

Testimonies

Nicole Grambo, 2011 ETA



After having studied Spanish and Bilingual Education/TESOL as part of my university degree I knew that I wanted to teach language as my career. My problem: What age to teach? When I was awarded a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship grant I was very excited for the opportunity to live in Uruguay and

experience a variety in English fluency levels and student ages as I worked in different Uruguayan education institutes. Furthermore, being a Spanish major of course I wanted to improve my own fluency too. My eight-month grant here has been split between two locations: the first five months in Maldonado, and the last three in Montevideo. Throughout my time here I have been able to work with a variety of public institutes between CERPs, *liceos*, *primarias*, and even with staff members at Plan CEIBAL.

With such a variety of classroom experiences it is difficult to choose just one to talk about. However, my time spent in various *ciclo básico* institutions as well as in bilingual *tiempo completo* primary schools have been the most impactful experiences for my professional development during my time in Uruguay. In the United States, our education system is split between three institutes. Elementary school is comprised of Kindergarten-5th grade, middle school encompasses 6th-8th grade, and finally high school is 9th-12th grade (with students graduating at 18 years old.) I am forever grateful to all the *ciclo básico* students I have met here for helping me decide that middle school is the age I want to teach when I return to the United States. As any U.S. or Uruguayan teacher of this age group can attest, early adolescents are not an easy crowd. They are noisy, rebellious, and they require an endless amount of energy. But they are also very sweet and possess an insatiable curiosity that we somehow seem to lose as adults. Before my time in Uruguay I had heard this was the hardest age to teach, but my experience here has been nothing but rewarding. If you can make that connection with the students where they know you see them as individuals rather than

the labels that society has placed on them (*plancha*, nerd, class clown) they really open up; before you know it, that kid slumped quietly in the back corner is not only participating in class, but doing so in English. This has been the most rewarding experience as an English Teaching Assistant and an important reminder that I will bring back home to the U.S. classroom.

In addition to *ciclo básico*, I have really been inspired by the bilingual *primarias* of Uruguay. For the first part of my grant I spent five months at Primaria 56 in Maldonado. This is a *tiempo completo* public elementary school with a bilingual immersion program. The entire school invited me in with wide open arms and immediately made me feel at home. I learned so much from the staff at this school and the very talented English teachers. You need a lot of visual support to teach a foreign language without resorting to translating instruction to students' native tongue. Printed material is very expensive in Uruguay, and it simply is not possible to print endless pictures for class activities day after day. Despite the limitations to resources these teachers face, they have been extremely successful in giving their students as complete of an immersion experience as possible. I was amazed by the students' receptive English skills as I observed these instructors teaching vocabulary, mathematics, and compare and contrast skills—it was all done in English with the students understanding all instruction. I was already looking at teaching in bilingual education as a career option before coming to Uruguay, but after seeing such a successful language program in action, the methods employed by the instructors, and the enthusiasm these students brought to the language classroom, I am finally convinced. When I return to the U.S. I want to be a part of a bilingual program (this time on the Spanish side.) Learning a foreign language at such a young age is usually reserved for those families who can afford private lessons. For a public institution to give this opportunity to students—especially to students from marginalized communities such as those targeted by most *tiempo completo* schools in Uruguay is a unique and exemplary concept.

As much as I enjoyed working in the *ciclo básico* setting, I learned an incredible amount from my experience at all other levels of the Uruguayan education system as well. Among these lessons I have learned in Uruguay is the notion that bilingual immersion programs really work. Even in limited resource situations, students learn the language when you place enthusiastic, talented and well-trained instructors in front of them. Now, with my Spanish skills also fine-tuned after eight months of my own language immersion of living abroad, I hope to return to the States to complete a Master's in Teaching. I will be looking to make the bilingual immersion classroom my home, supporting our own public schools that set out on this endeavor. Culture will be an integral part of my classroom, and although my students are likely to be mainly Mexican and Central American immigrants, they can expect to see my *mate* and *terno* brought to class as I talk about how to prepare the perfect *mate* or maybe even make them some homemade *dulce de leche*. After having the opportunity to share so much about my culture with Uruguayan students, I look forward to the other half of the Fulbright experience -bringing what I learned in Uruguay back home to the U.S. and integrating what I have learned about Uruguay into the U.S. language classroom. Uruguay may be a small country geographically, but it has much to share; you can be sure it is a country I will be talking about for years to come.

