

ALL SPANISH, ALL THE TIME

Language Immersion at CTY

by Michael Noah

News of CTY's Spanish language immersion summer program arrived in an e-mail that I barely skimmed before deleting it. I didn't give it another thought until a few days later, as I sat in Spanish class. I thought again about those words: *language immersion*. I imagined having the chance to really use the Spanish I'd learned in bits and pieces over the past two years. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became about the prospect of speaking only Spanish for four full weeks. I decided to apply.

Months later, in the heat of the Massachusetts summer, I stood on the quad at Hampshire College amid a throng of students and their parents. In the commotion of checking in, the teaching staff greeted me in Spanish. I struggled to string together answers to their simple questions. Handing me my camp T-shirt, one teacher asked where I was from: "*¿De dónde eres?*" In response, I stammered, "*Soy de Nuevo Jersey.*" Maybe, I thought, giving up English for four weeks would be easier said than done.

Getting Our Feet Wet

We spent the first afternoon getting acquainted with the program in English. This was when we first learned about the pledge we'd be expected to make the following day: to speak Spanish throughout the day as our primary language. As I got to know the other students, I learned that we brought a wide range of Spanish experience. Several people had never spoken a word of Spanish;

others had taken a few years of Spanish in school.

But even those of us with a few years of Spanish had a lot to learn, as our program director revealed. Over the course of a week in a typical language classroom, he told us, the student spends just 90 seconds speaking in the language. I had been at camp only a few hours, and I estimated that I must have spoken more Spanish in that time than I had in the entire previous school year.

The next day, we went to our classes, which would meet for several hours every day and would be the only time of day we were grouped by experience. I was placed in the class with students with the most experience, which surprised me at first. My teacher, Germán, was from Argentina. He started with an overview of how the course would unfold over the coming weeks—completely in Spanish. I couldn't keep from smiling as I realized that I understood most of what he was saying.

Our classes were far from what I was used to in school. When we weren't learning new verb conjugations by listening to popular songs from Spanish-speaking countries, we were walking in the nearby woods and using Spanish field guides to identify leaves and wildlife. We held an informal debate over issues such as the ethics of bullfighting, and then chose a winning side based on who made the best arguments. We walked around campus as our teacher pointed out new words for the objects all around us.

Because we would learn a concept in class and then be able to put it into use in our daily communications,

it was easy to grasp and retain what we were taught. In a single day, we covered topics that take months to teach in class back at school, but I didn't feel overwhelmed. I was just having a great time.

Diving In

Each day was filled with activities designed not only to improve our language skills, but to let us have fun doing so. We spent our mornings working in project groups, each led by different teachers. These projects—which included mural painting, creating a Hispanic cooking show, photography, learning cultural dances, and producing a newscast—gave us the chance to speak and learn in small, informal groups. Because we began a new project each week, we not only got to use Spanish in a variety of different situations, but also explored a range of topics.

I especially enjoyed the project in which we produced a newscast modeled on those broadcast on Univision, a popular American Spanish-language television channel. We went through the entire production process, from writing and recording our news stories (based on a combination of real-world and in-camp events) to editing our footage. In the process, we learned an extensive amount of vocabulary, ranging from the names for different news segments to the parts of a camera. When we had technical problems, we had to deal with them entirely in Spanish. I think we all realized that these problems were really opportunities to improve our abilities. In the end, we produced a 15-minute newscast that reflected the skills of everyone in the group, and it was something we could all be proud of.

Through meals and other activities outside of class, we interacted with all the teachers. Many came from Spanish-speaking countries around the world, while others had spent years studying in such places. The creative lessons and activities they planned for us revealed enormous dedication to our learning. They shared their cultures, often through presentations on local music, customs, and expressions. Each day, one of the teachers would introduce a colloquial term specific to their country of origin. We acquired a constantly growing number of ways to say “cool,” such as *¡Qué Padre!*, *chévere*, and many others.

As the weeks passed, the students grew into a cohesive group, which was most evident in the evening activities we chose and led ourselves. We held an election, complete with speeches and posters. Some students organized sports leagues and advertised the games; others started groups

centered on dance and art. We even established a camp newspaper, of which I became an editor.

Called *El Anaranjado*, Spanish for “orange,” the color of the camp's T-shirt, the newspaper chronicled events both inside and outside of camp. Because we were not receiving outside news while in camp, we included some world news articles, using the website of the popular Spanish newspaper *El País* as a source. Our newspaper was also filled with camp news, photos, and the results of the latest camp fútbol match.

By the end of camp, even those students who arrived knowing not a word of Spanish spoke the language well. In fact, they were more proficient after four weeks than I was when I arrived. On the final day of the program, we held a presentation for all the parents, showing what we had accomplished during the program. I was asked—on the spot—to talk about our work on the newspaper. Being able to get up in front of over 150 people and give a speech on the fly, unrehearsed, in Spanish was a great culmination to the four weeks.

Lasting Effects

After leaving camp, I still found it more fun to speak Spanish than English. I started watching Spanish television. When I catch up with friends from the program, we speak in Spanish. When I returned to school, I was able to skip and receive credit for a year of Spanish.

What I learned in those four weeks has sparked my interest in traveling to places such as Spain and Latin America. I've started thinking of how being bilingual can benefit my future. Spanish is a language so widely spoken around the world, and being able to speak it will not only provide opportunities to travel and study abroad in college, but will open additional career opportunities. Though I still don't know what career I will pursue, I am sure that knowing Spanish will be an advantage. Though my language immersion experience lasted only four weeks, in this short time, I learned how to imagine and think—and even dream—in Spanish. ■



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In conjunction with the Middlebury-Monterey Language Institute, CTY offers immersion programs in French, Spanish, and Chinese for students in grades 7–10. This summer, these programs will be held at Bard College at Simon's Rock. For more information, see cty.jhu.edu/summer/immersion.