

Language Study Across Contexts

While preparing for my first week of classes in Madrid, I thought that my Spanish language and culture course was one familiar experience in a sea of unknowns; I'd been taking Spanish at Wesleyan for five semesters. However, I discovered that learning Spanish in Spain was completely different; less structured, and more grounded in day-to-day needs.

Although a curriculum was provided, we often strayed from it. Our professor, a born-and-raised Spanish woman, created a space where we felt comfortable asking questions that were only tangentially related. Grammar lessons similar to those in the U.S. were supplemented with "culture" lessons aiming to familiarize us with life in Spain on both surface and deeper levels; for example, ordering food, or Spain-specific colloquial expressions. The class was designed for the specific situation of navigating daily life in an unfamiliar environment. However, I also learned a lot from tangents on topics like Spain's surrogacy ban, how political tensions affect Madrid's public transit, and the history of separatist groups, among many others. These impromptu deep-dives are still what I remember most.

This class was quite different from ones I've taken in the U.S. Beginner and Intermediate Spanish at Wesleyan had concrete, grammar- and vocabulary-focused curriculums. "Culture lessons" were oriented towards bigger-picture topics like history, music, and art. One explanation is that Spanish is so widely spoken; one can't teach universal "cultural norms" or colloquial language when each country has their own. However, it's not just about variation. Language classes in the U.S. focus on reading and writing, as well as learning about other countries "academically," because educators believe that it's the most useful for the success of their presumed student body. Assuming that we live most of our lives in the U.S., even if we spend a bit of time abroad, reading and writing Spanish well is more important than flawlessly using slang because these are "professional" skills.

My differing experiences in these two classes makes me curious about how context dictates what is most valued in language-learning. My class in Spain seemed aimed at "fitting in" there. Clearly, our professor wasn't teaching us to adopt Spanish identities and assimilate completely because we weren't staying long-term, but she did want to teach us how to "act like Spanish people" in terms of social norms and Spain-specific speech in order to make our experiences smoother. In the U.S, however, learning another language is seen as an academic

achievement and an advantage; classes emphasize specific skills necessary for professional or academic opportunities.

Even though Spanish classes in Spain were aimed at providing something we lacked in order to help us adjust, while Spanish classes in the U.S. provide new skills to supplement ones we already have, I imagine other kinds of language learning experiences don't fall into these categories. While the idea of "lack" for exchange students was connected to cultural quirks that helped us make friends and have a better time, for others these "lacks" hinder accessing housing, work, and other necessities, as well as being respected and perceived as intelligent.

Language-learning in one's home country and abroad as an American exchange student are both privileged experiences— even when the stakes seem high, we ultimately learn for enjoyment, not survival. Although one of the beautiful things about language learning is the empathy gained for other learners, a deeper understanding requires the realization that not everyone experiences the process in the same way. When I look back, I wonder: if my class had been for recent immigrants, whom I didn't meet many of in my university bubble, what would have been prioritized? How would their experiences differ from Spanish classes in their home country? Who gets to learn a language to get a leg up—"developing an advantage"— and who is taught that their position in the language learning process is a "lack?"