Alexandra Reed, 2011 ETA



As a double major in Spanish and International Relations, my reasons for applying to the Uruguay ETA program were two-fold: I knew first-hand how life-changing learning a foreign language could be, and I was (and still am!) convinced that

cross-cultural education was the first step toward a more positive chapter in the history of U.S. and Latin American relations. When I arrived in Uruguay eight months ago, I was eager to get to work promoting language-learning, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging candid international dialogue on an individual level.

During my time here, I have had the privilege to do just that with Uruguayan English language learners of all ages—from kindergartners in *Escuela 99* in Maldonado to professionals at *Plan Ceibal*, and everything in between. One of the places where this multicultural and multilingual dialogue has been most vivid and rewarding, however, has been *Liceo 29 Alicia Goyena* in Montevideo. Though *ciclo básico* is not exactly known as the easiest level to teach (it generally encompasses the difficult ages of 12 to 15), I have discovered that I relish the challenge of working with this particular age group and the rewards that come along with it. Most of all, I enjoy the transformation that tends to take place over the course of my first class with the students. When I first stand up in front of them, I am not Alexandra Reed—I am my country, meaning I am at once Ronald McDonald, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Michael Jackson, and Hannah Montana. But with every question the students ask me, I feel those layers being stripped away, until at the end of class they see me as an individual, an individual who—despite being English-speaking and from the United States—is not, in fact, so different from them.

No matter how many warnings I hear about how challenging a particular group of students may be, every class I have visited has received me with openness and respect and a curiosity that I do not believe you would find in the majority of U.S. classrooms. Very few—even among the usual suspects who start off the class slouched in the back row—seem to consider themselves “too cool” to ask questions and engage in discussion. In addition to the more standard conversations about food, music, school and sports, I have also been asked (to my amazement, by a first-year

class!) how I felt when Bin Laden was killed and to give my opinion, as a U.S. citizen, on whether Obama has been able to effect change in my country. The depth of these students' curiosity really knows no bounds!

When the bell rings, I am always surprised by how many students (and by which students!) choose to skip their *recreo* to stay and talk with me about my country and my experience here in Uruguay. The English teachers with whom I have worked are often equally surprised by their students' enthusiasm and curiosity—I have had more than one English teacher tell me that they have never seen their students make such an effort to communicate in English; "Wow! Now I see how much English they really are capable of understanding when they actually try!" one of the teachers commented to me. And from my point of view, that is exactly why I am here—if I can motivate even just a few of my students to continue studying English, if I can convince them of the value of the type cross-cultural interaction envisioned by Senator Fulbright, then my eight months here in Uruguay will have been well-spent. This opportunity to live and teach in Uruguay has truly been a dream come true for me—I feel incredibly lucky and proud to be a part of the Fulbright project.

Caroline Borer, 2011 ETA



"In my time as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Uruguay, I have visited over 30 high schools in 5 different departments, worked with hundreds of students in teacher formation across the country, and dialogued with dozens of secondary English teachers. Through these exchanges, I have become a more

confident and understanding person and working professional. But, although these experiences have changed me for the better, the phrase "a las ordenes" is much more indicative of my Fulbright experience. "A las ordenes" literally translates as "at your orders". Uruguayans use this phrase repeatedly, with the closest of friends to complete strangers. They are straightforward and genuine with their helpfulness and hospitality which is something I have rarely encountered in my life. I hope to employ that same, indiscriminate kindness when I return to the United States; to be "a las ordenes" of all those I meet."