

The earth rings with the voices of hundreds of languages, each with their distinct and unique differences. Yet, every language has something in common: they connect humans together through building relationships. I discovered this power of languages while volunteering at Centro Renovación, an elementary school in Costa Rica this past summer. Through tutoring young students during my stay, I grew my Spanish and people skills, along with my belief in the power of relationships.

While I may have been a tutor for the little kids in Centro Renovación, the kids were really the ones teaching me. I learned to listen, have patience, and be more outgoing through my many diverse interactions with my students. In the first week of tutoring, I was afraid to approach the kids, seemingly separated by the barrier of language. Yet, I knew I hadn't come to the school to cower in a corner, so I began to greet kids and ask if they needed help. This simple step of getting to know the kids was difficult, as I struggled to catch their fast Spanish full of slang. Yet, as the weeks wore on, I began to get used to each child's specific way of speaking. I learned to listen more than speak, to observe more than enforce my own thoughts. The kids taught me Costa Rican words, the culture of their neighborhood, and their personal jokes or wishes. I learned to rework my explanations to fit each student's learning style. Through it all, the kids joked about my Spanish and helped me grow my vocabulary. While I taught the young kids to recognize syllables or write letters, they taught me to break out of my comfort zone, learn to listen, and dive deeper into my Spanish.

Working in a foreign country highlighted the contrasts between my own city and the local culture. While teaching at Centro Renovación, I was surprised to see that basic structures for learning math and language fundamentally differed. For example, the methods of teaching long division were physically reversed, and I was blown away with how the kids were taught to read: by syllables. While in English we often learn "sight words" that don't follow usual spelling patterns, the Costa Rican children were taught to memorize only syllables, as these syllables were combined in endless ways to form Spanish words. Before teaching my students to read, I had to first learn the new system of reading myself!

Above all, my experience teaching made emotional connections I will never forget. After over a month of working with my students, playing tag with them, listening to stories from the main teacher, or climbing on the playground, I couldn't imagine simply walking away. I remember desperately hugging one of my students on my last day, both of us crying as we embraced. I hope to return as a future semester abroad through VU, but in the meantime I have sent the kids drawings and notes to stay in touch.

The relationships I made were by far the most impactful part of my trip. Although I was only in Costa Rica for a little over a month, I miss my students and friends daily. Teaching in Centro Renovación became much more than just a summer internship. Rather, I left transformed by what the kids showed me about myself, Spanish, and friendship. Looking to the future, I hope to connect with even more people, both at VU and beyond campus, using the Spanish and people skills my students taught me.

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