How Not to Learn a Language While Living Abroad

Is becoming fluent in a foreign language one of your main motivations for teaching abroad? It was for me. Though I had never studied Spanish and didn’t speak a word of it when I arrived in Costa Rica, I was sure I’d pick it up. I confidently assumed I would be speaking and reading the language in no time, simply by *being there* and immersing myself in the culture. How could I not, right? Well believe me, it’s possible!

I taught there for years and yes, by now I’m able to have a Spanish conversation without miming to get my point across, or smiling blankly and nodding,  but I still wouldn’t call myself fluent. Where did I go wrong, you ask? I’ll tell you. Read on to discover **Five Surefire Ways not to Learn a Language While Living Abroad**:

**1. Don’t study the language before you go.**

Feeling confident or just plain optimistic about your ability to soak in the language once you get there? As I told you, so was I. I honestly didn’t spend too much time learning Spanish vocab or conjugations before I left for Costa Rica. I was from Florida, after all; it would come naturally to me, right? Wrong. In reality, even books and studying won’t prepare you adequately for total immersion in a new language, but they will at least give you a head start.

**2. Live alone.**

It’s true that I was never that crazy about the idea of staying when a host family or roommate, but I sure wish I had at least done it in the beginning. There is nothing quite like being surrounded by Spanish speakers with whom you *must* communicate your everyday needs, to get your language skills off to a good start.  Plus, as friendly as Costa Ricans are by nature, I know now I missed an opportunity not only for lots of patient conversation, but also for local friends. Good thing I brought my cat.

**3. Hang out mostly with your English-speaking coworkers.**

This is the easy road, for sure. Being plopped down in a foreign country with a group of other new teachers just like you makes it dangerously easy to live in a bubble. Stay there, and you’d be surprised how little of the local language you can actually learn. Watch yourself plateau impressively at “*cerveza”* and “¿*donde* está?”!

**4. Better yet, date one of them.**

Everyone knows the real trick to mastering a language is to take part in a one-on-one “language interchange” with a native speaker (i.e., make a local friend). Sometimes this leads to dating, romance or even all-out love. All of which lead to language acquisition. On the other hand, you could spend all your one-on-one time with a fellow teacher from Nebraska… which is not quite as good for your *español.*

**5. Be shy.**

I know what you’re thinking—you can’t help being timid. That’s true, I couldn’t either, but my advice to you is to go against your nature. Learning a language means striking up conversations with people on busses, accepting invitations to family dinners, or even getting the nerve to try that salsa class at your school. You’ve got to be willing to put yourself out there if you want to become fluent in both the language—and in the culture. So go ahead, reinvent yourself. You might just learn a language along the way!