La Barrera

Sitting around the fire with the other American volunteer delegates and our Salvadoran students, I reached for the words I needed to ask my star student, Marissa, about her quest to obtain an education. I was told that her family was one of the poorest in the village, which was devastating to learn given the poverty of the region. I desperately wanted to talk to her; to understand where she developed the determination to pursue an education. But as I juggled Spanish words in my brain to form the questions I desired to articulate, my language proficiency fell short and the fire soon died out, leaving only the acrid air of smoke and a sense of dissatisfied curiosity.

I was in El Salvador the summer before my first year of college to teach English through Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad, an organization that combines cultural exchange and language education. After that night at the bonfire, I committed myself to achieving a level of fluency in Spanish that would allow me to ask questions of my students who so intrigued me. As a first semester freshman at the College of Charleston, I am enrolled in a 300-level Spanish Conversation class. The class was extremely intimidating for me at first, as I was expected to respond to questions from and prompt dialogue with my professor. However, as classes progressed and I came to appreciate my professor’s patience and support, it became easier to speak fluidly and the pressure to speak grammatically flawlessly diminished. My class created an accepting community of varying proficiency levels in which we encouraged one another to attempt to speak rather than holding back out of fear of making mistakes.

One day, my professor mentioned a Spanish club that the College has, where students and professors come together in a bar to casually converse in Spanish. The idea of speaking Spanish in a bar with my professors seemed enjoyable, but also daunting. After some self-convincing, I strolled over to Mynt bar at 4:00pm on a Friday afternoon. Realizing instantly that I was by far the youngest person in the room, I was faced with a choice—¿quedar o irme? Though my own professor was not there, I decided it was worth a shot as I had already trekked the couple of blocks from my dorm. I quickly learned that this was a welcoming space for students to practice their Spanish, and that there was no expectation to be perfectly articulate. I returned to Mynt for several of these tertulias with the Spanish Club throughout the semester, and gained confidence and competence in my Spanish speaking abilities.

I am in the process of declaring my Foreign Language Education major and Spanish concentration, and am applying to live in the Spanish House on campus, where, if accepted, I will pledge to only speak in Spanish for the entirety of the semester. However, I am most excited about my plans to return to El Salvador this summer as a leader to the trip I was a delegate for two summers ago. As a delegate, I taught classes that required limited Spanish vocabulary—math, elementary English—but as a trip leader I hope to lead a round-table discussion structured Spanish debate class to facilitate the conversations I previously lacked the vocabulary and confidence to initiate. Though I was wholly welcomed in the community with my average Spanish fluency, I hope when I return with heightened competence, I will be able to deepen the foundational connections with my students that I created and truly become a part of the Spanish-speaking and village community. It is true that Spanish is a romance language, for it is so easy to fall in love with.

2 To stay or to go? 3 Gatherings