

English as a Second Language in Spain

Melissa L's Final Report

What are your initial impressions of the organization and an overview and thoughts about the kind of work you've started doing; how does the work match your expectations, how does it match your goals?

My first day at the school was a bit overwhelming but at the same time I really enjoyed it. There were many people that I got to meet and unfortunately I don't remember all of their names but they were all kind and friendly and wanted to make me feel as comfortable as possible. I met the three English teachers that I will be working with for the rest of this internship and I really enjoyed talking to all of them and getting to work with them. I wasn't exactly sure what to expect in terms of what I would be doing because I was never given a really clear idea. When I first got here I discovered why: because there really wasn't any set idea of what I should do. My first week here consisted of me adjusting to the differences between this school in Spain and the schools in America and trying to figure out what I could do with the students. At the end of this first week I think we all have a little better idea: during the classes that I will be helping in, I will pull out small groups of students to work with them on different activities such as reading, phonics, conversations in English, etc. I will work with the teachers each week to decide what I will do with their classes that week. For the next two weeks I will be taking them through a play that they will be seeing soon in English and help them get to the point that they understand what is happening when they finally see it. I did a little bit of group work with the students this week and I really enjoyed it so I am excited to see what will happen next. Despite not knowing what to expect really, I think that the work I am doing really matches what I was thinking I would be doing.

What stood out to you the most regarding your arrival?

There were several things that stood out to me when I first arrived here. Probably the thing that stood out to me the most was just how much life revolves around Catholicism. Obviously I knew that going into this internship, I just don't think I realized how much. The day I got here, there was no school for the kids because of a Catholic holiday and I have been here a week and they have had two more celebrations in honor of certain saints. I've attended 3 masses and every day there is a prayer recited in the classroom. I'm not saying this to complain about their customs; on the contrary, I find them really interesting and I enjoy participating in them with my host family and the students at the school. It's just very different than what I'm used to so it's going to take some adjustment. I hope that as I become more familiar with the traditions and the customs, I can learn more about them.

What was your greatest anxiety prior to departing and how do you feel about that now that you have arrived?

I think my greatest anxiety prior to coming here was trying to communicate in Spanish. I had a moment where I was sitting in the airport in London next to two people who were speaking Spanish and I had no idea what they were talking about. To be honest, that made me pretty nervous. However, my host family speaks quite a bit of English and the kids want to learn to speak it better so at the moment most of our communication is in English. That is probably the one thing I want to start to fix because I am now worried that I will get so comfortable speaking English that I won't push myself to communicate in Spanish. One of my bad habits at the moment is eavesdropping on conversations in Spanish which I know is probably pretty rude but I am pleased to find that if I listen carefully, I can usually get the general idea of what two people are talking about. I'm hoping that soon I can move to more complete comprehension in the next month or two because I think that will greatly help me in terms of speaking the language.

How are things going at work now that you have settled in for a bit? How does this align with your professional goals that you set for yourself? What would you like to achieve in the next half of your internship?

In my opinion, things at work are going very well. I have really enjoyed working at the school these past few weeks because the staff is all very friendly and really tries to include me in everything, whether that is sitting down at a table with them for lunch or having a conversation with them. They are always checking in with me to see how I am doing and are willing to listen to my sometimes horrible attempts to communicate in Castilian Spanish with patience and understanding.

The girls at the school are all wonderful too! Every day I find myself learning more and more. One of my professional goals for myself was to be able to use this time to put some of the strategies and practices that I have been learning through my university classes into practice and discover for myself what works best for me. I can certainly say that I have tried many different strategies over the last few weeks which range from visuals to role plays to think-pair-shares and so many others. One of the great parts about what I do is that I have many opportunities to do the same thing over again with different groups in different classes. Therefore, if something doesn't work with one group, then I have the opportunity to adjust and change as I move to the next group and then the group after that. Of course, no group is the same and sometimes I have to adjust a strategy that worked well with every other group I've worked with. However, I think that is an important lesson that I need to learn. In teaching, no child is the same and the strategies that work with the majority of the class may not work for all

students. A teacher needs to know how to make those adjustments as they go so that every student can learn and I think that is a skill that I have been learning a lot recently. I hope that as I continue to progress through this internship, I will learn more effective strategies and how to put them to use in a way that benefits all my students.

