

Personal Reflection on Language and Culture

Two months into my semester abroad in Spain, my mom came to visit me. I was both excited to see her, and also eager to show her how well I was doing there, how fluent my Spanish had become, how much I knew about Madrid, and how well I could maneuver the city's array of buzzing sights and sounds. A big part of this, of course, was taking her to eat at charming restaurants that were "authentic" and, preferably, off the beaten path. I now realize that dining out with my mom in Spain was doomed from the beginning. My mother, both because of personal taste and past health problems, eats vegetarian meals, with no salt or alcohol, in reasonable portions and at "regular" times according to the American schedule. Basically, the complete opposite of what was customary in Madrid, where the lunch menú comes with three courses, chorizo is not considered a meat, and no place will serve dinner before eight o'clock.

During the week she was there with me, we constantly found ourselves in uncomfortable gastronomical situations. Most of the cafés were all too smoky for her to breathe (this I have noticed, has changed drastically in the past five years in Spain); we tried to eat at a renowned vegetarian restaurant at 5:30 pm, and they would not even let us in the door; when we found somewhere to order a bowl of soup, which in any case contained sausage, my mother almost fainted when she saw the cook walk through the dining area with a baby pig, sliced from head to tail, about to be roasted. In the end, most nights we went to the supermarket, bought fruit and yogurt, and ate in the hotel room. I was terribly upset, not only because my mom was not enjoying her time in this country that I had fallen in love with, but also because I thought I was disappointing her. I felt like I was blending in so well with the Madrilenian lifestyle, that I could not believe how hard it was to make a similar impression on my mom (who I tend to have a lot in common with).

I realized that I had spent two months there succumbing to whatever the city and its culture demanded; I tried to adopt the customs and live the way I imagined everybody there lived *sine qua non*, without worrying about my personal cultural stake. This had made it easier for me to avoid the language obstacles I was up against, since it was always easier, for example, to just agree with what was given to me in a restaurant rather than have to explain to the waiter what I actually wanted. This was both a superficial idea of what was Spanish culture, as well as an underestimation of what I could accomplish with my language skills.

Luckily my intervention did not ruin Spain for my mom, who still talks about going back someday. More importantly, I learned the importance of personal engagement at all levels of language learning, which is the vehicle for culture. Whatever topic I present to a class, based on film clips, guest speakers, or class trips, I encourage students to connect the materials with their own lives, often through activities in which they imagine themselves inserted into a text, painting, or news story. I believe it is this personal connection that makes culture authentic and language come to life.