

¡Hola! ¿Me puede ayudar con la dirección de mi hotel por favor?

My Costa Rican host mother laughs at the anglicized accent coming out of my laptop's speakers. Sitting in her kitchen I barely understand what she says to me, much less the audio that accompanies the video. I was sitting in my Costa Rican host family's kitchen. Through the open sliding door drifted in the sounds of the next door car wash and the cries of the chirping Yiguirros perched in the Papaya tree. It had barely been a month. I had packed up what I thought was a collection of the most important things in my life. Raincoat, passport, credit card, book bag, half of a suitcase filled with clothes, and a English-Spanish dictionary. I got on a plane to Costa Rica. I carried into the airport one medium sized suitcase, a duffle bag, my back pack, and two years of expectations.



I had been planning this trip for years, yet this video's true meaning and significance eluded me. The video was called **GRINGO PINTO** and what it represented was what I sought to become.

I knew exactly where I was, and where I had came from, but I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go. Where I came from begins when I was almost four years old. My family had recently broken up, and that launched my mother, sister, and I on a completely different route through life. I went from an ethnically diverse Houston suburb that I barely remember, to a homogenous small town in Ohio that I'll never be able to forget. Even if I want to. It is a story made special only by the fact that in spite of my ordinary up-bringing I am doing extraordinary things. I'm not complaining too much. Hindsight after some international travel made me realize my childhood wasn't bad at all. I had a warm house. I had clean water. I even had a few friends. Well, not too many, I'm not going to lie: I **stood out** more than I fit in. At least I was never hungry; for food that is.

I was always hungry for more knowledge. School was just okay, the real learning that I enjoyed the most was outside of the classroom. This is best illustrated by one of my family's favorite stories. It involves me talking to my dad when I was in third grade. He asked me if I had anything else I wanted to talk about before we stopped talking for the night. I asked my last question. My father's answer began with, "Well David, World War One was really complicated. The Balkan Mountains..." It is one of my favorite stories as well.

In attempting to trace the genesis of my interest in the Spanish language, the only possible conclusion comes from a sick day in fourth grade. I was lying on the couch in my house, passing the time. I was watching the James Bond movie, Goldeneye, which my dad had bought for me in Houston. However, this movie was different than any I had seen. It had funny looking words on the bottom of the screen. Using my highly tuned fourth grade analytical skills, I read the box and found out they were Spanish subtitles. I was fascinated by what I was seeing; I even tried to translate a few words. This event might be the origin of my fascination with the Spanish language; or it might not be. Either way the academic interest did not take off there, instead that had to wait until I entered the fourteenth grade.

So, where did that academic interest come from? It all started at “summer” orientation on May 17th, 2008. I sat down with my academic advisor to schedule classes for my first undergraduate semester. He recommended some classes for me, and I told him I wanted to study abroad the fall of my junior year. He told me I could make that work and eventually I double-checked everything for my four years in college, and it all fit. I hadn’t even graduated from high school yet, but I knew exactly where I wanted to be more than two years later. I was going to be in Costa Rica. I also knew what I was going to be doing for the next four years of my life. I liked it.

When I actually got on campus in the fall I liked that too; but only after I learned how to survive classes. I was particularly excited when I saw a flyer advertising an informational meeting for a trip to Panama in the spring. A few months later I found myself stepping off of a plane and onto the soil outside of my country for the first time. Just walking through the airport, immigration, baggage claim, and customs, it was so surreal. Despite the bilingual nature of the Tocumen International Airport, the language barrier was real. I had quit watching my James Bond movie. I had taken two years of Spanish in high school; it didn’t matter because I hadn’t taken it seriously. For all my knowledge and intelligence, as a college freshman talking to people with little formal education, I felt pretty stupid. I realized that I couldn’t remember anything that I had learned in high school. I didn’t even remember how to conjugate verbs in the present tense. I didn’t let that stop me though; it was still a great trip.

