Vivir y aprender a través del lenguaje

FU International Academy Tenerife
Puerto de la Cruz
AJ Pressland Fund Travel Report 2021
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¡Hola, me llamo Carolyn! I am a PhD student based in the Department of Geography studying the (geo)politics of volcanic risk in Indigenous territories in Latin America. In November this year I will be travelling to rural Chile to work with the Pewenche communities that live with Copahue volcano – and I will need to be fluent in Spanish if I am going to stand any chance of knowing what’s going on! While I undertook two CULP Spanish courses (B1 and B2) online last year, it has been difficult to improve my speaking skills on Zoom. The pandemic has made lots of things difficult, but there is something about learning languages by speaking to real life actual humans that Zoom just can’t quite replicate. I lived in Italy last year, and Italian is my default foreign language; this year it’s been really difficult to get my brain to fully switch into Spanish mode and put those Italian words to bed for a bit. The invaluable generosity of the AJ Pressland Fund allowed me to undertake an intensive 3-week language course to immerse myself fully in a Spanish-speaking environment and put my theoretical Zoom-knowledge into spoken practice.

My original (perhaps overly optimistic) application to the Pressland Fund planned to use the bursary to attend language school in Santiago at the beginning of my fieldwork period – originally scheduled to begin in August – but with most of Latin America still under strict lockdowns and on the UK government red list, it wasn’t possible to travel to Chile and these plans had to change. The Pressland Fund, and Jo at the Language Centre in particular, were amazingly helpful and accommodating in allowing me to still make the most of this wonderful opportunity. The Canary Islands were suggested by my supervisor as a more viable location for language school during the long summer vacation: the islands had navigated the pandemic particularly well, remaining open and accessible more than mainland Spain throughout, and as volcanic islands they are even relevant to my research interests! FU Tenerife language school was recommended by CULP, so I went for it. I knew very little about Tenerife when I signed up, I knew it was a popular tourist destination and had images of beaches and tropical birds, but little else. What I discovered was an incredible island, with amazing ecological diversity, and a wonderful and welcoming community. After an intense 3 weeks, I still feel like I’ve only scratched the surface of what Tenerife has to offer and I’ve returned with immense affection for the island and its people.
I completed 3 weeks of a 30-lesson intensive Spanish course at FU Tenerife. After sitting the entrance exam, I was placed in the B2 class, which allowed me to recap and perfect the Spanish I’d been learning remotely in Cambridge – and finally start using the dreaded *el subjuntivo* more fluently in conversation!

The mornings were usually structured around grammar and vocabulary, while the last two hours were conversation practice. I was set ‘homework’ everyday, usually a writing activity, and this allowed me to further cement the material covered in class, expand on areas of interest and practice explaining my PhD research Spanish. FU Tenerife guarantees small class sizes (maximum of 6), but I was exceptionally lucky in that there was never more than two of us in a class – and for the middle week I had 1:1 tuition! These individualised lessons provided an incredible opportunity to discuss and dissect my research area, build key vocabulary, and catch any mistakes (including if I was slipping in some Italian words!). By the end of the second week I was speaking with a degree of fluency I hadn’t expected to achieve, effectively building on the work I’d done with CULP at Cambridge to speak in flowing sentences.

I learned so much from chatting to my teachers about life in the Canary Islands. The pandemic has been tough on everyone, and it was inspiring to hear how this island community, largely reliant on tourism, has pulled together through the lockdowns and is emerging hopeful and determined. Having spent a year living in Venice, where *turisti* is a muttered insult, it surprised me to hear my teachers speak so positively of the island’s tourism industry: of how it has brought facilities and infrastructure to Tenerife that also benefit the local population, and that they would not have been able to access otherwise. While it may be hard to live in the tourist-dominated south of the island, and there are many second homes, there are also many close-knit local communities on the island, and Puerto de la Cruz manages to maintain a healthy equilibrium of local and transient demographics.

