

Final Essay - Topic #2

My first exposure to a second language did not begin within a formal educational setting. Instead, it began at the age of eight when my family started taking annual trips to Mexico. It was here where the acquisition of a second language started to develop organically for me. Staring at menus entirely written in Spanish, trying to decipher the names of foods, with the help of my parents, is where my language curiosity was forged. Two decades have passed since this initial language exposure and it has steadily grown throughout annual family trips to Mexico, formal schooling, Duolingo practice, and most notably, eight months of backpacking across Latin America. This paper will reflect upon those experiences via the lens of second language acquisition theories while exploring the immersive contexts that have balanced my learning in a way that sole classroom learning could not. Of course structured Spanish courses have helped improve my grammar, but it is the lived experiences, travel, and cultural immersion that have provided me with the greatest amount of Spanish development.

My family's first vacation to Mexico was in 2006 and since then we have returned nearly fifteen times. My parents have always been keen travellers and intended to turn these family trips into an opportunity for cultural exposure. They knew how fortunate I was to be raised and educated in Canada, but also wanted me to garner a broader worldview, especially while I was in such a formative period in my childhood. We would always stay at local hotels, dine at authentic restaurants, and explore towns and markets by foot. These experiences were so foreign in comparison to the all-inclusive resort vacations that many of my schoolmates were taking with

their families. While I do understand the benefits and appeal for all-inclusive resorts, especially for families with children, the words "bubble-wrapped" come to mind. In countries like Mexico, many guests are essentially insulated from the reality of the country, including the language, beyond the resort walls.

Exploring authentic Mexico with my parents provided me the opportunity to study food names, decode menus, read local signage and participate in low-stakes social interactions like simple greetings. These moments were slightly beyond my current level of understanding, not overwhelming, and just challenging enough to push my developing language brain forward. Krashen (1982) describes this as Comprehensible Input, the idea that acquisition occurs most naturally when learners encounter material *just* beyond their current level. This is referred to as $i+1$. Decoding a menu or exchanging greetings with a local vendor were not structured classroom exercises, but they were exactly the kind of contextually rich input that drives genuine acquisition. When I reflect upon these trips, I do it with a huge smile on my face, knowing that my parents had created the conditions that Krashen (1982) also identifies with his Affective Filter Hypothesis, that low anxiety and high motivation environments reduce barriers for language learners. Without knowing it, my parents helped create an environment with both conditions simultaneously.

Without a doubt the most significant result of our Mexico trips was a unique friendship that continues to this day. It was in 2008 when visiting Huatulco, Mexico that my family grew close with Giovanni, a waiter at a local restaurant near our hotel. My father and Giovanni connected and the young waiter began touring him around to his favourite nighttime spots following his long shifts. Meanwhile, Giovanni and I, both language learners ourselves, would help each other practice our vocabularies. What started as a basic interaction immediately

developed into a deeper, cross-cultural family friendship. As I grew older, Giovanni and I remained in constant touch, with my mother and me spending quality time with him as recently as December 2025. He has seen me grow from a ten-year old kid into a twenty-eight year-old adult. I have known Giovanni for longer than I have not, something that is astonishing to reflect upon. We have since attended weddings, Christmas celebrations, family parties, and even a quinceanera. Norton (2013) argues that investment in language acquisition is intertwined within identity and real relationships. Giovanni represents exactly that kind of investment.

Building upon these early experiences in Mexico, I pursued Spanish formally through high school classes, university courses at UVic, and supplementary tools like Duolingo. While these structured environments were valuable, particularly for building grammatical accuracy and understanding of verb conjugation and sentence structure, I was always aware of a gap between what I could produce on paper and what I needed for a real conversation. Pérez-Vidal and Juan-Garau (2009) address this directly, suggesting that formal instruction and lived, immersive experience serve complementary but distinct functions. Formal education helps build accuracy whereas immersive experiences help build fluency.

The most revolutionary experience in my Spanish learning journey occurred throughout two backpacking trips to Latin America totalling eight months. In 2018, my best friend and I backpacked from Cancun to Panama City, crossing through Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The second trip was in 2024 when I visited Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. To put it bluntly, these two trips changed my life. It is nearly impossible to replicate the levels of immersion I felt on these trips within a classroom setting. Necessity can be a great teacher and I simply needed Spanish to survive. Whether it was navigating bus routes, finding hostels, ordering food, haggling for items, or *occasionally* using it

to get out of trouble, Spanish was my key. During these trips my vocabulary grew immensely at a pace that I never attained through my classroom experience. I acquired regional slang, casual expressions, and the ability to differentiate between dialects as I travelled from country to country. To an outsider, regional slang may not be crucial but trust me when you are on the road, it can make a world of difference. Take this humorous moment for example: as I inched my way south through Central America I was often using the word “toalla” when I rented towels from hostels. About halfway through my two weeks in Costa Rica I utilized this request and the hostel owner broke the news to me that “toalla” was the word they used for something very different. Unbeknownst to me, for a week straight I had been repeatedly asking workers for “tampons” in Costa Rican Spanish.

