

Sabbatical Report 2013-2014

December 1, 2014

Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Costa Rica

For the first five months of my sabbatical in July, 2013, I volunteered to teach Costa Ricans English as a Foreign Language in El Empalme, Costa Rica. I explored several different possibilities of teaching positions in Costa Rica. I conferred with people who had ties and worked in areas that drafted linguists to do volunteer work in Central America. I had a past history in the Peace Corps when I served two and half years in the Dominican Republic. I corresponded with the Peace Corps representatives who supply the Peace Corps volunteers in third world countries. This experience gave me an opportunity to make a visit to a new part of the world. Also, I wanted to go back to a Spanish speaking country to hone in on my own Spanish fluency and to apply my skills in English as a Second Language to different grade levels (k-12) and (adults). The Peace Corps assigned me to the province called El Empalme which is in the south part of the country in rural Costa Rica on the Pan American Highway. There is quite a lot of traffic on this highway and many tourists stop who are traveling to Panama. The citizens of El Empalme saw a real need for their people to learn English. The committee members of the Association Center for Comprehensive Integrated Development of El Empalme began sponsoring teachers to come and teach English. I was there first sponsored teacher.

Costa Rican children are taught English in school, but only the majority complete the sixth grade. With the help of the Peace Corps and the Costa Rican people, we were able to start the English classes in the community center. I had as many as 105 students in my classes ranging from four years of age to adults of all ages. The majority of classes were held in the community center and the Catholic Church. There were no supplies when I started teaching. When I first walked into the classroom, I had one piece of chalk and a worn out chalkboard. I immediately put out a call for help and eventually was given after two months, more supplies. I also purchased many supplies. Since there were so few materials I had to improvise in my English classes. I came up with games, singing, dancing and anything that would help them learn English. I also attended an ESL training for the teachers in the community. I was asked for my expertise on the subject.

I lived with a Costa Rican family the entire five months. They did not speak a word of English so I was able to learn more about the language and culture by speaking only Spanish. I would have liked to stay longer than five months, but my living conditions were almost unbearable. There were inadequate sewer, water treatment, and electrical systems in the entire village. The government doesn't put a lot of emphasis on small villages and unless the government takes care of it, it doesn't happen. The people were very poor. We were in the high mountains with no heat and I froze day and night. The upkeep of

the house was non-existent. I was promised board and room, but it was very unsatisfactory. Since I wear a prosthetic leg, I had a hard time walking on the uneven roads. I was not as tough as I used to be 25 years ago so it was time to come home. I had made wonderful friendships while I was there so it was difficult to say goodbye. I still Skype my Costa Rican friends and keep abreast of their lives.

After I came back to the States, I rested for a while and then began to write about my experiences teaching English abroad. I wrote an article on the 'Importance of Listening in ESL' when beginning to learn English. I submitted my article and am still waiting for a response from the publishers.

Bilingual Education /Language Studies

I also visited the schools in Woodburn, Oregon because of their wonderful bilingual programs. I was able to watch many teachers teach Spanish and Russian in a dual immersion school setting. One teacher was absolutely outstanding in her teaching techniques. I was able to observe great bilingual strategies that are used across the State of Oregon. The school personnel agreed to let me come back and do research when I had time.

I met up with an old school friend who majored in a Master's program in ESL and Bilingual Education. She is now the Vice Principal at Washington school in Woodburn which is solely bilingual. She mentioned that there was a huge need for more bilingual teachers and that the students who have stayed in bilingual education are actually doing quite well on state assessments.

For the past six years I have been taking Spanish classes on the weekends to keep up my Spanish proficiency. When I returned from Costa Rica, I went right back to my Spanish studies and Spanish book club. I also took French lessons in Costa Rica because I knew I would be traveling to France and Geneva, Switzerland soon. I was able to have a vacation/multicultural experience traveling to Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Germany and France staying with families along the way.

I would like to thank Eastern Oregon University and the administration for giving me the opportunity to travel abroad; teach English as a Second Language to all grade levels; have free time to write and research; and keep up with my language skills. All of which help make me a more insightful professor. I had a wonderful year!

Sincerely,

Dr. Lee Ann McNerney

