

# BARCELONA

com més llengües, més vida!  
**advanced español & basic català**

report for the AJ Pressland fund  
by Adam Searle, summer 2018



## introduction / introducción / introducció

*Hola, com va això?* I'm Adam, a second year PhD student in the department of geography, based at King's College. Last term I was incredibly lucky to be selected for the AJ Pressland fund, which allowed me to spend five weeks at the Universitat de Barcelona undertaking an intensive Spanish language course, and to have the amazing opportunity to feel deeply immersed in Barcelonès and Català culture.

But why would I want to spend my summer in Barcelona?... well, for anyone who has ever spent time there, they'll know why. Barcelona is a city bursting with a vibrancy and liveliness like nowhere else. It is a unique blend of Catalunya, Spain, and Europe made up of many languages, nationalities, and different ways of life. As both an ecologist and a human geographer, I deal with both science and philosophy every day, and do my best to understand how these different ways of thinking may be used to complement one another. My research, very roughly, concerns the role of genetic technologies in wildlife conservation. I started learning Spanish in November 2017, after being inspired by certain people at the Cambridge University Language Centre, and after realising the best place in the world to ask questions concerning my research topic would be in the Pyrenees (I won't bore you with why this is so!). I took Sebastian Bianchi's B2 semi-intensive Spanish course in the Easter term of 2018, which gave me so much confidence with my listening and speaking.

From the language practice sessions on Thursday evenings and from conversations with a number of people, I truly understood the importance of language in all forms of research. This is why I chose Barcelona over Madrid, Seville, Salamanca, etc. Because at the core of its identity Barcelona is a multilingual city. As my fieldwork will be carried out in Catalunya, Aragón, and the south of France, I knew having some basic Catalan would go a long way in terms of making connections. So, in addition to carrying out the 80-hour advanced Spanish course at Universitat de Barcelona in the mornings, I took a 30-hour basic Catalan course in the evenings which was offered by the Catalan government and was absolutely free!

If you're reading this report as a prospective applicant to the AJ Pressland fund, my main piece of advice would be: apply! So many doors have been opened for me through my summer in Catalunya, both in terms of making friends that will last a lifetime, and through making my research incomparably easier! If you have any questions while reading it, please feel free to drop me an email at [aeds2@cam.ac.uk](mailto:aeds2@cam.ac.uk)

In this report, I am going to tell you about:

- my language learning experience
- Barcelona living
- weekend trips
- outcomes and looking forward

*nb. All photos in this report were taken on my phone – apologies for the lack of quality!*



language experience  
experiencia de lenguaje  
experiència lingüística

The above photo was taken in the courtyard of Universitat de Barcelona's oldest building, where I spent six hours a day during June 2018. The University was founded in 1450 and is incredibly diverse with over 63,000 students.

When I arrived in at the University, I was a stunned by how beautiful it was, and this is coming from a Cambridge student! The courtyards are full of trees and birds, it seems so sunny all the time, and everyone you pass greets you with a *bon dia*. The first day we took placement tests, and I was allocated in the group for CEFR B2.2 / C1.1. In my group I was one of twelve, and we were a real mix! The youngest 17 and the oldest 63, and we were from Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Turkey, the UK, and the USA. I've never taken a language course abroad before, but I was expecting it to be like a constant revolving door, with people leaving and joining every other day. Thankfully, this was not the case, and we became very close as a cohort together.

In our lessons, although we worked through textbooks, our main focus was always conversation. The lessons were always themed on topics we were able to have some say in choosing, from environmental issues to Catalan nationalism, from *El Clásico* and the history of the Barça-Madrid rivalry to Federico García Lorca and andaluz literature. Within days, my irrational fear of *el subjuntivo* had gone! For the last hour of each day's learning we would focus on grammar, something I'd previously held as horribly boring, however our teacher Silvia managed to make it interesting for everyone. The days would start at 9am and end at 2.30pm, punctuated with a twenty-minute break around 11am, where I'd go with my classmates to a bar on Plaça Universitat to order a *café amb llet, sisplau*. Switching to basic Catalan in situations like these not only improved my interactions with the local people of Barcelona, but helped me understand the advanced Spanish I was learning as part of the university course much better. With my colleagues in these situations, despite the temptation to revert to English, we spoke Spanish in these social situations and the improvement we made as a result was remarkable.

