

Prime Minister Scholarship for Latin America NZ Teachers of Spanish in Colombia

by Celina Bortolotto and José Miguel Díaz Rodríguez, Massey University (2018)

One of the most exciting and enriching experiences for any language teacher is to spend time in a country where the particular language is spoken. Immersing yourself in the cultural context helps to understand the nuances of the language and the way that native speakers use it to communicate their worldviews. This was the basic premise followed by Massey Lecturers Dr Celina Bortolotto and Dr José Miguel Díaz Rodríguez when they approached the Universidad Nacional de Colombia with the idea to organize a training programme for a group of Kiwi teachers of Spanish. After discussing the project with Education NZ and submitting a bid, Massey received a Prime Minister Scholarship for Latin America (PMSLA) award in October 2017 to make this dream come true. As a result, a group of eight teachers of Spanish from various NZ regions went to Bogotá, Colombia, from April 7 to May 7 accompanied by Dr José Miguel Díaz Rodríguez.



The goal behind this programme was to offer NZ teachers of Spanish who are non-native speakers of the language the opportunity to upscale their teaching capacity by immersing themselves in a Spanish-speaking context,

also interacting in classes and workshops with experts in Second Language Teaching and Colombian culture. Massey University, Education NZ and Universidad Nacional all recognize the potential for training collaborations, exchange of expertise, cultural ties and strategic partnerships as a means to create opportunities for both countries.

The programme prepared by Universidad Nacional offered a whole range of classes, including Advanced Spanish language, Teaching Methodologies, Colombian history, Indigenous languages, as well as cooking and dance workshops. Furthermore, the Colombian university organised a series of cultural guided tours to visit several museums and landmarks in Bogotá which complemented the activities conducted on campus. On their part, Celina and José organised a tour to Leticia, a city in the Amazon region, which became one of the highlights of the trip, contrasting with the urban activities in Bogotá.

As part of the project, our NZ teachers also had the opportunity to act as cultural ambassadors by sharing with fellow Colombian teachers and students the variety of their challenges and teaching practices, as well as the richness and diversity of their culture in Aotearoa. Through lectures, workshops, field trips and conversations, teachers discussed different aspects of New Zealand culture and compared worldviews with their Colombian peers. During their stay in Bogotá, they even had the chance to visit a Colombian school, where they shared time with their peer teachers and students.

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An important aspect of the project was that the teachers selected were all from different regions in NZ, with two teachers from Canterbury, one from Wellington, three from Hawke's Bay, one from Otago and one from the north of Auckland. The lucky group consisted of: Angeline Dew, from Cashmere High School; Charlotte Glen, from Waiuku College; Anna Henderson, from Naenae College; Annette Jeffery, from Lindisfarne School, Hawke's Bay; Abbie Law, from Otago Girls' High School; Linda Robinson, from Rangī Ruru Girls' School, Christchurch; Nikol Stirland, from Napier Girls' High School, and Anita Vennell, from Havelock North High School. Despite their different backgrounds and experiences, all of them shared a common feature, which made them stand out, as they have organized or participated in activities promoting the teaching of Spanish in NZ for the last three years.

Upon their return to NZ, the teachers had the chance to reflect on their experience and the impact of the project:

"I am a lot more confident when talking or initiating discussions in Spanish with my more advanced students. I've learned Colombian and other typical Latin American expressions that I can teach to my students. I found the phonetics training very useful to me, now I can explain more clearly how to produce vowels and consonants in a more natural accent." (Charlotte Glen, original in Spanish)

"The experience has deepened my understanding of Colombia and the Spanish speaking world in general. While I was there, I was able to connect my prior knowledge and experiences to what I was learning and experiencing at the time. I think that this will help me to improve my Spanish teaching from an intercultural perspective." (Nikol Stirland)

"Our studies at the university were not only invaluable from a cultural perspective, but also from a Spanish linguistic one. To be immersed in a language is the best way to learn it, and for one month I was lucky to be a part of this enriching experience that helped me feel connected to the country... I am very excited about having the opportunity to share my experiences and newfound knowledge of Colombia with those in New Zealand." (Angeline Dew)

"The experience has had a huge impact on my teaching. It has reignited my passion for teaching and learning. I have been excited since being back to impart my new knowledge and my personal experiences with my students. They are enjoying learning about a country that they didn't know much about before my departure." (Abbie Law)

"The immersion in the language and the culture is the key difference. It is impossible to truly get an understanding of language without being exposed to and become part of the culture. Things such as dance, food, history, museums, cultural customs such as how people ask for a coffee or cross the road cannot be taught from a textbook. I hope that I can pass some of this on to my own students." (Anna Edlin)

We are very grateful both to Education NZ and Universidad Nacional for having believed in this project and supported us all along the way. We are also very happy and excited at Massey by the opportunity we had to contribute to upscaling our teachers of Spanish's capacity through this incredible experience. Our plans for the future include maintaining and extending our excellent relationship with Universidad Nacional in Colombia, as well as looking for new partners in Latin America to continue offering our teachers in Aotearoa a variety of challenges to support and encourage their professional and personal growth.