“Tranquila!” shouted a disgruntled pedestrian as I frantically swooshed past him on my “Sevibici,” the rent-a-bike of Sevilla, Spain. What this innocent bystander failed to understand was that I couldn’t slow down or be any more “tranquila;” as I disrupted the thick pedestrian traffic of Sevilla, my two city-smart Spanish hostesses effortlessly maneuvered their bicycles along the cobblestone streets, slipping through holes in the crowd I could never seem to find. I would have loved to leisurely ride through the city, but I was in Spain to become assimilated with daily life, which I found meant anything from watching Spanish movies to stressfully biking through the city. I certainly did not expect this when I went abroad to Spain two years ago, but I learned that the gains of an experience never quite match up to the expectations.

For four weeks that summer, my life was completely uprooted and I left my New England suburban environment to become intertwined with the fast-paced rhythm of Spanish life. Although I undoubtedly struggled at times to absorb certain cultural norms, the greatest challenge Spain presented to me was an inability to connect with others due to the language barrier. Admittedly my language skills were not perfect, but I could survive conversationally. Each day, my language skills – and my confidence – improved, and I could understand almost everything and converse sufficiently with others. However, a conversation-base of the language was not enough: there was still a missing link for true communication. I could speak words that said what I wanted to convey, but I could not manipulate or really use the language to fully express myself. Language, word choice, and tone are the most effective mechanisms to illustrate character, and in Spain, I was stripped of the luxury of these devices. I could communicate, but no one knew who I was, and I could not easily show them.

I have always been considered a leader, and a “people person,” and, even though these things might define me, language defines them. Traveling to Spain drew attention to the importance of language in my daily interactions – something that is often overlooked and underestimated. I better understood the role that language played in my life, and how it has helped to establish who I am today. Being able to communicate in Spanish, but lacking the complete mastery that would allow for interpersonal connection gave me a stronger drive and desire to obtain this type of fluency. Since realizing both the possibilities language fluency affords and the challenge it poses, I have been more conscious in my language learning, bringing it outside of a static classroom environment. From choosing to watch movies in Spanish to reading leisure books in the language, I look for ways to improve and sustain my skills. Seeking to achieve bilingualism and apply I to a professional environment, I have cultivated my love of language in college, researching the economic, social, and political effects of language in light of my International Studies major. Although my future may be uncertain, I know it will be rooted in my passion for the Spanish language.

With a stronger domain of the Spanish language, that day riding through Sevilla could have been different. I might not have been so flustered, or I could have warned the pedestrians who were in my dangerous path. I could have called out to the girls ahead of me, or maybe they would have even known me well enough to slow down and wait. That summer, I was immersed in the Spanish language, the Spanish culture, but did not have a chance to contribute to society meaningfully. Pursuing a deeper fluency in language, what I learned to be the vital foundation for relationships, and interpersonal connections, I pursue a second chance in a Hispanic environment. A chance to actively participate in a foreign environment, fully coming to know a new population, a new culture, a new world.