

**Planning and Completing Immersive Language Study:  
Recommendations for Folklorists Based on Work in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala**  
American Folklore Society Consultancy and Professional Development Program  
Joseph O'Connell, Independent Folklorist

This report outlines some of my suggestions for folklorists working independently to plan and complete an immersive language study. My perspective is based on a study trip I completed in March 2014 with support from the American Folklore Society Consultancy and Professional Development Program. In the first section of this report, I will summarize my activities as a Spanish language student in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. I will also discuss the relevance of these activities to my work as a public folklorist in the U.S. In the second section, I will identify some considerations that might prove significant for other folklorists planning language immersion travel. Although my experience is limited and specific, I intend for this report to be applicable for any culture worker interested in language acquisition for purposes of community outreach and collaboration.

### **Summary of Professional Development Activity**

In March 2014, I spent two weeks in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala studying at Celas Maya Spanish School. I was initially motivated to improve my Spanish skills by my fieldwork experiences in Latina/o communities in Indiana. As part of regional survey projects for Traditional Arts Indiana, I had worked with Spanish-speakers in multiple parts of the state and documented local forms of several Mexican-American expressive traditions. The Spanish I'd learned as an undergraduate student had been helpful in these situations, but I was also keenly aware of the limits I faced based on my skill level and lack of in-context speaking experience. The pitfalls of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a language other than one's native language are well-known to folklorists. In relation to Anglo documentation of Latina/o culture, Américo Paredes's 1977 article "On Ethnographic Work among Minority Groups: A Folklorist's Perspective" still resonates. Paredes, citing a variety of linguistic misinterpretations on the part of English-speaking anthropologists, cautions against leaning on "guidebook flavor" Spanish to draw conclusions about Mexican and Mexican-American cultures. Accordingly, in choosing to develop my Spanish skills as a resource for working with U.S. Latina/o groups, I sought out an immersive context in which I could work toward a more nuanced comprehension of "feelings and attitudes in actual speech situations" (Paredes 76).

Based on the recommendations of language teachers and friends, I chose to travel to Guatemala to complete a short period of immersive study in the city of Quetzaltenango (or "Xela," as it is known locally). Located in the country's western highlands, Xela has a reputation as a "typical Guatemalan city," presenting ample opportunity for full immersion in Spanish. I structured my stay around lessons at Celas Maya, one of several local language schools that cater to visitors traveling expressly to learn Spanish (or, less frequently, the indigenous languages of K'iche' or Mam). Celas Maya matched me with a language instructor and facilitated a homestay with a local family near the school. I met with my instructor one-on-one every weekday morning for five hours. These lessons included a combination of

structured curriculum and conversational practice. During the evenings, I completed homework assignments, studied independently, shared dinner with my host family, and explored the city.

During my two weeks of study, I made strides toward becoming a more confident and intuitive Spanish speaker. In addition to taking 50 hours of formal lessons, the experience of living in Xela required me to apply my Spanish routinely, as the default language of daily life. Interacting with native speakers in a specific, Spanish-speaking place provided me with concrete examples of applied Spanish that went beyond the generalized, pan-American Spanish I had acquired in the college classroom (Paredes's "guidebook" Spanish). In contrast to past classroom experiences, my work in Xela focused on spoken rather than written Spanish. Taking one-on-one lessons required constant speaking, which was important for developing an "active" grasp of some of the knowledge I had previously held "passively." I also gained practice conversing in a range of social situations outside the school, which were crucial learning opportunities for beginning to perceive and employ the language in its performative dimensions. I found studying in a context in which speaking Spanish is imminently *useful* to be a powerful motivator for learning. Ultimately, the trip served as a period of focus for renewing my efforts at acquiring Spanish. The momentum of the experience has carried over since my return, as I continue to study individually and seek out opportunities to develop my skills through conversational practice.