The level of teaching at Universitat de Barcelona was genuinely very impressive: a mix of approachability and humour, firm course structure, and a receptiveness to the individualised requirements of the class. By chance, our group had three people working in ecological and environmental issues around the world (including myself), therefore not only did I have people to practice specialised vocabulary with, our teacher chose to dedicate a lot of time to specific vocabulary for us.

When I arrived in Barcelona I was planning to just focus on my Spanish, but when I arrived I immediately noticed the importance of Catalan in daily life, and looked online if there was any way I could learn Catalan for free. I happened to come across free courses delivered by the Catalan government and was able to sign up for classes there and then. On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, I spent 4pm to 7pm at the *Consorti per a la Normalització Lingüística*, a large teaching complex in *El Gòtic*, the gothic quarter in Barcelona's old town. The walk there itself was so impressionable, from the cosmopolitan district of *l'Eixample* through the historic heart of *Ciutat Vella*, the old city. I became almost normalised to the public works of amazing creatives such as Gaudí and Miró, and with my Spanish and Catalan felt a certain level of comfort and self-confidence with my ability to distinguish myself from the thousands of tourists passing through *les Rambles*, which García Lorca famously once described as the only street in the world that he wished would never end.

Catalan classes were very different. In this setting, I was the only person not from the Spanish-speaking world, with most of my classmates hailing from the Americas and the rest of Spain. The mixture of abilities and rigidly defined vocabulary topics (e.g. the body, things in the house, personal information) made it feel a bit more like language learning in school. I was entering it as a relative beginner, too, and although I'd picked up a bit of Catalan from a friend in Cambridge from Girona, it is much more difficult to come across learning resources or speaking opportunities. My Catalan level went from negligible to being able to hold a conversation during this course. Frankly, unless I was aiming to deeply immerse myself in Catalan culture and engage in literature, the level I have now is completely sufficient for communication (normally, when conversation topics become a bit more advanced, I politely ask «*perdó, em sap greu, podem parlar castellà ara?*») The fact that I've made it that far in Catalan normally delights people even though we switch to Spanish). In social situations around my Catalan classes, I was speaking Spanish with immense confidence with my native-speaking friends from El Salvador, Colombia, and Panama. Going to my Spanish classes at the university on a Wednesday morning, after spending an evening drinking a few *cañas* and watching the world cup games with native speakers having almost forgotten how to socialise in English, gave me even more confidence with my Spanish learning as I began to understand and use the language much more colloquially. My teacher even said one day after I exclaimed *¡qué fuerte!* (very colloquial – an expression of surprise or admiration) *tío, ¡me flipas!* (much more colloquial! – “dude, you've shocked me!”).

Although my Catalan wasn't at a very high level, it helped me feel much more local in Barcelona and Catalunya, and allowed me to speak Spanish with so much more conviction. I realised over the month that in my head, I wasn't translating Spanish into English any more, and I was translating Catalan to Spanish as it made more sense. If you'd have told me that in October 2017, honestly, I'd have laughed at it!

## living in barcelona viviendo en barcelona vivint a barcelona



This photo shows a tradition Catalan celebration part of all *festes dels barris* – local festivals usually commemorating saint's days – called a *correfoc*. The spectacle is striking; moments after the *drac* is covered in fireworks and runs through the streets to fill them with smoke and fire, as locals beat drums and sing. I ran into this festival by accident and was utterly awe-struck!

The most memorable thing about Barcelona, for me, is the fact I spent five weeks speaking absolutely no English other than to direct lost tourists and speak on the phone to my parents. Having never even come close to this before in my life, with any language, I can't express how profound that experience was! I would have been happy with just that. But luckily for me, I was in one of the most exciting places in the world. I honestly did so much that I don't know what to include in this report!

