

## A summer of Spanish

In my school, Spanish class is a joke. Barely anyone takes it seriously, and up until eleventh grade, it seems as though we keep learning the same things over and over again. The people, who look forward to learning Spanish, such as me, rarely get the chance to be challenged in learning the language because everything seems too easy. I had been getting nothing less than an A+ average in Spanish class since third grade, not because I put any extra effort into it, but because it came fairly easily to me. My goal is to become fluent in Spanish not only because of the rising Hispanic population in America, but because I think Spanish is a beautiful language. When I found out that CTY was doing a language immersion program in Spanish (as well as French and Chinese) I immediately signed up.

Language immersion basically means that students are not permitted to speak in English. They must speak solely in the target language, because that is the best and most efficient way to improve your skills.

My Spanish camp took place at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. All of the students stayed for four weeks in the campus dorms. On the first day, we all took time to settle in and get familiar with our resident advisors (RA) and the other students in our hall, and we got to speak in English, which was really a gift. However, later that night marked the first of the four Language Pledges we took throughout the whole course. The Language Pledge was sort of an oath stating that we would only speak in Spanish for the next month. It was all very formal too. We each went to the front of the auditorium and signed our names, and that's where this whole experience started.

Every morning our RA's (who are all fluent in Spanish) would come knocking on our door at 7:00 making us wake up to go to "desayuno", which is breakfast. We would go to breakfast and sit with the other people in our hall and just speak in Spanish. Everyone is at different levels; some are beginners in Spanish, some are more advanced, but no ones Spanish was perfect. That is why we had to use lots of hand motions or act out what we want to say because we did not know how to say it in Spanish. The RA's and the teachers would always correct our grammar, and we would carry around a stack of index cards in our bags when we wanted to write down a new word we learned. During all of our meals we would be talking in Spanish, and sometimes the teachers had to force small talk just so we would all talk. For the first week of camp, we would have two or three designated times during the day, where we could speak in English, like when we had free time or when we wanted to call home. However, as we progressed and started to improve, we would get less and less time to speak English to the point where it was 99.9% Spanish only.

After breakfast we would have a morning assembly where the entire Spanish camp gathers in the auditorium to watch some presentations from the teachers about the culture of various Spanish speaking countries. For instance, every morning a group would come up and present the flag of a country and tell us some facts about the flag and the country. We would also listen to music, from traditional Spanish music to Enrique Iglesias. After that we would meet up with our teachers and go to class, which would last about two and a half hours. (I know it seems like a lot, but we had many breaks in between). Which class you were in was based on your performance on the assessment they gave you on the first day, so the classes ranged from beginner to advanced level. Since I was in the advanced class, I remember that on the first day, I had no idea what my teacher was saying. He was talking so fast that I could vaguely understand what he was talking about. As time went on, not only could I understand almost all of what he was saying, but I could respond as well.

They told us at the beginning of the camp that the goal was to teach us a years worth of Spanish in one month. I think they taught me much more than what I would have learned in one year. My teacher taught us tenses that I never knew existed, such as subjunctive, imperative, conditional, imperfect subjunctive, and much more.

It isn't like this camp was all work and no play. Some nights we would play games or watch Finding Nemo in Spanish. We would even play volleyball using Spanish! We read novels in Spanish, sang in Spanish, we were basically doing everything we normally would on a school day or at home, but in Spanish. This is really a great way to learn a language because you learn every day words and phrases that you would need in a normal situation.

They were trying to create a school environment with this program. We learned everything from history, literature, and art. We even had a series of heated debates like, "Should the drinking age be lowered?" or "Should bullfighting be illegal?" It was very interesting to hear what our peers had to say about these topics, and it sounded even better in Spanish.

It was hard for everyone at the beginning knowing that speaking English was not an option. In order to learn, we had to get used to expressing ourselves in Spanish. Each student would be given a set of "English Cards" or "tarjetas de ingles" that we would have to give to a teacher or an RA when we really, really had to speak English (not including emergencies of course). However, the point was not to lose any English Cards because they would count up the total number of cards from each hall at the end of the week and the hall with the least amount of cards lost got a pizza party. Teachers and RA's can also take cards away from someone if they caught you speaking in English, but they can also give you a card if they think you are making your best effort to speak Spanish and if you have made a lot of improvement. Tarjetas de ingles were sacred to us, but they also motivated us and let us know that secretly talking in English was not helping us.

The whole point of the camp was to immerse ourselves into Spanish and speak the language as best as we could. The whole experience was so amazing that I did not even want to leave after the four weeks were over. I still miss all of my friends from camp, but the most important thing is that I learned how to learn a language. Even though all of the knowledge I obtained from that camp is still with me, I will never forget the Spanish movies, food, sports, and dance that we were exposed to. I have learned to appreciate everything my teachers taught me, but also, I learned how to actually enjoy learning Spanish at school.

By Aishwarya Raje