Another professional goal I have for myself is to become fluent in Spanish. This has probably been one of the hardest parts for me because most of my day is spent working with girls in English and then three nights a week I spend another 2 hours tutoring students in English so it has been a little more difficult than I imagined. However, I have been learning quite a lot and I feel like I am able to understand more than half of the conversations around me and I can sometimes hold a basic conversation with someone. My ability to speak the language is one thing that I would really like to improve on so I have been looking into the possibility of taking a course or two in Spanish starting in April. By then, I will be done with my two online classes and will have some time that I could fill. My host mom has heard of a place near where we live that offers Spanish courses for foreigners so she is helping me look into it.

How are things going relative to your personal goals? In which areas have you made progress and where do you still have some room to expand? What do you want to make sure you address before you leave?

My main personal goal for myself was to learn how to become more independent. I have an amazing family back home that is always there for me to support me but between the distance and the time difference they are not as readily available to me as before. I want to be able to make and manage a budget and learn how to figure out foreign transportation and be able to get around on my own with minimal assistance. In terms of this, I have actually been doing really well. Within a week of being here, I had mastered the Bilbao Metro System and now use it all the time to get around. I have been doing fairly well with a budget and have been sticking to it as much as possible. I am hoping to plan an overnight trip to Madrid for a few days very soon which I know will be an interesting experience, especially if I do it all by myself. However, I do think that I am learning to become my own person while here and I hope to continue to grow in responsibility and confidence over the next few months.

How are things going relative to your cross-cultural goals? What kinds of experiences have stood out to you so far? What do you want to ensure to experience before you leave?

My main cross-cultural goal was to learn how to become an effective teacher to students in different parts of the world. Like I stated above, I have been putting to the test many strategies that I was taught to use in my university classes and it has been

really interesting to see how some that I learned in my regular classes have gone over with the girls. Sometimes they work fairly well and sometimes they don't. For example, formal lecture and reading of a play script to help students learn English: not effective. Using a simplified play script paired with horrible stick figure drawings and dramatic reenactment: surprisingly very affective. One of the great parts about the last few weeks is that while I have been here and learning, I've been taking an ESOL class online that has often provided many helpful insights (such as using dramatic reenactment of the script to increase comprehension). I hope that as I become more familiar with the system of schooling here, I will continue to apply and adapt the knowledge from those classes to my work. Perhaps one day if I become a teacher in another foreign country, I will be able to use this experience to guide my work.

I also hoped to learn how to adjust to a new culture and that has definitely been one of the most fun parts of living here. I really enjoy the Friday and Saturdays spent with friends going around for pintxos and just enjoying spending time together in downtown Bilbao. Going out on the weekends was never something I really did much back home because I usually had a lot of homework and was exhausted from a crazy week at school. However, that is the custom here and I have really enjoyed the relaxing evenings just walking through town and stopping at different places for pintxos or shopping. The aspect of religion has also been really interesting to me. Almost everyone I know is Catholic here and there seems to constantly be celebrations for saints happening. Currently it is Lent which is a big deal to a lot of them and comes with dietary restrictions which have been interesting to observe and sometimes participate in because of meals at the school. However, I have really loved learning how to adjust to the local culture.

An interesting question I have been considering for some time is how to reconcile my culture and customs with those here in Spain. Should I completely integrate myself or should I hold on to some of those customs which define me as an American? For instance, I am not Catholic but here there are sometimes things that others do that have a special significance to Catholics. A few weeks ago there was a celebration for San Blas and many people were buying a special type of necklace and it was supposed to be worn for 9 days and then burned and it is supposed to heal you of illnesses (if I understood correctly). I had to ask myself if that was something I should do though I don't really believe in it. It's a question that I am still working on an answer for and not just in terms of the religious customs. I still haven't really decided what to do but I hope to be able to answer that soon.

Please describe the organizational structure at your host organization and who you worked with during your internship. Describe the workplace culture at your host

organization. How does your personal cultural lens work within the culture of your host organization?

