

THE WONDER OF IMMERSION BY TOM DEMARCO

About this time last year I enrolled myself in one of Penobscot School's weekend immersions in the hopes of finally "doing something" about my deplorable Spanish. I've been speaking deplorable Spanish since the days that the American Field Service changed my life forever by sending us a Spanish exchange student named Angel Diaz-Navarro. I was an only child when Angel arrived and since that day I've had a brother, a charming man who is today a pharmacist living in Madrid with a beautiful wife and two lovely children (my godsons).

One day I asked Angel to characterize my Spanish. He reflected for a moment then allowed that it was "un poco . . . macaronico."

OK, so I speak macaroni Spanish, is that so terrible? Well, it serves me fine as long as I'm speaking to Spanish people who also speak English. In those circumstances, a conversation like this passes muster:

"Tengo mucho. . . um, what's the word for 'hunger' again?"

"Hambre"

"Tengo mucho hambre."

With people who don't speak English, the going gets rougher. When they ask me to explain the American political system or our strange obsession with religion, I tend to come up empty. Clearly I was in need of some kind of jump start to lead me onto the road of speaking excellent, even elegant Spanish. Or failing that, at least being able to express myself and understand.

I showed up at Rockland's Penobscot School at 5PM on the designated Friday, where I was greeted by Carolina Da Pieve, our instructor, a young woman from Argentina. She spoke rapid, musical Spanish and I understood every single word she said. I was so surprised by this that I had to stop my jaw from dropping. I know it's a trick, one that gifted language teachers everywhere possess, but it still seemed magical. Carolina's talent was a nearly perfect eye for the signals we send when a word doesn't register; when she saw that she would find an alternative way to express the same thought, not being content until she sensed that her exact meaning had been captured. I wasn't quite so clever in my responses, but she helped me along and somehow made me feel good about my own performance while she tinkered with it to make it a little better at each repetition.

There were seven of us taking the immersion together. We're weren't all at the same level at the beginning or at the end, but each of us made huge improvements. Just as enjoyable as finding my tongue in Spanish was seeing the others begin to emerge. By dinner time that night (a meal we prepared together), we were beginning to chat a bit in our faltering Spanish. Carolina sliced and diced and stirred and washed along with the rest of us and made tiny improvements in our vocabulary and usage on the fly.

The rest of the weekend went by in a blur. We stayed fairly late that night and the next, and by the time we left lunch on Sunday we'd had effectively no opportunity to speak English at all.

During much of the weekend, I was exhausted. Exhaustion is an important ingredient of the immersion because your attentive waking mind has a tendency to reject the foreign language experience. It makes you hesitate at the beginning of a sentence and wonder “do I have any idea how to finish what I’m starting to say?” That can be fatal. After a few hours, the guard is down, and you jump into the sentence trusting that it will all come out OK at the end. Of course it does. At this point your mouth is moving faster than the persnickety little grammar book in your head can keep up with.

I got home around 3 PM that Sunday. Shortly after that my phone rang and it was Angel, calling from Madrid. He’d had no idea how I had just spent my weekend, and I didn’t clue him in. But he knew immediately that something was different. Usually we spar for a minute or two in Spanish and then switch to English so the conversation is not a total waste. But this time, we spoke for a full half hour in Spanish. At one point he called to his wife, “Ana, Ana, veng’ aqui. Tom habla un español increíble!” He put her on the phone and I rattled on. It was one of the highpoints of my life to date.

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Tom DeMarco is a director at Penobscot School and an occasional student there in Spanish and French. This year’s Penobscot School Immersion Weekends are detailed at www.languagelearning.org.



Peter Fasoldt and Corine Nabuchodonosor are two of Penobscot School’s immersion teachers.