It was particularly useful to be able to discuss my research with my teachers during conversation hours. This allowed me to cement key vocabulary that will be essential when I’m in the field later this year, and my teachers genuinely enjoyed discussing the more philosophical/political issues that I’m interrogating.
with my research. It was particularly interesting to hear how so many of the issues I’m exploring in Latin America are also relevant to the Canaries; the islands are a long way (both imaginatively and physically) from mainland Spain and there are certain tensions and misunderstandings that accompany that. Apparently it’s not uncommon for Spaniards to be surprised that the Canaries have bus networks and ‘modern’ life, or for the islands to function as anything other than large tourist resorts. I’ll touch more on my experiences of Tenerife later, but these stereotypes are far from the lived reality of the islands – it’s true that it’s possible to visit and not leave the tourist bubble, but there is so much more to the place and the people. Despite these challenges, my teachers stressed that Canarians rarely leave to settle elsewhere. Again, coming from my experiences in Italy, where the lack of jobs outside of the tourism sector has caused significant brain drain, it was interesting to hear how the tight-knit communities and quality of life means that even if students leave to go to university in mainland Spain, more often than not they return after their degree. The wages in Tenerife might not be particularly high, but the quality and pace of life is hard to match. The island has almost everything you could need: beaches, mountains, forests, wonderful wildlife, a culture of street parties and celebrations, a strong community, a variety of places to live (from secluded villages to medium-sized and quite cosmopolitan cities), and so much sunshine. I left Tenerife with a deep respect for the island and its people, and a strong desire to return.

For any prospective Pressland Fund applicants, I would highly recommend individual lessons for those working at intermediate level and above – either as part of a blended course including both group and individual classes, or private tuition throughout. The speed through which we could move through the syllabus and identify and address any gaps in my knowledge was incredible, and there’s nowhere to hide! It might sound daunting but these conversation hours with my teachers were incredibly enriching and were definitely the reason I was able to progress so quickly. It’s always good to practice speaking a foreign language, but speaking 1:1 with a trained Spanish teacher means they can catch every mistake – and if it’s clear that you don’t understand something they can explain where and why errors are cropping up, and maybe even flip into a mini grammar lesson.
FU Tenerife language school is situated in a suburb of Puerto de la Cruz, a medium-sized city on the northern coast of Tenerife. The city has a little of everything you could want: great beaches within walking distance both in the city and just outside (though be warned: black volcanic sand is hot on the soles of your feet!), good places to surf, a nice pace of life, and good food – and at €0.90 for a coffee and €6 cocktails, you really can’t complain. The *guagua* (bus) network in Tenerife is great and for less than €2 you can take the bus up into the hills above Puerto de la Cruz to the old town of La Orotava to enjoy the views and colonial-style architecture, and sample traditional Canarian food at a *Guachincha*.

I lived in accommodation arranged via the language school, and lived with a Swiss French doctor and a German investment banker, both a similar age (late twenties). It was great to practice our Spanish outside of class and, despite our different nationalities and professions, our unlikely bunch had a lot in common. We had a great time honing our Spanish and exploring Tenerife together, but more on that in the following section. There was a vibrant community at the language school to socialise with, and the FU Tenerife put on daily afternoon activities (e.g. surf lessons, cultural workshops, beach volleyball, visits to local sites like the Botanic Gardens). It was great to be part of the language school community, and really enriching to hang out in such varied groups of people, to learn a little about their lives – and be put to shame at my (lack of) volleyball skills by a German accountant more than twice my age!

I really enjoyed the laid-back pace of life in Puerto de la Cruz, and although the islands were still subject to covid restrictions, we didn’t feel confined due to the wide variety of sports and outdoor activities available. My teachers were keen to emphasise that the Canaries are usually renowned for their salsa street party culture, and it’s quite telling that the uniquely Canarian phrase *cambarse la peluca* (literally: to twist the wig) means to go out and have fun dancing. While it wasn’t possible to go out to dance (all venues were strictly table service and there was a 1am curfew), we did take salsa classes in the language school – and I’m quite pleased to have such a good reason to return!
We took every opportunity to explore Tenerife. One of the most amazing things about the island, and definitely the thing I will never forget, is its incredible ecological diversity: it’s like an entire continent in miniature. The guagua (bus) network on Tenerife is great, and it’s possible to get from Puerto de la Cruz to the south in 3 hours. Most of the tourism activities are concentrated here, and after the relatively tropical (humid, hot and occasionally heavy rain) of Puerto de la Cruz, the dry heat of the desert landscape came as a surprise. Most of Tenerife’s southern coast is occupied by mega-hotels and arid landscape similar to Andalucía in Spain, and we visited Los Gigantes at the western tip of the island to see the town’s namesake cliffs – the tallest cliffs in Europe (600m). We took a boat trip out to get closer to the cliffs and saw a pod of pygmy sperm whales and had bottlenose dolphins playing in the boat’s wake.