The organizational structure of this school is very different from anything that I have seen before. Part of that I believe is because the school works with students from age 3 to age 18 and the school is divided into the different sections to accommodate different age groups. First of all, there is the director (principal). I have never worked with her but I have met her on different occasions. From there the school is split into three different sections: Infants, Primary, and Secondary (ESO and Bach). My host mom is the sub-director of the Infants section but other than that I know little of the internal structure of this section. Primary also has a sub-director and I have met her a few times. In addition to a sub-director, Primary also has Heads of different subjects. For example, there is a Head of the English Department, a Head of the Science Department, a Head of the Religion Department, and so on and so forth within the Primary section. The same is true of the Secondary section although the professors are different. Often the Heads of each department are also professors and teach classes as well. I have met the Head of the English Department for Primary but I have never worked with her. From there, the professors are divided into groups based on students. There are a set of professors for 1st and 2nd years, a set for 3rd and 4th years, and a set for 5th and 6th years. Each of these professors has a specialization and a subject(s) that they teach. Unlike the US, primary teachers do not teach all the subjects and they do not remain with the same students all day but rather change between classes. I am placed with the 1st and 2nd year students so I know most of the teachers of the different subjects in this group. However, the only teachers that I have worked with professionally are the 3 English teachers for 1st and 2nd.

Probably what surprised me the most about this school was just how informal the school is. There are no such things as bells to keep you on track, the students refer to you by your first name, and there are no such things as substitute teachers from outside the school. If one of the teachers is running late or is absent that day, then another teacher, often from the same group, will keep an eye on their students for a while and, if necessary, teach the lesson. If class runs late in one subject, no big deal. You just start the next class a little later. There are specific times laid out for classes but because of the absence of bells, class rarely starts at that exact time so this adds to the informality. I am not sure if this is a cultural norm in schools throughout Spain but this is the case with this particular school. As someone who is used to the formal, set structure of elementary schools in America, this was something that took some adjusting. However, I do not think that this is necessarily a bad thing. Rather, I like the informal nature because it has allowed me to have more freedom to develop my role and identity with the students and the teachers. I have been able to create some structure (groups within class, set days

that groups come with me, set plan of activities throughout the term) within my work with the students which has helped me be able to function better.

What words of advice do you have for future interns as they prepare for this internship and living in your host country/culture?

There are many words of advice that I would give future interns who are coming to Spain. One would be to try and live with a host family if possible. It can be pretty interesting sometimes depending on the family you are placed with but you get to often be a part of things that you wouldn't otherwise. For example, I am going to be helping my host mom plan a golden wedding anniversary for her parents, I will be attending a special mass with the first communion of the youngest child in my host family (a very big deal here) and I have been able to expose myself more fully to the culture than I would have been able to if I had stayed in a dorm or apartment by myself or with other study abroad students.

The second piece of advice I would give is to find and take some Spanish lessons while in country. This is probably my biggest regret, that I didn't take any lessons in Spanish right when I got here. I think that my Spanish would have improved more if I had found a class to take. Many people may not have this problem but in my internship, I am at school every day from 9-5 and I am expected to speak in English with the girls. Then three out of the five days of the school week I tutor children in English until 8 at night. I then only have about an hour before everyone usually goes to bed when I can speak with them in Spanish. While I can say that I have learned a lot and I am more confident in the language now, I think having a class that exposed me to new vocabulary and sentence structure and grammar would have made a huge difference.

Lastly, I would say to make friends with whom you can spend time. I was lucky to meet two girls a little younger than me who are fun to hang out with and have shown me around a bit. It is really nice to have that friend support, especially since I came here alone without any other intern or study abroad students. It helps me feel like I'm not stranded in a foreign country on my own. There are many other small pieces of advice I would give but I think that this covers the main points.

What are the most important things you have learned about yourself thus far through this experience? What has been the greatest personal challenge? What has been the greatest reward?

These last several months have been filled with many ups and downs and lots of learning experiences for me. As I am nearing the end of my internship, I have had the opportunity to look back and reflect on my progress and see what I have learned. Probably one of the biggest changes I have seen in myself from this experience is my

confidence. When I first arrived at the school, I had no idea what I was supposed to do with my students other than "teach them English" and the only direction I was given was "whatever you want". As a person who had a lot of insecurities about my ability to be a teacher, insecurities that I didn't even realize that I had, this lack of direction was my worst nightmare! I was already overwhelmed about being in a new culture and adjusting to a new language and then on top of that, to be given absolutely no guidelines at first as to what I should do was really difficult. Understandably, the first few weeks were a bit rough as I was adjusting to my new role and trying to gauge where I fit in. However, I was given some material to work with at the beginning of Week 3 and was able to use that until Week 6 and that took a lot of the stress away, giving me room to adjust and breathe and come up with some ideas of things to do with my students.

