

Teaching at Ker Liber: Spring Internship, 2005  
By Kari Pack

In the spring of 2005 I went to Guadalajara, Mexico to teach English at the preschool in Ker Liber, a Spanish-English bilingual school that included a preschool, an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. I had already visited Mexico before, and I had already done some student teaching, but it was my first time teaching preschoolers in Mexico. I was nervous and excited. I wondered if the experience I had was enough preparation to face the four to six-year-old students that I was going to teach, but I knew that despite this worry it would be a good learning experience.

I arrived at the New Guadalajara bus station, Monday, March fourth, in Guadalajara the day before my internship, where the School's English coordinator, Jaime Bolaños, picked us up and took us to meet our host families. I also arrived with a worsening case of bronchitis. I didn't want to miss my first day of work though, so I spent the next day at Ker Liber getting to know the students and my job—all without a voice. Then, after missing the rest of my first week I arrived the next Monday ready to teach.

Most of my internship I spent working with Anna, the preschool English teacher. Anna and I taught English to four groups of preschoolers—one group of Kindergarten-One (K-1), one of group Kindergarten-Two (K-2) and two groups of Kindergarten-Three (K-3). My job was to help her teach the preschool English classes, prepare materials, and help prepare and present special presentations that the students put on for their parents. I also led classes on my own when Anna was sick or had other projects to work on, but I was only left alone to teach after I became familiar with the students and how the classes ran.

On a typical workday I arrived at school at seven in the morning, dressed somewhat professionally (though Ker Liber was pretty relaxed about dress) and prepared for class until nine o'clock, when preschool started. Then Anna and I began teaching with K-3, followed by K-1, K-2, and finally ending with the other K-3 at 2:15 in the afternoon. In these classes Anna and I taught using a number of teaching strategies, including: using all English instruction, games, projects, workbooks, class discussion connecting the curriculum to the students' lives, and incorporating song and dance to relax the class and create a fun way to learn vocabulary and ideas.

The rest of my time at Ker Liber was spent doing one-on-one tutoring with students that needed extra help with their English, and substitute teaching classes in the elementary and middle schools. I tutored students in second and third grade, and I had the opportunity to substitute the third, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade classes.

I loved teaching English at Ker Liber. It was personal and professionally building experience. I had originally planned on being a high school teacher. I wanted to be sure I was making the right decision, though, because I didn't have a lot of experience teaching younger children. The most related experience I had was when I tutored individual students in a summer literacy program, but it wasn't close enough to an actual elementary school teaching atmosphere. That was why I decided to teach in the preschool, and I ended up loving the time I spent teaching there.

The kids were so much fun to work with because they were so optimistic and everything was new and exciting for them. They really made teaching the classes an adventure. Not only was it my first time working with so many younger children, but it

was also the first time I ever felt like a real teacher. I fell in love with it, and I decided that I really wanted to be an elementary school teacher instead of a high school teacher.

Not everything was perfect at my worksite of course. It was a lot of work because the students had a hard time understanding directions in English because they were just beginning to learn English, and the students had a short attention span because they were so young. These challenges, though, forced me to be more creative in my lessons, something I would have done if the students had easily understood directions and been patient learners.

My internship was not all teaching and work. A great deal of what I experienced and learned from on my internship came from my day-to-day life outside of work, which included the time I spent with my host family, my visits around the city, and the time I spent with friends.

It was definitely my host family that had the biggest impact on me outside of the work place. I lived with the family of two of the students from Ker Liber. These two students were nine year-old Carolina and seven year-old Ivana, respectively from the third and second grade classes. They lived with their single, working, Buddhist mom, Isabel, a couple miles from the school, while their father, who came to visit them every now and then, lived in Mexico City. They also had an aunt, Nelly, who stayed with them during the first half of my internship.

I was given a room all to myself to use. It was located upstairs in the living section of the house, where the family room and the bedrooms were located, so that I wouldn't feel distanced from the family.

Living with Isabel and the girls was really enjoyable. I would spend my time with the girls, playing games, visiting the park, and helping them with homework. If I wasn't doing that at home I would be chitchatting with Nelly or Isabel, or I would be listening in on Isabel's Buddhist meetings that she held at the house once a week.