On my first day in Barcelona I got talking to someone in a vintage shop over a shared appreciation of the music that was playing, and I ended up going to a concert with them later that night. The confidence I had from my language classes meant that I could connect with strangers, I weirdly felt more comfortable doing this in Barcelona than I do in the UK, I suppose down to the relatively very open nature of most Catalans. I went to *lots* of concerts; jazz, indie, dance music... most of them free or very cheap. I got to know a lot of people involved in Barcelona's music scene and suddenly felt a real part of it. One thing to know about Calaunya: there is *always* a party! Going for *pintxos* and *cañas* after Catalan class was a lot of fun, tasting bite-sized versions of Iberian cuisine and getting to know my classmates.

I lived in *El Raval*, in Barcelona's old city, during my stay. El Raval is famous for its bars, its graffiti, its skateboarders, and its cultural diversity. On carrer Riera Baixa, where I was staying, there were many second-hand clothing or record shops and I was deeply immersed in the alternative side of Barcelona. That being said, I did venture out to the more touristy sites, and have to say that the *Sagrada Família* is a thousand times more impressive in person!



exploring other places  
explorando otros lugares  
explorant altres llocs

Above is *Plaza de los Burgos* in Pamplona (or Iruña in Basque) during the inauguration of la fiesta de San Fermín, where I visited in June for a weekend.

I had to take every opportunity to immerse myself in Catalan and Spanish life, so I made a real effort to say *sí* every time anyone asked me if I wanted to do something. This meant taking a coach to Pamplona for the world famous *sanfermines* and making friends with a huge group of Basque people who took me in as their own! It meant climbing in the Pyrenees with a *vía ferratta* for the first time in my life, in a beautiful part of northern Catalunya close to the Aragonese border called Congost de Mont-Rebei. Also, it meant birdwatching in Montseny national park which is just a short drive from Barcelona, learning the Catalan and Spanish names for local wildlife. A really special moment which will stay with me forever was seeing a Bonelli's eagle dive for a marmot at what seemed like the speed of light. I'll never forget the local names because of that! (in Spanish *águila-azor perdicera*; in Catalan: *l'àguila cuabarrada*).

I went camping on a beach in Tarragona, southern Catalunya, with some friends I'd met in my Spanish course. I even went to Girona on my own one day to practice my Catalan (unlike Barcelona, in Girona you will *very rarely* hear Spanish on the street)... and to see the filming locations for King's Landing in *Game of Thrones*...

Looking back on the five weeks of my language course, I feel like I fitted in a decade's worth of travel and cultural experiences. For me, it is a testament to Barcelona as a place to learn a language, there is absolutely always something to do with someone you are yet to meet! If you're more of a 'chillout' person than myself, too, there's a beach just five minutes' walk from your house!



## outcomes and the future resultados y el futuro resultats i futur

These columns are emblematic of *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, in the mountains to of the city, where I had an interview after my language learning.

Although I was initially supposed to have the interview in September, whilst I was in Barcelona following my language courses I arranged for it to be moved forward to the start of June, where I was interviewed for a position as a visiting researcher at *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona's* world-renowned *Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals* (Institute of Environmental Science and Technology). My interview was a mix of Spanish and English, but those interviewing me were very impressed I'd introduced myself in Catalan... it went very well!

For the second year of my PhD, while I'll be conducting fieldwork with ecologists in the Pyrenees and with geneticists in Barcelona, I am an *investigador visitant* at UAB. In fact, I am writing this report from my office there now, and on a daily basis I am speaking a mix of Spanish and Catalan – only using English to write my PhD and read papers! I am giving seminars here in Spanish and feel totally involved with Catalan academia now. To put it very simply, I absolutely fell in love with Barcelona, and I am over the moon that I get to stay here.

Looking forward, my language improvement will make fieldwork *so much* easier. I will be able to deeply engage in other people's views on sensitive topics, to understand their cultural approaches to certain aspects of my work, and—most importantly—have the opportunity to get to know them as people. After I finish my PhD in Cambridge I intend on applying for postdoctoral fellowships in Spain, there is so much here that fascinates me, and I understand it even more as my ability to put it into words improves.

Truly, I am forever indebted to the Pressland Fund for affording me this opportunity. None of this would have happened without their generosity. Thank you also to those working in the language centre who made it all seem possible from day one – a special shout out to Emma – who has been helping all of the PhD geographers reach their language goals. **Moltes gràcies per tot! ¡Muchas gracias por todo!**