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I spent the summer of 2009 teaching two conversational English classes in Ecuador through an internship with WorldTeach. I was assigned to work in Quito, and I lived with a host family in the *Centro Histórico*, which is the Ecuadorian equivalent of our Capitol Hill. I was completely immersed in the culture, Spanish language and customs of the sierra people. Two other American volunteers were stationed with me at SECAP, which essentially serves as a vocational school for the community. My experience was unique, and even though I struggled at times to bridge the cultural gap, I had an amazing summer that was largely influenced by my students and host family.

Upon arrival at SECAP, I found out that I had been assigned to teach advanced conversational English and basic conversational English. I began my courses by diagnosing the students' level of English and asking what they wanted help learning, reviewing or practicing. My advanced class lived up to my "American" perception and expectations of what an advanced class truly was. For the most part, my twenty-three Ecuadorian students were fluent in English; at times, each of the students had difficulties when switching verb tenses and with fluidity in general. However, my so-called basic class should have actually been labelled as pre-basic, at least according to the Ecuadorian education system. Almost none of the students had been formally exposed to English before, and I soon found out that it was impossible for me at first to even give directions in English. I conducted the majority of the class in "Spanglish" and slowly incorporated more English over time. For the next eight weeks, I integrated their needs and requests with a basic English overview of my self-created curriculum.

I taught my advanced students new slang phrases and English idiomatic expressions that

are used commonly throughout teaching bits, group work and pop culture references. I assigned open-ended role plays that helped them gain confidence when speaking English, and I also did several running dictations and fill-in-the-blank music lyrics that helped focus on their listening skills in English. Many of my advanced students were adults with full-time jobs in which they are required to communicate via phone or email with sister corporate offices in the United States, so I emphasized greetings, recommendation letter writing, follow-up emails, resume writing, business English and a review of tourism vocabulary.

For my basic class, I noticed that there was a substantial immediate learning curve because the majority of my students picked up the lists of vocabulary quickly and could do simple sentence recognition and corrections with ease. This class was challenging because I had a crowded class from ages five to sixty-five, all trying to learn basic English. Furthermore, I really had to work to establish a trusting relationship with my students in order to slowly progress from “Spanglish” classes to actual English classes. Towards the end, I made up creative and fun games that enabled my students to make complex sentences with the current lists of vocabulary. They would just memorize the questions or I would provide them with written scripts, but at least they became more independent, successful and infinitely better with English pronunciation.

To me, success always seems to be defined by clichés and is something difficult to measure because we equate it with other idealistic words. However, my students and host family would tell me this expression in Spanish and here is its closest translation in English: “teachers teach more by what they are than by what they say.” Especially after living in a developing country for three months and hearing or saying things that get lost in translation, I have to say that I think this expression is clear and succinct! I began my summer by throwing my

expectations to the wind and immersing myself in a culture with an open mind and heart. Looking back, if I had entered Ecuador with “American” expectations of what school should be like or how my students would arrive, act and treat me, then I would not have been nearly as successful as I feel now, simply because my life as I knew it here in the States cannot be compared to *mi vida ecuatoriana* as I know it now. As cliché as this sounds, it would be like comparing apples to oranges; it cannot be done. In some way, I think I would have been disappointed by having my academic expectations lowered from my “American standard”; in other ways, I think my initial expectations would have been shattered by the close relationships that I formed with my students and host family.

Since SECAP did not give us a rigid curriculum, all class time was essentially free and enabled us to move along and learn as a team at a fair pace. If there was mass confusion or a question, I would pause, answer it, provide counter-examples in Spanish, concept check, and then hopefully move on. Some questions and lessons took significantly longer than others. Thus, I do not measure or equate my success as a teacher with the number of academic textbook units that we zoomed through, by the number of passed exams, or by the number of grammatical errors in projects; all of that is irrelevant. To be honest, I did not even count those things. What mattered to my students was that I show up, smile, help them learn something new (whether that be a word or an entire verb tense), and just show them that I was happy to be with them.

Our classroom transformed from just a space to hold classes to a place where my students and I gathered to share in laughter, gestures, American culture, famous Ecuadorian hospitality, and English. The students always wanted to make sure that I felt at home with them in class, which reflected our trust, respect and teamwork for the goal of learning English. I could have taught them a number of different topics, but we studied only what was really beneficial and

could be covered in full. I believe that the hours spent with students before and after class discussing our families, friends, homes, and past experiences were of the true essence of success: to be in solidarity and foster a loving community with people.

As I stated above, I established and continue to enjoy phenomenal friendships with my former students and host family members. Everything was set up through WorldTeach, which I definitely cannot take credit for doing. Parts of the summer seemed hectic and confusing by having to communicate in English and Spanish to my directors, supervisors, students, volunteers and host family. I never thought that I would have the courage to do an immersion program such as this, much less do an internship abroad as a teacher. I felt appreciated by my organization and students and enjoyed volunteering to teach class and then spending hours hanging out or travelling. However, I had absolutely no idea how much I would end up taking away from this experience. Even when I felt exhausted, I still found myself giving 100% of my effort to teach and interact with the Ecuadorian people. I was blindsided by the fact that no matter how much I *gave*, I would still *take away* more – the friendships and the memories. I had the time of my life and would give anything to go back to the place that served as my home for the past three months.