Research such as Hernandez (n.d.) documents these types of immersion experiences directly, finding that learners who spend extended time abroad while participating in genuine contact are able to record significant gains. By participating in a foreign society, learners find ways to adapt and integrate. Injecting myself into the home-side crowds of raucous soccer fans in Buenos Aires comes to mind. Pinar (2016) identifies similar themes, arguing that studying abroad contexts provide unique conditions for Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Jimenez (2022) also adds depth to this approach, detailing how proficiency levels and length of immersion are greatly influential variables on how much language a learner is actually able to retain. As each day went by and each country introduced new vocabulary, my proficiency increased, exactly the compounding effect that Jimenez argues. Linck, Kroll, and Sunderman (2009) offer the most empirical evidence, demonstrating that immersed learners clearly outperform classroom-only learners in both production and comprehension. When I reflect upon

my eight months in Latin America, I feel attached to these themes, as I grew a deep connection to each region I travelled through.

One memorable moment of my 2024 trip was when I watched the Edmonton Oilers play in the Stanley Cup Finals in Colombia. Many of the local pubs had the ESPN sports package for soccer games, which also included the Spanish broadcasts of the hockey finals. This provided me with a unique experience where I was able to watch every game of a sport I knew well, entirely in Spanish. There I was in Rincon del Mar, Colombia, my feet in the sand, a red plastic chair, a seaside palapa, trying my best to explain the alien-like ice hockey game to the local fisherman. What an unforgettable experience. Relating back to Krashen's $i+1$, this provided the ultimate fulfilling and low-stakes learning experience.

Language acquisition does not stop when travel does, and I have continued to find ways to practice Spanish at home. My girlfriend, who is more fluent in Spanish than I am, and I held an informal conversation session while watching a recent Montreal Canadiens and Los Angeles Kings game. It began simply with me stating the score and period in Spanish, to which she playfully responded "¿Qué es hockey?", challenging me to describe the sport as a foreign concept to her. From there we compared Montreal and Los Angeles across language, climate, and culture, before I broke down the entire structure of the NHL in Spanish: "Hay 32 equipos en total. Hay 7 equipos canadienses, y 25 equipos estadounidenses. Los equipos juegan en dos conferencias, Oeste y Este." She corrected my errors, filled gaps, and allowed me to take my time gathering thoughts. Vygotsky (1978) describes this dynamic as the Zone of Proximal Development, the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. My girlfriend occupied that role naturally throughout our conversation. Swain (1985) further argues that producing language, rather than

simply receiving it, forces learners to identify and address gaps in their knowledge. This is something I experienced firsthand when navigating the difference between *El Atlántico* and *la división del Atlántico* mid-conversation.

When I reflect on my Spanish journey, I feel like my formal instruction and lived experiences are not in a competition but rather a complementary partnership. Structured education gave me the scaffolding for grammar and sentence skills. But it was the adventures, the family parties with Giovanni, the harrowing night buses of Latin America, and the conversational practice with my girlfriend, that gave Spanish a personal meaning and helped me retain the language. Xamaní (2015) emphasizes the importance of acquisition through tourism, as travellers are exposed to language through culture and experiences while remaining personally motivated. Attending a Mexican wedding as the sole foreigner was a perfect example of this for my journey, motivated by curiosity, I was fully immersed in cultural tradition. As I transition into a career in education these moments will help me support language learners in my own classroom. While structured lessons are vital, creating low-risk environments centered around authenticity and meaningful relationships proves equally as important.

My Spanish journey is ongoing and imperfect, with many grammatical errors, regional gaps, and moments where I have to pause and look things up mid-conversation. But it is also full of real relationships, authentic experiences, and a passionate investment in the language. The research supports what I have lived. Immersion, identity, and authentic context are some of the most crucial factors tied to second language acquisition. Formal instruction matters, but it is the memories created in the most unexpected places, like the restaurants in rural Mexico or the hostels in Costa Rica, where language truly flourishes.

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