I think the turning point really came for me when school started back up after our two week break at the end of March. I felt comfortable and adjusted to my role and ready to branch out and make the most of my internship. As a result of this newfound confidence, these last eight weeks have been amazing for me! The greatest reward has probably been seeing the girls in my classes also learning and growing. Last week, our classes were observed by parents and teachers twice and it felt great for me to see that these girls actually had learned something from my time working with them. It was the first feedback I have received about my work and forced me to reflect a bit on what I am doing and what impact I am having on them and though their progress isn't anything miraculous, there is a difference! I guess the most important thing that I have learned about myself is that I have the skills and abilities to be a teacher (take that insecurities!). I am really excited to see how this experience impacts me next year when I start student teaching and what else I might learn about myself between now and then.

The period of cultural adjustment is often represented by a "W" curve with various peaks and valleys: Honeymoon (peak); Initial Culture Shock (valley); Cultural Adjustment (peak); Further Culture Shock (valley); Further Adjustment (peak); Re-entry Shock (valley). Outline your cultural adjustment thus far marking the highs and lows with approximate dates and descriptions of events that represent some of these phases (recognizing of course, that you are still in process).

As I reflect on my cultural adjustment, I think that there has been a quite a few moments of ups and downs. Probably the first moment of culture shock that I remember experiencing occurred before I even got to Spain but in the middle of Heathrow Airport in London. I had a five hour layover and so I was sitting in the main area surrounded by shops and people from all over. It just so happened that I happened to sit right next to two people who were speaking Spanish. Up until that point, I was doing alright. I had managed to keep myself calm for the 9 hour flight from Seattle to London and even was excited about this new experience. However, in that moment as I was trying to listen in

to the conversation that those two people were having, I found that I could not understand anything that they were saying and it hit me that I was headed to a foreign country where they speak a language other than English and I would be there for five months! So, as you can probably imagine, the next four hours in the airport as well as the two hour flight from London to Bilbao were filled with some emotional moments for me!

The honeymoon moment started probably a little while after I arrived in Spain. I had met my host family and they had welcomed me into their home and were making an effort to help me adjust. I found that I could even occasionally follow their conversations when I paid attention (it's amazing what a good night's sleep and a lack of anxiety can do for your comprehension skills!). That honeymoon period lasted for probably the first seven weeks of my internship. In that time, everything was new and exciting and when spring break started, I was constantly travelling around with my host family and seeing all sorts of places.

The second bout of culture shock that I experienced happened the last weekend in March at the end of my two week break from school. I was with my host family in Lekeitio, a small town about an hour from Bilbao. We were having a barbeque lunch with two other families that they knew and we had spent the entire afternoon eating and playing games. Though I had a lot of fun that day, I felt like something was off. I was really struggling with relating with the girls that I had been spending the afternoon with. They were constantly talking with each other in a mix of Spanish and Basque (something that I cannot follow) and laughing about things that I didn't understand. I would sometimes ask but would usually get a response like "it's hard to explain" and it was almost an inconvenience to explain it to me. It made me wish for the first time since I arrived that I could be home with my friends and family and have a conversation that I can follow completely and actually contribute to.

The adjustment period after this bout of culture shock started about two weeks later. I had a great conversation with my host mom and as a result, I started to try and reach out and connect more with the people around me. I think that in part this is what has made the last few weeks so great for me. I feel like I have made some meaningful connections with people in the last few weeks and even have some new friends. I got to have coffee and several conversations with a fellow university student who is observing at the school. She even spent two years living in New York so if I ever had a hard time expressing an American phrase in Spanish, she understood. I also got to spend some time with the art teacher who works here at the school. She is originally from the UK so we have had some great conversations about our countries and the educational systems in both. I even got to assist in one of her art classes with the preschoolers. I am still in this adjustment period as far as I can tell though I would not be surprised if another

round of culture shock happens to hit me before I return home. My biggest hope is that my adjustment as I return will be smooth and relatively easy for me.

Identify 3-4 accomplishments or successes in your internship of which you are most proud. These can be professional, personal or cross-cultural. Explain them briefly below. After identifying 3-4, pick two of these and expand on them with the following:

- *outline the context of the situation*
- *Describe any challenges you faced*
- *Describe the actions you took to overcome the challenges*

As I reflect back on my internship after returning to the US, I can recall several situations in which I was able to accomplish something that related back to some of the goals I set for myself before leaving for Spain. There were three moments of which I am especially proud: the first time I was able to participate in a conversation in Spanish with little difficulty (one of my goals was to increase my ability to speak and understand Spanish), when I was complimented on my authentic accent (my goal was to learn how to adapt to another culture), and when I was finally able to find an activity that got all the students at my school to enjoy speaking English (my goal was to learn and develop new strategies for working with children in a classroom setting).