People often casually asked me “how was your trip?” How do you sum up two weeks of your life in a sentence? I still find it hard to give anyone an idea of how that trip affected me. As I look back at everything I have experienced in my short twenty-one years of life, that first trip to Panama was one of the most formative experiences I have had so far. I saw people with so little material wealth, but who also had such a proud cultural and social richness. I sat with five men for two or three hours and tried to have a conversation. Thankfully, for my ill-prepared self, most of the men there had picked up bits of English. This conversation was a true cultural exchange. We talked about the environment, the world, our values, and all of

David Pickering

1 st year fall	BIOL – 151 Foundations I GEOL – 250 Physical Geology MATH – 225 Calculus & Modeling UC – 110 Reading and Writing BIOL – Freshman Seminar	3 rd year fall – Study Abroad Semester Intermediate Spanish II Advanced Spanish I Advanced Spanish II Environmental Elective Ecotourism Elective
1 st year spring	BIOL – 152 Foundations I CHEM 102 Principles II MATH – 215 Stats ECON – 100 Economics UC – 120 Oral Communications	3 rd year spring (16) English 310 (3) Professional Writing (Dates and Times to be announced) Fine Arts (3) – Creative Writing (ENG 204) Religion (3) – UC-220 – Religious Foundations and the Bible ENVS 400 (3) Research A Spanish Class – Prensa y Cine (4)
2 nd year fall	BIOL – 360 Ecology CHEM 231 – Organic Chemistry I ENVS – 350 Environmental Science SPAN – 220 Intermediate Spanish ENVS 491 – Independent Study	4 th year fall (15) Phys 220 (4) Physics I ENVS 315/400 (3) Research Methods/Research CHEM 221 (4) Analytical Chemistry SPAN 331 (4) Lat. American Culture and Civilization (CC)
2 nd year spring	CHEM 232 (3) – Organic Chemistry II CHEM 234 (1) – Ochem Lab II POLI 205 (3) Intro to Public Policy UC 300 (3) Cultural Diversity UC 150 (3) Global Awareness SPAN 230 (4) Intermediate II ENVS 491 (1) – Panama Trip	4 th year spring (22) Phys 221 (4) Physics II Ethical Thought (3) Humanities (3) SPAN 410 (4) Spanish Theatre SPAN 365 (4) Latin American Novel SPAN 350 (4) Medieval 18 th Century (CC)



this happened at the border between Spanish and English: Spanglish. So much happened on that trip; I wish I had room to talk about it. In the end all that matters is that I had been inspired. Through all of the events I don’t have room to talk about, I had been inspired. When I returned to the states I had to schedule my classes for the next semester. I knew I was going to study in Costa Rica in just over a year. I also wanted to go back to Panama. I decided that I had to improve my language. I dug up my old language placement exam score from summer orientation and scheduled SPAN 220, Intermediate Spanish, for the coming semester.

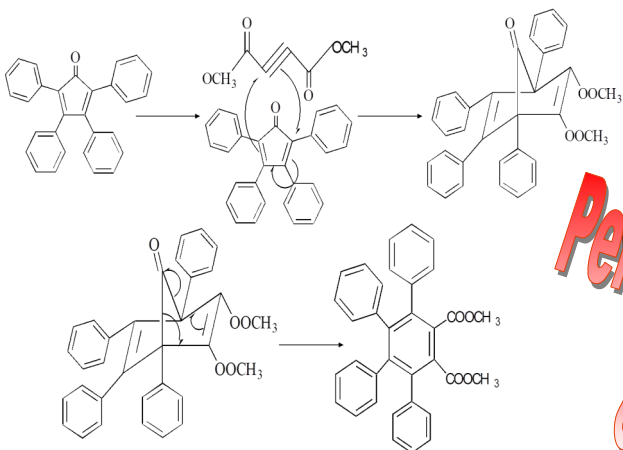


I spent part of the following summer trying to talk to a contact I had made in Panama, Felix Lopez. I tried to learn more about the culture that I wanted to help. It was so hard. I found one book published in 1929, one article written by a Peace Corps volunteer, and one thesis project on Panamanian textile art; The Mola. My contact used a lot of Panama specific slang, and wrote as he spoke. The online translators weren't much help because they could only translate grammatically correct Spanish. My dream wasn't put on hold; I just couldn't make any progress until I had learned more.

