Liesel Theusch

Guatemala Volunteer

Week 8 (Last week abroad)

Competency: Global Citizenship ~ Communication Level 4: Articulates a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and provides a thoughtful account of what learning a second language has taught one about culture, the world and the complexity of relations between groups of people.

My final week in Guatemala was bittersweet. During these 2 months, I connected with my host family, the girls and children at my organization, and other travelers I met along the way. Language allowed me to create new relationships and empathize with a new culture in addition to living my daily routine. Throughout my experience abroad, my Spanish greatly improved, but I am not fluent by any means. There were times where I would show my willingness to help by simply spending time with the family and helping with meals. The small gestures made the family that much more welcoming and willing to share their lives with me when language failed. Guatemala is building around its tour industry that has grown substantially over the past 20 years and this has led to English classes rising in Guatemalan public and private schools. Even so, English is not as common in Xela as in Antigua so most of my interactions were in Spanish. If I had not been familiar with the language I would not have forged the lasting relationships that I did throughout my experience.

Spanish in my home was a way to share my experiences in the States with my Guatemalan family and learn of their experiences and cultural expectations. There were many afternoons that my host mom and I sat talking about Guatemalan life for hours over coffee. Without knowing the language, I would not have heard her stories about what it means to be a pastor’s wife, what it means to send her children to private school, expenses and hardships in Xela and Guatemala as a whole, the importance of family, why many Guatemalans give so much to others, and many more insights. There were times where I did not understand certain words and phrases, but she was patient with explanations and waiting for me to think through our discussions or questions I wanted to ask. From my host mom, I learned how important patience is in communicating across barriers whether it is language, class, professional roles, or cultures. In any of these situations, the individuals engaged in a conversation bring different experiences and values to the table. It takes patience to understand and process what these differences might be and how they could affect the encounter, if at all. After being in a position where it was necessary for others to be patient with my language and communication, I am more aware of the struggle when you cannot convey your ideas in a palatable way to others.

My youngest host sister at 8 years old sought me out daily to play games and do homework where I could put my MSU education to use. Even through the language barrier, I was able to focus on the questions I needed to ask in order to help her learn. Our homework time would consist of me asking her guiding questions and asking her to explain her answers when others in her family would simply give her the answers. My Spanish allowed me to tutor a variety of subjects, but also recognize the differences in approaches to education in Guatemala and the US. These tutoring experiences also lead me to reflect on how students in my future classroom may feel when they are still learning the language in addition to the course content. I found myself using the same terms and structure of my questions partially because of my language skills, but also so the sister and I followed similar routines while doing homework. The repetition led to her anticipating my questions in the last weeks and her answers started to come from a deeper understanding of the content. This routine can allow students from different backgrounds to follow my future lessons and delve deeper into the content with fewer limitations caused by language. Where language fails, I reverted back to demonstrations or actions of my meanings or pictures while working through homework or even speaking with my family or coworkers at my organization.

I was most limited in my role as a caregiver in the group home/orphanage by my language, but the staff was very patient and used many demonstrations or objects to communicate with me. I felt as though I cared for the children and girls there sufficiently throughout my mornings there, but language would have enabled me to contribute so much more. I would always look for another way to help in the daily routine and my actions were always done with compassion and a smile. On my last day in the home, the staff put together a small going away party with all the girls I helped throughout my volunteer experience. It was filled with each staff member in the nursery expressing their thanks and giving a small speech and the girls also joined in the speeches. Hearing from girls that I had not known the names of yet had valued my contributions was evidence of how accepting and inclusive of me they were from my first day there. I never felt excluded because of my language. The routine and patience of everyone involved led to yet another valued experience.

Spanish has allowed me to interact with amazing people and a culture different from my own. I had never thought I would use my knowledge of the language in my future when I started classes at age 15. My classes at MSU delved into the history and culture behind various Spanish-speaking countries. Spanish allowed my to deeply connect with those that are culturally different than me in Guatemala. Learning a second language has required me to keep an open-mind, to considering different interpretations of ideas I want to communicate, and how to communicate in either language efficiently and precisely. I expect to speak differently when I adjust back to life in English because of the structure my brain has been trying to communicate ideas for the past months. This experience has developed my patience, communication in Spanish and English, as well as my ability to consider more interpretations and needs of different individuals around me.