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TEACHING AND DOCUMENTARY-MAKING IN COLOMBIA

LINGUISTICS ALUM NICOLE CHARTIER STUDIES REGIONAL DIALECTS ON A FULBRIGHT IN COLOMBIA



Nicole Chartier '13 in downtown Bogotá

When I first arrived in Colombia as an English Teaching Assistant through the Fulbright program, I began to seriously doubt my ability to communicate in Spanish; however, there was one phrase I quickly became accustomed to: “Tranquila, tranquila, no te preocupes” (“Relax, relax, don’t worry”). I was calm; and the New Englander in me found the idea of “calm down—don’t worry” extremely frustrating at first. *Don’t tell me to calm down, I am calm* is how I frequently wanted to respond. Instead, I tried to calm myself, but how do you calm down in a city

this large and this chaotic? I became worried that I would never feel at home here in Bogotá.

It’s quite easy to become overwhelmed by this city—there are more people in Bogotá than the whole state of New Hampshire. Bogotá is unapologetically Bogotá. Its contrast of gritty harshness and natural tranquility continually keeps me on my toes. There is litter and graffiti on the streets, but, at the same time, the city is filled with green spaces. And if you look to the east, you become awestruck by the mountains that guard the city. When it’s sunny, the city shines.

The most beautiful feature of Bogotá is the people. This is especially true of both the professors and the students with whom I work at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. The professors at the university have been extremely helpful to me; they have embraced me and helped me with whatever I need—from practice with Spanish to taking me around to help me get acquainted with the city. They have welcomed me with open arms into their country, their city, and their families. I don’t feel like a tourist or a foreigner whom they have to help, but someone that they have known and loved their entire lives. They have also been really patient with me as I have tried to shed some of my “gringa-ness” as I adapt to Colombian culture. For example, the first time I was 5 minutes late, I ran into my boss’s office, out of breath and sweating and started apologizing profusely. He looked at me, completely confused as to why I was so stressed, and said, “Tranquila, my dear—you still have about 20 minutes until you’re really late.”



The students at the university have also welcomed me with open arms. The majority of students I work with are majoring in teaching English and have expressed sincere gratitude at the opportunity of working and speaking with a native speaker. Although I am supposed to be the teacher, I feel that I have learned more from them. They have taught me a lot about their city and culture; the necessary slang and phrases to pass as a bogotana; and the hot spots to see in the city. The students have been eager to learn English from a native speaker, asking me any and all questions they can about English, really putting my degree in linguistics to work.

My background in linguistics has not only been beneficial in the classroom, but also provided the opportunity for two amazing projects that I'm currently conducting here in Colombia. The first project examines dialect differences in Bogotá based on socioeconomic status. I am focusing mainly on the production of two consonants that correspond to the graphemes (smallest units in written language) 'll' and 'y'. The other project is a documentary examining regional dialects of Colombia. For this project, I record conversations and interviews with Colombians from different dialectal regions, in order to highlight both the dialectal and cultural diversity that can be found throughout the country. These studies have contributed to my understanding of linguistic diversity and made me a better researcher, which will be beneficial when I begin graduate studies this fall in linguistics.

Not only have these projects helped me develop professionally, but they have also afforded me the opportunity to meet amazing Colombians throughout the country, further reinforcing my belief that even though the diverse landscapes here are beautiful, the people are truly what make this country awe-inspiring. Although I have loved spending time on the coast and in other parts of the country, Bogotá is my home. I have found a sense of comfort amidst the chaos, an acceptance of the pollution and negatives, because, for me, the beauty of the city and the people who live in it far outweigh any negative that I have encountered.

The motto for Colombia is "the only risk is wanting to stay." With about four months left in my grant, I am already starting to realize how much I will miss this city, and how this city has changed me. I only hope to bring the spirit of the people back to the United States with me.

Contributed by Nicole Chartier '13 (Linguistics)