When I returned to campus and went to my first Spanish class I was just slightly less lost than when I was in Panama the first time. It was probably because my professor, **Dr. Stephanie Saunders**, was speaking very slowly, and in a purposefully anglicized accent. I quickly formed a friendship with my new professor. She began to help me communicate with Felix, *mi amigo*, and I began to make some progress. I also saw how much work it was actually going to take to realize my dream.



I continued learning things in Spanish class, and my language skills were slowly improving. To put it into perspective, I was spending equal amounts of time studying for Spanish as I was studying for organic chemistry. These two classes consumed my life. Breakfast, breaks in between classes, five or six hours every night in the library. All of it spent studying, and mainly for those two classes. This is how I lived my sophomore year: I studied. I'm not complaining though, my hard work with organic chemistry eventually paid off. Looking back, I am disappointed that I only earned a B in both sections of my Organic Chemistry courses. However, my command of the material in comparison to my classmates was shown when I was offered a job as a teaching assistant the following summer right before I studied abroad in Costa Rica. One of my favorite memories from that summer was when my professor was counseling a student. She kept drawing parallels between how if you could learn a foreign language, you could learn organic chemistry. I was proud. I conquered organic chemistry and was well on my way to realizing my second goal, proficiency in Spanish. My study abroad experience was just a few months off. I had entered into the new and strange land of organic chemistry, I figured it out, and I excelled at it. My Spanish wasn't quite where I wanted it to be, I didn't think I was excelling at it yet. I knew that I needed my language skills to be at a certain point for when I was to study abroad in Costa Rica. However, I still had one more trial before I was going to be able to live in another culture.



Es un buche pero puede tomarse un yodo
 ¿Un queque? Y ella rió
 Solamente un taco
 Podés a GRINGO PINTO
 Pero así eché un cliente
 ¿Entendio Gringito?
 Pero no se la agarró la fácil
 ¿Me apesgó?
 Solo póngaseme pilas
 Pero no se la agarró la fácil
 ¿Me apesgó?

That trial came in the form of a second school sponsored trip. My professor, who had led the first trip to Panama, told us that this year he was going to lead a trip to both Panama *and* Costa Rica. I had kept talking to *mi amigo* and was trying to plan projects for the coming trip. I still have all of the old emails and remember the countless meetings with my professor where we tried to plan projects. In the end, it didn't happen how I thought it would. Our group first went to Costa Rica. I took in the sights and made note of some things for when I returned in a few months for my study abroad program. However, I ignored most of Costa Rica, my mind was focused on Panama. I had spent the better part of a year thinking about this trip, and I wanted it to go perfectly. I got to Panama and my language was certainly better. I could see that my hard work had begun to pay off. I could communicate with the native speakers that surrounded me. However, I had to rack my brain just to squeeze out a childlike sentence. I wasn't too happy with where I was. I also was not happy about revisiting the same place and not having brought projects with us. Our first trip was a time of learning and a little service. Our second trip was meant to be a better balance of learning and service. Instead my group felt and acted less like students and more like tourists. For example, we went shopping for their textile art, the mola, five times, but only engaged in some kind of service twice. In the end we discovered that we were more useful to the community as tourists than as friends. I am still unable to truly convey the sense of disappointment I felt after returning from that trip. The culmination of what I thought was a year of hard work was really just a realization. I hadn't understood the real needs of my friends in Panama and they hadn't understood my group and I's intentions and desires. I also came to understand that I needed to keep working if I was going to have a successful study abroad experience.



When my trip was over my Spanish took a whole new turn. I felt like I had failed, but I wasn't going to let it consume me. More importantly than recognizing my failure, I recognized my success. I had seen my progress with my Spanish, the language moved from an abstract concept and goal to something more real. My face-to-face time and conversation with Felix, now an actual friend, really gave me a new outlook on Spanish. I had become emotionally invested in this two year odyssey that in which I was in the middle. Spanish wasn't just a language to me anymore, it wasn't something to put on my resume. This trip had made it a part of me. The two trips I had been on had given a human face to my desire to learn Spanish. I began to look at my class differently.

The human face of Spanish changed the laborious chore of Spanish homework and studying into an exercise in understanding people. My test grades improved.