I still remember the first time I was able to have a conversation with someone without it being especially difficult. It occurred on the last Friday of my first term at the school. It was morning recess and I had been working on something for the first part of the break until I was told that there were pintxos and drinks in one of the classrooms for all the staff to celebrate the end of the term. I ended up going by myself and when I entered the room, there were few people that I actually knew. After grabbing a pintxo, I was standing off to the side when the director and another teacher came over my way and started to talk to me. One of the things that I realized during my first few weeks in Spain is that I often get really nervous when I am asked questions directly. In situations where I can just be a listener, I find that I often understand more of what is said because I don't have to think about a response and I am not constantly worrying about saying something wrong. Add to that the fact that I am speaking with the director of the entire school and you start to understand what I was feeling in that moment. However, I did my best to calm myself down and reminded myself that this wasn't a test but rather a friendly conversation that two people wanted to have in order to get to know me better. Although I still made mistakes, I surprised even myself with how much I was able to participate. I was actually able to see the conversation through to the end with little difficulty. Considering that one of my goals was to become more fluent in Spanish, this was a great moment for me in which I got to see some progress in that area.

While learning more Spanish was a major bonus, my main goal going into this internship was to develop skills and strategies that would make me a more effective teacher. There are many moments that I could choose that would demonstrate my progress in this area but the one that I remember the most came near the end of my internship. Throughout my time there I had been looking for activities that would help my students speak while still letting them have some fun. I had tried a few different ideas but one day when we were working with new vocabulary, I had an idea. I was introducing different types of fruit using some flash cards given to me by one of the English teachers and we had run out of time for the activity I wanted to do. So, to finish off the class I had each student take a flash card and give a mini presentation about the fruit pictured on it. I gave them four things to say (the name of the fruit, the color, whether it had seeds, and if they liked it) and somewhat scripted it all for them before having each student stand up and present. I wasn't sure how it would go, especially with the shy students, but to my surprise they all not only excelled at it, they genuinely enjoyed it! Through this activity, I learned not only a fun way to encourage students to speak, but I also learned ways to modify it to help students who struggle more with either the language or are extremely shy. As a teacher, I will have to think on my feet like I did in this situation and always be thinking of how to modify my ideas in order to promote success for all my students. The fact that I have had the opportunity to learn how to do this before even graduating is something that I believe will benefit me greatly in my future career.

With your experience completed, are you more or less committed to a career in this field? What experiences have contributed to this? What specific skills have you developed that can make you successful in this, or another career?

When I first decided to complete this internship, I saw it as a great opportunity to get some experience working in my future career before graduating. To be honest, I was not completely sure how I would feel about teaching after my five months were up. Would I still enjoy working with children in a classroom setting? I have volunteered some in classrooms before but never have I worked with kids as the sole instructor or in an ESL setting before so I was curious to see where this led. Having now completed my internship, I can say with absolute certainty that now more than ever I want to be a teacher! I even now have a passion for working with ESL students. There are many experiences that contributed to this but probably one of the biggest came near the end of my internship. We had an open house day for parents to come and see what their daughters were learning at school and several parents came in while I was conducting my English lesson. Obviously I was really nervous to be under observation but as I was listening to the girls speaking (albeit very nervously), I realized just how much they had learned in the last few months. I won't take all the credit for it; they have some amazing English professors. However, I do know that I had an impact on their learning and

seeing them, even at such a young age, able to participate in a conversation in English made me proud of what I had been able to accomplish.

There were many skills that I picked up from my time in Spain that I believe will benefit me as I continue in my career as a teacher. First, I have learned how to best manage a classroom. I believe that classroom management is an important, and often underrated, skill. There are so many things happening at the same time when you have a group of thirty kids all in one room so it is important to learn how to best quiet them, how to balance fun with seriousness, and how to keep everyone, including yourself, organized. I also learned how to set up a reward system and which methods are better than others. There are probably many other skills that I learned as well while working at this school that I won't even realize I have until I find myself in another classroom in a few years. However, now more than ever I feel prepared for my future career and I cannot wait for the day when I will have a classroom of my own.