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"My choice to study abroad was, in my mind, a choice to spend a year of my life in a different rhythm, a different physical and mental space, as well as in a different language. I wanted to broaden my experiences and expand my perspective ... and have a lot of fun."



One of the most prominent and valuable characteristics of my study abroad experience in Spain was that multiple times every day I felt like a complete idiot. To be fair, I am quite the klutz in general, and I certainly have my fair share of slips of the tongue and awkward interactions in my natural habitat. But on most days I can manage to pass as a normal, fully functioning member of society. In Zaragoza, Spain, however, this general rule was met with a four- to possibly ten-month exception.

It is tempting to begin this paragraph with a moderate, face-saving phrase like, “this mostly has to do with language.” That would be disingenuous – it all has to do with language. From ordering a coffee to giving an in-class presentation about the geopolitics of Hungary, every time I was required to open my mouth or use my ears there was a high probability that I would be forced to recognize my incompetence. Sure, slight differences in manners and customs can take some getting used to (I assume this is what is meant by the term “culture shock”). However, I think if I was capable of fully understanding and responding to the censure and instruction sent my way in these situations, I could take it all more or less in stride. Instead, I stumbled and stammered – often.

Even when I understood the literal meaning of what someone said and when I could manage a grammatically-sound sentence myself, actual understanding and effective communication eluded me. A memorable exchange came about once while I was trying to buy something at a

newsstand. When I asked (transliterated), “Can I have a bag of chips, please?” The man behind the counter answered cheekily that I could not just have them, but he would be happy to sell them to me.

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In another more prolonged, less humorous incident, the vagueness of the directions I received and my inability to respond quickly to questions ended with me sitting opposite a worker in the Office for the Documentation of Foreigners who repeatedly told a person at the other end of the line, “He does not understand hardly anything. I said ‘table’ and he did not know what I was talking about.” Now I can look back and laugh. But at the time, being ridiculed, patronized and wrangled into making three unnecessary visits to the same bureaucratic office over three afternoons was not terribly amusing.

One of the reasons for these persistent difficulties is that I had not spent very much of my social time with native Spanish speakers. Most of my good friends were other exchange students.

One upshot of this social arrangement was instead of becoming accustomed to hearing and speaking the casual local vernacular, I ended up speaking a type of exchange-student-ese. It is a simple, direct language approximating Spanish but spiced up with all sorts of grammatical and idiomatic errors of French, Italian and German provenance.

If I had the chance to go back in time and have a second chance at my first semester, I would not be tempted to change a thing. The friendships I made with other exchange students were so very special and marked in a remarkable, positive way by our relative lack of language skills. Unlike other kinds of friendships built upon bases of common interests or a shared sense of humor, my relationships with other exchange students were built upon an absurd shared situation: being a fool in a foreign land.

It is impossible to take yourself too seriously for the very reasons I have described. I am not denying that there is a great deal of collective embarrassment toward our awkwardness in communicating with each other and the world around us. But when the red in our cheeks begins to fade, a good chuckle and a knowing smile tend to follow. And maybe this is just evidence of my rose-tinted romanticism, but I think the necessary simplicity of our language forces us to get to the root of our sentiments. It makes us nicer, more sincere people and better friends.

In all likelihood, I will concentrate more this coming semester on addressing my incompetency. By weaseling my way into Spanish social circles and spending more of my time reading and listening to Spanish, maybe I can take some steps toward becoming a little bit more normal, a bit more fully functioning as a member of the society I find myself in. I am a firm believer in the old platitude that foreign languages unlock new worlds of people and ideas. It would be a shame to let this terrific opportunity to get a firmer hold on the keys slip through my fingers. However, to lose that sense of ridiculousness – or humility, to put it more nobly – would also be a shame. I hope I always keep in mind that to some extent I will always be a fool in a foreign land. The important thing, I think, is that out of your awkward deeds and halting gibberish you manage to produce kindness and decency. And maybe, if you are lucky enough, you can let some friends in on the fun at the end of the day.