While I am far from being able to rely on Spanish as a primary interpretive tool, an improved grasp of the language has nonetheless served as a significant resource in my fieldwork. Completing intensive study in March proved useful for a project that I conducted in April for the Wisconsin Arts Board. As part of a survey of two counties in southeast Wisconsin, I documented a Via Crucis procession staged by Mexican-Americans in the city of Kenosha. Speaking basic Spanish helped me to introduce myself to participants, obtain advance permission for photography, and organize and conduct a group interview about the local expression of this religious tradition. Many of the participants were bilingual, but I gave a Spanish introduction in the interview setting to present the option of contributing in Spanish. Some participants did feel more comfortable speaking Spanish, and allowing for both languages elicited contributions from individuals who probably would not have chimed in otherwise. My comprehension was sufficient to ask follow up questions to Spanish responses. A bilingual approach, then, made for a more inclusive conversation than would have otherwise been possible. The interview benefited from my recent practice, and the experience affirmed the value of Spanish skills for working with communities in a public folklore context. At the same time, in keeping with Paredes's observations, I have avoided building analyses through the use of Spanish alone, erring on the side of a "rigorous checking of... data" (110).

### **Recommendations for Planning and Completing a Language Immersion**

Here I will identify some general considerations that might factor into the effectiveness of a language study trip such as the one I completed in Guatemala. Where applicable, I will tailor my comments to folklorists and culture workers who plan to do some form of cultural outreach in their language of study. My thoughts on language study are based on what I found to be helpful or unhelpful under my

particular circumstances. I suggest consulting with language instructors at U.S. universities for additional input from individuals with further experience and pedagogical expertise. Many decisions will depend upon the goals of the student, including what language is to be learned and the skill level of the student. Although I have aimed to keep them general, my suggestions apply most directly to intermediate Spanish students interested in study opportunities in Central America. Going into my trip, my previous experience as a Spanish learner included four semesters of college Spanish, including a short immersion program in the U.S. I undertook this study trip ten years after my college coursework ended. My goals were to renew my engagement with the language and develop a more “active” knowledge of spoken Spanish that I could apply in field research. The following outlines some of the key decisions I faced in the process of planning and conducting this study.

### I. Location and Duration of Study

At the most general level, traveling to complete a language immersion involves choosing a destination and setting aside time for the trip. Some factors to consider when researching possible locations for language study include the following:

- What is the availability and quality of language instruction?
- How is the language of study expressed locally? Will students absorb an identifiable local or regional accent?
- How much and what kind of tourism does a place attract? Will tourism affect the likelihood of interacting with others primarily in the language of study?
- What are the associated costs of studying in the destination city, including travel, housing, education, and food?
- What do other language learners have to say about the destination?

In my case, online research and talking to experienced travelers helped me identify Xela as a study destination that could accommodate a short intensive study within my budget. Compared to formal programs or coursework through U.S. institutions, studying at a local school in Xela was more affordable and offered better opportunities for integrating socially in a Spanish-speaking context. Additional factors for choosing Xela included local accent, availability of instruction, and the relative lack of English-language-centered tourism. The Spanish spoken in Xela is considered to be a relatively “accent-neutral” representation of Latin American Spanish. In theory, the local accent is easy to comprehend and imitating it leads to the acquisition of a versatile Spanish unlikely to be perceived in terms of specific regional or cultural biases. Xela also offers an established language education infrastructure. The city has worked to promote itself as a destination for language students, and there are several Spanish schools that cater to travelers. Accordingly, there is also a local understanding that many visitors are in Xela to acquire Spanish, and a willingness to accommodate speakers who are not yet fluent. Overall, this language environment is very different than that of other cities that cater to English-speaking visitors with agendas other than language immersion.

Another major consideration is how much time one has to dedicate to a language immersion. Many of the students I met in Xela had planned for stays of a month or more. Some serious students had committed to living in Xela for an even longer duration in order to study for the DELE exam, a certification in Spanish as a second language. According to the staff at Celas Maya, three weeks is a common minimum period of study for those who expect to make significant progress. In my experience, a shorter stay, while obviously limited, can still be productive if undertaken as part of a sustained regimen of practice. Although a longer period of immersion would undoubtedly have been useful, I have found that I have been able to retain and build upon the gains I made in Xela by continuing to study and seek out practice opportunities independently.