I began to actually understand what page my teacher was telling me to go to instead of looking at my neighbor's book to find out. Speaking of my neighbor; she had been on the trip too. Blonde hair, green eyes, and a Spanish major whose language skills far out-matched mine, I couldn't help myself. We started dating and a short while later the semester ended and I looked up my grades and saw that I had an A in Spanish. Success. I spent the summer as an organic chemistry teaching assistant by day, and a purveyor of Latin culture at night. She would visit every few weekends and we would watch Spanish movies, listen to music, and go Salsa dancing. When we couldn't see each other we sent texts and talked in Spanish. She helped me move from learning about Spanish through books to learning about Spanish through life. My plane would leave in a few weeks and I had already started my cultural immersion, and my language skills improved every day.



Eventually those days of routine ended. I said goodbye to my friends and entered a strange and unfamiliar culture; Costa Rica. My time abroad is best described as a whirlwind of experiences that I can barely understand myself. Imagine the difficulty of trying to share a two-week life changing experience, much less one that lasted four months. Here is what I can share, my experience started well. It was very exploratory. I tried to read the newspaper, had childish verbal exchanges with my host family, and encountered the Gringo Pinto video. I had skipped euphoria and moved into understanding; something that took other students the entire trip to grasp. Then it hit. I got sick. Most of my second month in Costa Rica was in bed or in my house recuperating. I was in bed for two days, and for the following two weeks I only went to class, ate, and slept. It was one of the loneliest times of my life. The sickness-induced isolation, coupled with my girlfriend leaving me, put me in a dark place. She had helped me so much before I left, and actually



left me because she didn't understand how trying my situation was. She wouldn't be able to see all of the progress I was about to make. I had involved her in the creation of my Latin-American identity. She left and I was sent off in search of my own identity in Costa Rica. During my third month I began to come out of my depression. I focused on my schoolwork and I came to know my host family on a deeper level. Things were looking up. After I got through my third and final month of formal Spanish classes I had a lot of free time on my hands. I began to explore my city, San José, again. I then began to learn the way that I learn best. My Spanish had improved to the point where I could go out and enjoy the city. I had planned for so long to have this incredible experience and I almost let the opportunity remain unrealized. By the last week I had it down. This week was very representative of the experience I had been planning for all of those years. I sat in public parks and read the newspaper, and struck up a conversation with a nice man named Juan. I got coffee and

chatted with my servers. I went to the discotheque and danced to salsa, merengue, and bachata music for six hours. I drank beer with Costa Rican college students. I gave directions to tourists who had come to visit Costa Rica. To top it all off I started speaking Spanish to a tourist who looked like a Costa Rican and they asked me if I knew English. So many of these experiences had eluded me for most of my stay in the Country, but in the end I found them. I won.



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My Spanish professor laughs at the humorous illustrations. The words, mainly idiomatic expressions, come out of the computer speakers. My professor understands all of the words, but not their subtle hidden meanings. I sit in my professor's extra chair. The only sounds are from the warm air coming out of the heater, and the sound of her laughter as it fills her office. I had barely been back a month, every memory still fresh in my mind. I waited for the characteristic music of the credits. I then stood up and told her to hit the YouTube replay button. I looked over her shoulder and as the video played, I David Pickering, translated the phrases for her, my Spanish professor. I had accomplished what I set out to do not even two years earlier, I had become Gringo Pinto.



In less than two years I made so much progress. I went from not understanding anything that people said to me to having an in-depth philosophical conversation with a man named Juan that I met in a city park. I formed a deep friendship with my Costa Rican host family, all though the Spanish language. I was actually explaining to my Spanish professor what the meanings of those phrases were. I was teaching her! In less than two years I had entered into the strange world of a foreign language, and in the end I can effectively communicate with it.

I now have a skill. I am comfortable enough with my ability to actually tell people I speak Spanish. By no means would I refer to myself as fluent, but it is comforting when your host mother tells you that out of the fifty or so students that have entered into her home and been a part of her family, I David Pickering, was the second best Spanish speaker out of all of those visitors. My host mother was very polite, but even more sincere. The best question is; who was the number one speaker? A twenty-seven year old Spanish teacher who took a year off of work to improve her language.

