

Lucas Delahunty

During my sophomore year at Valparaiso University, I decided to study in Chile to improve my knowledge of the Spanish language and learn about Chilean history and culture. When I arrived in Viña del Mar, I lived with a host family, attended classes in Spanish, and volunteered my time as an assistant to a middle school English teacher on the outskirts of Viña del Mar. As a teacher assistant, I expected to teach students and help the teacher with day-to-day tasks, but I did not expect that the students would be the ones teaching me.

When I was in Chile, I attended classes at Universidad Viña del Mar and was offered the opportunity to volunteer at an elementary and middle school called Paul Harris School. I travelled to the school on certain weekdays, but the journey there required 30 minutes of walking up and down hills and 30 minutes on a small public bus called a “micro.” Upon arriving at Paul Harris School, I would spend about an hour to an hour and a half with 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in their English class—assisting the teacher carry out class activities and help clarify quiz and exam concepts with students having difficulties with class content. Since students were in the early stages of learning English, I relied heavily on my knowledge of the Spanish language. Most of the time I had confidence in my ability to communicate in Spanish with the students, but at other times it was difficult to communicate effectively.

Anyone who is familiar with Chilean Spanish knows that most people speak quickly and use a lot of slang or “chilenismos.” While this proved to be a challenge throughout my entire semester abroad, as a teacher assistant it was especially challenging since I—at times—did not understand what students were asking or saying, or was unable to translate class concepts into Spanish. At the time, this dilemma was frustrating, but in retrospect it was a humbling experience that taught me the power of learning by helping. Not only were the students learning a second language, but my knowledge of a second language was forming and evolving as well. Even today, I know that my Spanish is not perfect and will always have to be improved upon, but my time spent at Paul Harris School showed me that language learning does not have to be mutually exclusive. If you help another person learn a language, don’t be surprised if you learn something new in return.