Related to trip duration, observing basic health and safety protocol can also help ensure that one maximizes the time one sets aside for study. However, even when exercising caution, it can be difficult to maintain perfect health while traveling. The reality for many international students in Xela is that adapting to changes in diet and altitude frequently results in illness. Several people with whom I spoke suggested allowing extra time for physical adjustment and the likelihood of some degree of illness. When one falls ill during a shorter stay, losing a few days might mean losing a large proportion of one's available study time. In general, I would emphasize both researching and following food and other health precautions as well as factoring the possibility of travel related illness into one's timetable.

## II. Choosing a School and Instructor

Language schools and instructors can vary widely in terms of teaching approach and experience. When planning to study at a language school, some relevant questions might include the following:

- How is the school certified?
- What do past students have to say about the school?
- Does the school seem to cater to serious or casual students?
- Will the school provide the level of travel support that I require? (Do they provide help with or information on travel logistics, adapting to the local environment, and making housing arrangements?)

Before making a choice, I recommend dialoging with the school staff to learn more about the school's pedagogical approach:

- What is the format of instruction?
- What training or teaching experience do its instructors possess?
- Does the school provide its teachers with a unified curriculum and study materials?
- If you will be paired with an individual instructor, how will that pairing be made?

In my experience, it took additional effort after I had begun my lessons to find an instructor who was a good match and to shape the lessons to fit my needs as a student. In general, I found that there were no clear teaching standards at the school. As a result, the nature of the lessons depended entirely on the individual teacher and on the influence of the student in shaping the lessons. If studying at a

language school, I suggest asking the school about potential teachers in advance, and identifying what one seeks in a teacher. Some differences I noted among instructors include the following:

- The level of experience among teachers varied widely. I found that those who had been teaching for longer tended to be better prepared and to have more confident, decisive teaching styles.
- Some teachers spoke basic English while many did not. I often felt that having an English-speaking teacher was an advantage for several reasons. First, it can sometimes save time to translate unknown words or phrases rather than explaining them in Spanish. Second, familiarity with English can often help teachers address the common mistakes of English-speakers learning Spanish.
- Some teachers emphasized practicing conversation over working on fundamentals. For me, since I wished to review fundamentals, it was important to find a teacher with the patience for a structured review of verb tenses, grammar, and other basics.
- Teachers varied in their adaptability to student interests and specialization.

In addition to observing that the instruction worked best with a lot of student input, I found the same to be true for logistical arrangements made through the school. Under these circumstances, it might be necessary to compensate for different standards of organization by following up to ensure that registration, housing, and other plans are in place according to one's expectations.

### III. Getting the Most Out of Lessons

When taking one-on-one lessons, I recommend being prepared to proactively shape the plan of study in order to make the learning experience as productive as possible. Although my school required instructors to submit a basic lesson plan for each student, I found this plan to be too general. It was helpful to work with the teacher to create a more detailed plan for my time at the school beyond the basic lesson plan required by the school. Discussing my expectations made for a better use of the time set aside for lessons. Although I had hoped for more leadership on the part of the instructor and a more structured curriculum on the part of the school, my instructor and I were able to work together to make satisfactory plans about how we would progress toward my goals over the course of the lessons.

Culture workers learning an additional language might particularly benefit from discussing with the school and instructor what they hope to gain from the lessons. I suggest talking about how you expect to be using the language in the future, and to developing some focus vocabulary topics or conversational practice scenarios. For me, this meant practicing conversational skills for discussing expressive culture and for introducing myself and my work to potential interviewees. Since most of what I do as a folklorist is conducting field surveys that cover a wide range of topics, I sought to acquire vocabulary at a broad level related to several modes of expression, including music, craft, and food. Culture workers with greater specialization might find opportunities to develop more targeted topic-based skills. Furthermore, students might consider working with an instructor to plan site visits to artists, events, or culturally significant places. Building this kind of activity into lessons might create

opportunities for guided, in-person practice in the kinds of contexts in which one might conduct fieldwork.

