

## *Study Abroad/Reflections*

### **Rediscovering my Latin–American Professional Identity: A Reflection on a Fulbright Experience**

*Virginia Gonzalez, PhD*

Professor, Literacy Studies & Language Studies  
Program, College of Education  
University of Cincinnati (USA)

*I emigrated from Peru to the United States in the mid-1980s. More than 20 years later, a short trip to Latin America helped me come full circle personally and professionally and close the gaps that I had felt developing over the past two decades. This opportunity was provided by a Fulbright Senior Specialist Program award at The University of Costa Rica in San Jose at the School of Modern Languages during 2008. The Fulbright experience was a renewal for me professionally, as it opened a window of opportunities to see the cultural and language commonalties and differences between my academic experience in the US and my Latin American ancestry.*

In 2008 I was selected by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) for a Fulbright Senior Specialist Program award at The University of Costa Rica in San Jose. The program aims to increase the participation of U.S. scholars in Fulbright academic exchanges by providing shorter-length programs of study, allowing for more flexibility for academics in planning their work schedules around overseas scholarship.

Costa Rica has a big need for developing English language skills in their college students in relation to their fields of expertise because of job demands among global companies. The country has become highly educated after the government began supporting free public education in the 1950s, and with a large segment of young people, a number of international and global companies have developed on-site branches in Costa Rica. As a result, there's a high demand for young professionals who can speak English fluently and a growing number of students in The School of Modern Languages at The University of Costa Rica (UCR).

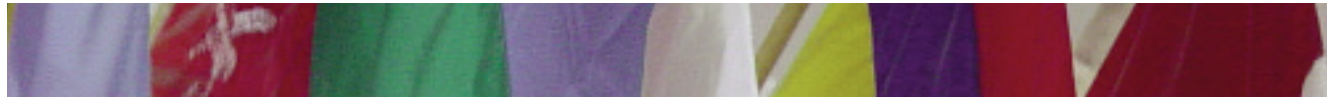
As my expertise is in the English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) areas, I was selected to collaborate with administrators and faculty at the School of Modern

Languages at UCR during December, 2008. I was positively impressed by the high professionalism and enthusiasm of the colleagues I met, all of them professors at different undergraduate and master levels of ESL/EFL and other foreign languages programs. The faculty of the School of Modern Languages was formed by a large cadre of professors, around 100 of them, who train elementary, high school, and post-secondary educators to be specialists in teaching a variety of second and foreign languages (including English, French, Italian, German, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Arabic).

UCR administrators and faculty have been engaging in a multi-year process of developing a new professional identity for the university, which has resulted in a renovated interest in improving knowledge and in keeping up-to-date with new research trends and instructional methodologies. One of the outcomes of this effort was the First International Linguistic Congress organized by the Head of the School of Modern Languages, Mr. Alder Senior (who played the role of my host) in collaboration with faculty and other administrators. My visit was motivated by two purposes: (1) to network and plan possible collaborative activities on research and training with short and long term goals, and (2) to participate in the First International Linguistic Congress as a keynote speaker, round table panelist, and workshop presenter.

My keynote address provided an overview of major historical and contemporary research trends in teaching ESL/EFL, and applications for assessment and instruction for adult learners. I also participated in a roundtable panel that explored the role of multiculturalism in different countries and led two workshops, one examining second-language learning and the other exploring the cultural adaptation of international students in the U.S. The conference activities and presentations were well planned and highly informative and interactive.

The administrators and faculty were eager to develop international contacts and collaborative activities, and they expressed a genuine interest in training opportunities abroad at the doctoral level. Many were interested in traveling and studying abroad to English-speaking countries to become immersed in the sociocultural setting of the second or foreign language they most commonly teach.



The conference setting also allowed for plenty of interaction and networking activities with administrators and faculty, as well as with students and attendants visiting from other national universities and the Costa Rican Department of Education. I was also



*Dr. Gonzalez: Inaugural keynote address at the Conference*

positively impressed by the up-to-date methodologies and instructional practices presented by faculty at the Linguistic Congress.

In addition, I also had a wonderful opportunity to meet some international colleagues from Italy, Germany, France, and Brazil. We made very good friendships based on our common multicultural and multilingual backgrounds, and even some common personal histories. I also particularly bonded with some professors of Italian at the School of Modern Languages since I am proficient in Italian. In attending their conference sessions and talking to them, I had a special opportunity to learn about contemporary second-language learning issues in Italy and the European Union. All the colleagues I met and network with were very caring, respectful, and sociable people who made me feel part of a productive academic community, which further achieved the purposes of my Senior Specialist grant.

Moreover, I had a rare chance to practice my academic Spanish after over twenty years of immersion in the American academic culture. It was a re-discovery of my capacity of transforming knowledge and concepts of my field of expertise into newly coined vocabulary in Spanish. I benefited a lot from learning by immersion and from the role modeling of my Costa Rican and international colleagues. Of course, it did help that I am a native speaker of Spanish, and that I am also from Latin American, as I was raised and born in Lima, Peru. However, as is usually the case with any language, each country has its own dialectal variation, and jargon.

At the end of my two-week stay I received the

ultimate compliment from a Costa Rican colleague, who stated that “You already sound almost like a Costa Rican.” This visit helped me “rediscover” my academic use of Spanish within a professional setting.

In sum, my Fulbright Senior Specialist experience was very productive and an excellent opportunity to learn and share with colleagues about research and training issues on second-and-foreign language. But, most importantly it was an opportunity to grow as a scholar and re-discover my Latin-American professional identity, to fine tune my international perspective, and to open up my mind to global issues on second-and-foreign-language teaching and learning. The end of the Linguistic Congress marked the end of my visit, and it was very hard to leave the community of colleagues that had formed during an intense two week period. We promised to continue our collaboration via e-mail exchanges, online discussion forums, online training, and collaboration at conferences of common interest in our countries.

I particularly enjoyed the wonderful work pace that my Costa Rican colleagues established during my visit, with intense working sessions but also enough “cultural time” to smell the tropical exotic flowers and gardens, with citrus trees in blossom during my visit, which were surrounding the buildings and courtyards of the University of Costa Rica. There was always just enough time to enjoy wonderful catering meals and their famous Costa Rican coffee, and to delight in cultural activities and music (the famous Costa Rican “acto cultural”), and to partake in wonderful conversations and laughs with new friends and colleagues. As I expressed to my host, Mr. Alder Senior, and as Costa Ricans say, my experience was “Pura Vida” (the cultural connotation has multiple meanings, such as “Thank you, cool, that was awesome,” but the literal translation into English is “Pure Life”).

#### **About the Author:**

*Dr. Gonzalez has an interdisciplinary professional and academic background (BA in Psychology from the Catholic University of Lima-Peru; MA in Bilingual Special Education, and PhD in Educational Psychology both graduate degrees from the University of Texas at Austin). One of her major areas of expertise is the development of multidisciplinary models explaining learning and developmental processes in bilingual/ESL Hispanic children. She has an interest in ESL learning and cultural adaptation processes in international graduate students. She can be reached at [virginia.gonzalez@uc.edu](mailto:virginia.gonzalez@uc.edu)*