn't talking.

50 "*La unica manera de mejorarse es practicando,*" Abuela said, taking my hand and leading me down another row of *vendedores*. "The only way you'll get better is to practice."

"You don't understand," I said. "At home people make fun of my Spanish."

"*People?*" Abuela asked, raising one eyebrow. "People like who?"

"Like Roxana and my friend Magda's brothers and sister."

60 "*No importa,*" Abuela said. "It doesn't matter now. You'll be speaking like a native in no time at all. That is, if you speak. You've got to open your mouth and try."

We passed a stall where a woman was selling homemade cookies. "Can I have some?" I asked Abuela.

She just looked at me. "I don't know," she said. "Ask her."

I walked up to the woman's table and spoke slowly. "*Buenos días, señora.*"

The lady smiled and asked me what I wanted. "*Buenos días, niña. Qué quieres?*"

70 "*Quiero dos galletes de chocolate,*" I said. "I want two chocolate cookies."

DECODING TIP

Look for familiar English word parts in the Spanish sentence *No te preocupes*. Underline the word or word parts you recognize. What does the Spanish sentence mean?

DECODING TIP

Use context clues to figure out the meaning of the Spanish sentence *Estás de moda* in line 123. Circle those clues. What does the phrase mean?

I started cracking my knuckles as soon as I walked into my homeroom class with Mrs. Ortiz. Standing in front of a classroom of total strangers was *not* my idea of a good time.

“Class, I want you to meet Marisol Mayagüez,” Señora Baptiste said.

It was strange hearing how Panamanian my name sounded, when I didn’t feel Panamanian at all. I stared down at a square on the floor.

110 “You’ll be fine,” Mrs. Ortiz said. “*No te preocupes*.”

At lunchtime I walked into the cafeteria. I just couldn’t stop cracking my knuckles. It was the most knuckle cracking I’d ever done and my fingers were starting to hurt. Then I saw Ana, waving to me.

“Marisol, *ven aca*,” Ana said. “I saved you a place at my table.”

I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to sit alone, but afraid to sit at a table where all the kids spoke nothing but Spanish.

120 Ana was wearing a blue sundress with white flowers all over it, the same orange sandals, and the same orange-tinted sunglasses.

“*Estás de moda*, Ana,” I said. “You look great.”

“Thanks,” she said, standing up and giving a little spin. “I guess I’m stylish enough for America.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but I didn’t say anything. Ana was my only chance at a new friend so far. I wasn’t going to hurt her feelings by telling her that the girls I knew in New York would never wear an outfit like hers.

130

After school I met Ana, and we walked home together.

“Tell me all about Nueva York,” Ana said as we walked down the tiny winding street. “Do you know how lucky you are to come from New York, the Big Apple? *Wow!*”

“Well, nobody in New York calls it the Big Apple,” I said, laughing.

“Do you go to clubs every night?” Ana asked, talking as fast in English as she did in Spanish. “Do you meet lots of rock stars and famous people?”

140 “As if,” I said, jumping down a hopscotch drawn on the sidewalk. At least some things were the same in Panama.

“As if,” Ana repeated. “*Que significa* as if?”

“It means no way,” I explained.

“So what do you do for fun?” Ana asked.

“Me and my best friend, Magda, we watch music videos and play punchball in the park,” I said, shrugging. “Just regular stuff.”

“Your regular stuff sounds *muy divertido* to me,” Ana said.

150 “Do you have a best friend?” I asked as we crossed the street. I knew where I was now. Abuela’s apartment building was at the end of the block.

Ana scratched her arm and looked down. “I did have a best friend,” she said quietly. “Her name was Digna. But she’s not here anymore. She moved to Nicaragua to live with her father. I had to start the school year completely by myself.”

160 I thought about Magda in New York. We were going to take Roberto Clemente Junior High School by storm this year—drill team, honor roll, everything. Now I was here starting the school year completely by myself and Magda was there—in New York, without me.

DECODING TIP

What does *Nueva* in line 131 mean? Circle the context clue that states its meaning.

DECODING TIP

Underline a familiar English word part in the Spanish phrase *Que significa* in line 141. Then circle a context clue that follows. What does the sentence mean?

INFER

Box the information about Ana’s and Marisol’s old friends. How are the girls’ situations similar? How do you think they feel? Do you predict they will become friends? Why or why not?

INFER

In line 167, underline Marisol's allusion to a popular movie. What does she mean?

WORD KNOWLEDGE

Underline the translation of *Como te fue hoy?* What does *cena* probably mean?

INFER

Pause at line 189. What might the narrator be feeling? How do you know?

"I'm glad you came to Panama," Ana said, opening the door to her apartment.

"Thanks, Ana," I said. I stood on the porch for a second. Looking out onto Panama City, the palm trees blowing in the wind.

I thought about the scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy says, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto." That was exactly how I felt, and I didn't even have a dog to tell it to. I was in this on my own.

"*Como te fue hoy?*" Abuela asked, wiping her hands on her apron. "How'd it go today?"

"Not bad," I said, trying to smile. "Not bad at all."

"OK, we'll talk over *cena*," she said. "You go and relax."

I kept thinking about what Mrs. Ortiz had said, about how coming to Panama was an opportunity. She had said the best way to learn a language was through "immersion." It was a funny word—immersion. I kind of knew what it meant, but I had never heard anybody actually use the word in regular conversation.

I went into the living room, to the shelf where Abuela kept all her books. I pulled out the *American Heritage Dictionary* that I had spotted a few days before. I opened it and was surprised to see my mother's maiden name, Inez Velásquez, written in her same perfect handwriting.

This dictionary must have belonged to Mami when she was in school, I thought, and even though it was just a book, I held it to my chest for a second.

I sat on Abuela's old red couch, the couch filled with stuffing that had popped out on the side. I opened the dictionary and flipped to the I's. The word was listed under

OWN THE STORY

PRACTICING THE STANDARDS

Analyzing Character How well do you understand Marisol? Find three of Marisol's actions or statements that reveal her character to you. Then, write a paragraph analyzing Marisol's character—as it is revealed in this part of the novel. Open your paragraph with a sentence that names three character traits you noticed in Marisol. Then, describe Marisol's actions or quote her words that support your analysis.

KEEPING TRACK

Personal Word List Record the new words you learned from this story in your Personal Word List. Note also the Spanish words you learned, along with their meanings in English.

Personal Reading Log Note your answer to this question: Would you like to read the novel that this story is taken from? Record the title of this story in your Personal Reading Log. Give yourself 4 points on the Reading Meter.

Checklist for Standards Mastery Check your progress in mastering the standards. Review the standards you had trouble with, and work to improve your understanding.