Scheduling can also be a factor in the productivity of lessons. Long lesson sessions can be fatiguing, and their usefulness wanes if the instructor or student loses focus. When choosing how much time per day to study, consider the balance between quality and quantity of study per day. I suggest setting a lesson schedule that works within the student's and the teacher's limitations, avoiding the frustrations of unproductive time at the end of long lesson hours. If five hours or more of lessons per day feels forced, consider whether there are other activities that could substitute for part of that time, or whether it might be possible to distribute the hours differently over the course of the day.

Although an instructor will likely provide some study materials, bringing one's own might help personalize or establish a standard for lessons. These might include textbooks, workbooks, articles, or other print materials that are of particular interest or relevance to one's goals. Identifying and supplying study materials can serve as an additional way to influence the priorities and the quality of lessons. In my experience, although the teachers at Celas Maya were themselves very knowledgeable, some of the homework assignments contained errors.

#### IV. Supplementing Lessons

One of the benefits of language immersion is the opportunity to practice outside of class time. In addition to using the language in routine interactions, it can be helpful to seek out sustained conversation opportunities. Staying with a host family is a good way to build in additional conversation time. At Celas Maya, homestays are designed to include meals with the host family, serving as an additional time in which to chat and build relationships in everyday Spanish. Many language students in Xela also seek out volunteer opportunities and planned cultural activities. Celas Maya offers structured activities along these lines. However, I found that spending time among students often involved communicating in English. As a result, activities offered specifically to language students might not be as useful as opportunities one creates for oneself. Getting the most out of one's time involves committing to using the language as a routine. I benefited from the fact that very few locals in Xela engaged me in English, or gave me the opportunity to default to English. When I did meet a local resident interested in speaking English, we planned a language "intercambio," splitting our time between languages and helping to correct and instruct the other person. Opportunities to meet and spend time with Spanish-speakers outside the school context were generally valuable as ways to integrate with local life and gain exposure to Spanish without the accommodations of instructors and fellow students.

Individual study outside of class time can also be important for reinforcing what one learns during lessons and conversational practice. My lessons at Celas Maya usually included some form of homework for completion outside of class. The school also offered textbooks, dictionaries, and other resources for check-out from the office. In addition to these resources, I frequently completed online exercises on my own time. A variety of websites and podcasts serve as accessible ways to practice language skills on an individual basis. I found the free website and application Duo Lingo to be especially

useful, and I would recommend it to other language learners. This relatively new site provides a structured curriculum of language acquisition exercises in several languages in addition to Spanish. I have also found consuming Spanish-language media to be useful for developing my comprehension skills. One audio program that I have appreciated since returning to the states is Radio Ambulante, a Spanish-language radio storytelling program in the style of This American Life. This show is unique in that it allows listeners to hear regional Spanish in the “vernacular,” featuring interview content with variety of speakers from around the Spanish-speaking world. Overall, individual efforts to stay in-practice have helped me to maintain an active knowledge of the language and prepare me for future opportunities to advance and apply my skills.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, I see traveling to complete immersive language studies as a viable strategy for folklorists with flexible schedules who can dedicate time to travel and who are willing to put work into actively structuring and enhancing their instruction. In my experience, the opportunity to immerse in a Spanish-speaking context allowed me to make considerable gains as a Spanish-speaker in a relatively short amount of time. Furthermore, the experience provided valuable exposure to the contextual and performative aspects of the language, the precise aspects that Paredes warned ethnographers against overlooking. Following my trip to Xela, I transitioned directly into independent study and the application of my Spanish skills to work as a folklorist. The main drawbacks of my study trip were the relative lack of strong curriculum and the short duration of my stay. With some effort, it was possible to compensate for these drawbacks, and to collaborate with my instructors to plan lessons that were appropriate to my skill level, goals, and time allowance. Given the overall benefit of this study trip for my language skills, I can recommend a strategic, informed approach to immersive study as an option for folklorists working independently to acquire an additional language.

## **References**

Paredes, Américo. "On Ethnographic Work among Minority Groups: A Folklorist's Perspective," *New Scholar*, 6 (1977): 1-32.