We spent another weekend exploring and hiking in Anaga National Park in the north. The north has a reputation for hiding beneath the panza de burro (literally: the donkey’s belly, but refers to the low-lying stratus cloud that tends to hang over the north of the island), but we were exceptionally lucky and had sunny days to explore the park. At higher altitudes, the park is forest, and feels similar to the New Forest in England – after the humidity of Puerto de la Cruz (and a particularly windy car ride to get there) the cooler air and shade was a relief. We hiked across the park and down to the beach at the northern tip of Tenerife, walking through a variety of ecological microclimates depending on the altitude and orientation (jagged volcanic hills populated by tropical plants, arid scrub, huge cacti, a few mountain goats and some tiny villages). The roads stop several kilometres short of the northern coast and those who live in these beautiful but secluded areas rely on boats for supplies.

Mount Teide is situated at the centre of Tenerife and, with its peak at 3716m, the volcano is the highest mountain in Spain. The volcano was a constant presence throughout my time at the language school: always visible on the horizon. It’s possible to climb the volcano, but Teide is situated within a UNESCO world heritage national park, and permits were not available due to the ongoing pandemic restrictions. But the park is only officially open from 9am-9pm, so local tour operators have found a way
to circumnavigate the UNESCO restrictions by hiking up the volcano by night. It may sound crazy, but given that I am studying volcanoes, it would have been a wasted opportunity not to try to climb Teide… ¿verdad? The night hike was tough due to the altitude and the lack of sleep. The tour guides supplied us with all the kit we needed and we started at 11pm. Our rag-tag group from the language school all spoke English but the others were studying Spanish at A2 level, so I put my Spanish to the test and translated for the guide throughout. I will never forget the stars: the night air was so clear it was possible to see the *Vía Láctea* (Milky Way) with the naked eye. As we reached the base of the volcano’s cone, you could see other groups of Canarians ahead of us, snaking up the path with their headtorches – my photo just cannot do it justice. We arrived at the peak as the sun was rising and the view (as much as the altitude) was truly breath taking. It’s an experience I’m so grateful to have had – even if I’m not in a rush to do it again!

Looking back at my time spent at language school, it feels like I managed to fit a year’s worth of adventures into the three weeks I had in Tenerife, and after being cooped up in lockdowns for so long it was amazing to be able to stretch my legs as well as my mind – I couldn’t have hoped for better preparation for my fieldwork in the Andes.
With travel essentially impossible for so long, I feel very lucky to have been able to have this experience, and I cannot thank the Pressland Fund enough. ¡Muchas gracias por todo! Academically, this opportunity has been a real lifeline, allowing me to press forward with my Spanish language skills before I start on a (now slightly shortened) period of fieldwork in November. I can’t recommend FU Tenerife enough – the teachers were amazingly kind and engaging, the island is a wonderful place to live and explore, and the Spanish itself is sufficiently neutral that it’s a good basis to continue learning and speaking Spanish in both mainland Spain and Latin America. The regional differences between Canarian accents and those in Chile will be significant – but this is down to the infamously strange Chilean accent, rather than any problems with the Spanish I learned in Tenerife. I really enjoyed learning Canarian idioms and discussing linguistic differences (and the reasons for these) with my teachers – for example, in Tenerife a guagua is a bus, while in Chile it’s a baby(!). But most of all, being in such an international environment and really thriving with such a wonderful group of people not only improved my Spanish, but helped me to build back my confidence after so long spent working remotely and in isolation – and, as my teachers were keen to remind me, 50% of language learning is confidence and not being afraid of making mistakes. The improvements in my Spanish, made possible by the Pressland Fund, will make fieldwork so much easier, and will have a tangible effect on the quality of my ethnographic research. I now have a really solid foundation from which to continue to develop my Spanish skills, and I can’t wait to be back in a Spanish speaking environment. ¡Chile aquí vamos!

The incredible beauty and diversity of Tenerife more than made up for the continuing covid restrictions in place, and after spending so much of the last year cooped up in various lockdowns, it was such a relief to be able to be outside and curious again. Having had little to no expectations when I arrived in Tenerife, I was really blown away by everything the island has to offer, and I’m keen to return when Canarian culture is back in full swing to experience the famous street parties and test out my salsa moves!

To anyone reading this: apply for the Pressland Fund, it’s an opportunity that can’t be missed.
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Intensive 30 lessons per week
(20 x small group classes, 10 x conversation classes)

Course cost: €807 (£682)
Cost of accommodation: €420 (£354)
Total cost: £1036
Total funding awarded: £945

Experience: priceless.