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Defining Fluency

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Journals from Spain - Center for Cross-Cultural Studies

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Fatima and I with two of our friends (Fatima was visiting us in Sevilla!)
Hola!

I remember that for the last several years I have been asked several times by others if I were fluent in Spanish. You know how it goes, the typical question, What's your major? followed by, What do you want to do with your life? was often later met with a question about my fluency, or lack thereof. I would just often respond with No, I am not fluent. But do I speak Spanish? Yes, I suppose I do. But it was always very hard for me to define what fluency is or to decide if I really spoke Spanish.

However, a few weeks ago I randomly thought of that question again, and I decided to reevaluate my level of Spanish. Do I think I am fluent now? The answer, which I can give with joy and also with relief, is that yes, I do speak Spanish, and yes, I am fluent. Now obviously I do not speak the language perfectly and I still commit errors every day, but I base my answer on a few different things.

First of all, I can communicate with anyone here. There are people that have stronger accents than others and people that are harder to understand, but I am no longer afraid of not having the words when I approach someone or of not understanding them. My ears are accustomed to the accent here. I can buy things in a grocery store, go to the bank, say hi to people on the street, and even go to the doctor by myself if I need to. I have lost my fear of doing all of that. I can also carry on phone conversations in Spanish, which is a big accomplishment, believe me. It took me a while at first, because I couldn't see the person's face and couldn't use body language to help me converse with him or her, but now I have less trouble with that. I also can understand some (not all, but some) jokes and also colloquial phrases that people use in day-to-day conversation. How exciting!

In addition to conversations, I am also able to read a lot more in Spanish than I could before, and at a much faster pace. My literature class is fun because we can delve deeper into the language, and I see how

beautiful Spanish really is, especially in poetry. And its a good thing I can read books for my history class, because one thing that is still hard for me is taking notes when the professor talks too rapidly. But the Spaniards in my class told me its difficult for them too, so that made me feel better.

The last thing that has developed a lot is my ability to understand movies and television or the radio (although I haven't had the opportunity to try the latter that often). That is definitely a big difference from my first few months here!

Anyway, all of that is to say that studying abroad really makes all those years of sitting in class worth it. And looking back on my time so far, I am so thankful and excited to see how much I have grown (and how much I'm sure all of the abroad students have) in my ability to communicate in a second language. My friends and professors here have helped me so much, and I have no regrets, just a desire to keep learning and growing.

Hasta la proxima!
Sierra Stopper, Spanish
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