Isabel and I became pretty good friends while I was down there. I looked up to her because even though she led a stressed life she was almost always happy and optimistic about anything she had to face. Isabel worked in an office at the national headquarters for Coconut Express (a coconut milk stand business) in Guadalajara. She spent a lot of time working, which meant that she didn't get a great deal of time to spend with the kids, but she spent as much time with the girls as she could. She brought the girls to work with her every now and then to eat lunch, and she would take the girls on outings or watch movies with them when she got the chance.

Carolina and Ivana were two of the most interesting people in my life in Guadalajara. They were always full of energy and eager for something exciting to come along, which was fun but also testing at times. We would get into interesting discussions about how weird I was, play games, go on walks, and work on homework. It was difficult though, because they didn't have the same standards of respect as American children. I really wanted my room left alone when I wasn't in it, but they would play in it when I was gone. Also they had no compunction about stating things that I considered rude. Even though it was trying for me to put up with this behavior I kept in mind that they had grown up with different cultural standards, and if it got to be too much I would explain to them that it bothered me and why, which usually worked.

Just living in Guadalajara had a big impact on my internship experience. Guadalajara is the second biggest city in Mexico, with a population of around eight million people (or so I heard). That's a big city for me, considering that the biggest city I had lived in before was Portland, Oregon, with a population of a couple million. Honestly enough, it scared me a little at first to try to get around the city by myself. Luckily, I ended up doing fine.

The Guadalajara area incorporates three cities besides itself, and I actually lived in the region of Zapopan. I lived in a very modernized area, surrounded by American stores, chain restaurants and the biggest mall in Guadalajara, so I definitely did not miss the modern conveniences of America. Quite on the contrary, I got sick of all the big Wal-Mart type buildings and busy atmosphere. To escape from it all I would take off for the weekend to visit Guadalajara's or Zapopan's historic, colonial centers.

When I wasn't hanging around with my host family or site seeing I spent my time with Savino, my boyfriend and fellow intern, Shane, the other intern, or the other teachers from the school. When we hung out, if it wasn't a small party, the main focus was usually futbol—or as we call it, soccer—the biggest sporting event in Mexico. We all flocked to the bars, the only place possible, to watch the soccer game and to debate which of our favorite teams would win.

My time outside the workplace may sound like it was all fun, but, even if it's not noticeable, it was a great learning experience. In this time I learned a lot about Mexican culture and language that I would not have learned if I had just taught and locked myself into an apartment the rest of my time down there.

For one thing, I learned that the American culture is actually not as consumer and trend oriented as it appears. In the US most people are actually very informal in dress and presentation, unlike in Mexico where appearance is everything. Very few people in Mexico would actually dare go to the grocery store in sweats, while in the US that is a common occurrence. I also learned that I preferred the higher standards on some level because it gave more value/respect to the people, but I would still never go out in high heels everyday.

Another thing I learned was that just because there were a lot of well-off individuals in Guadalajara it didn't mean that there weren't poor people in other parts of the city. Quite the reverse, it just accentuated the difference between the two class levels.

Beyond social values, I also vastly improved my Spanish speaking skills. It was the first time I learned Spanish completely outside of a classroom context, so my Spanish speaking skills grew, instead, through day-to-day experiences. I also discovered how much Spanish I had truly learned through all my studying. It may sound funny but one of my most exciting language learning experiences was when I went to the theater to watch the movie, *Are We There Yet?*. The movie turned out to be dubbed, and for the first time I understood a movie in Spanish without subtitles. I was so happy that I went straight home and turned the television on (I don't generally watch television.) to see what I could understand.

All in all, I must say I had a pretty good time in on my internship teaching and just hanging out in Mexico. I made a lot of friends, I vastly improved my Spanish, and I learned a lot about myself as an American and as a teacher. I would definitely recommend the experience to anyone, and I would advise anyone interested to come with

an open mind. After all anything is possible, and stereotypes are not always good perspectives for preparing for those possibilities.