

Cross-Border Homeschooling Helps Students Learn Spanish

Ron Fortin was living a comfortable life as an IT consultant in Texas when God called him to leave everything he knew, travel to a foreign country, and serve as principal of a non-profit school for impoverished youth.

Of course, Fortin didn't know a word of Spanish at the time. A year after making the move, he's fluent—and he's helping homeschoolers get fluent with the Homeschool Spanish Academy he birthed during his Guatemalan adventures with the Lord.

The story of Homeschool Spanish Academy begins when Fortin, a former U.S. Marine Corps sergeant and Trinity University graduate, received a prophetic word from an old Bible study friend. The prophecy encouraged Fortin to quit his 9-to-5 job and move to Jocotenago, Guatemala to minister at The Scheel Center, a school in one of the city's most desperate neighborhoods.

Fortin respectfully declined. But God was relentless in His pursuit. "Less than three weeks later, I changed my mind," Fortin recalls. "Every excuse I had for not going down just evaporated. It was as if the Lord was leading me there, so I obeyed."

Again, Fortin didn't know a word of Spanish at the time, other than maybe "hello" and "goodbye," and he was about to take on the leadership position of a school where the students and staff didn't speak a word of English. Fortin enrolled in online Spanish lessons a month before he left for Guatemala in Dec. 2009, and learned enough in those few short weeks to make it from the airport to his new home. He could understand and hold conversations in Spanish.

"That was five weeks," Fortin says. "I thought to myself: What

can somebody do with five months, or a year?" As Fortin pondered that question, the Lord birthed a concept that would connect homeschool students in the U.S. with Spanish instructors in Guatemala via the Internet. Fortin reached out to his own online Spanish teacher, Maria Jose Perez, to help him launch the business.

The program, which leverages Fortin's IT skills, offers students a more immersive experience than textbook study alone because of the interaction with native Guatemalans who are actually in Guatemala. As Fortin sees it, Guatemalan Spanish is ideal for instruction because it is notably clearer than other Latin American dialects.

With almost 30 years of Spanish instructing experience, Perez and her mother-in-law have developed the entire curriculum for the Homeschool Spanish Academy. From day one, students are engaged in Spanish conversations with real Spanish speakers.

Just one month after starting Homeschool Spanish Academy, 15-year-old Houston homeschooler Cody Dupree learned his alphabet and Spanish pronunciation. "I didn't have any previous foreign language experience, except for two week-long trips to Mexico," Dupree says. "It was nice to have an instructor to talk to face-to-face. This is a great way to learn Spanish, especially if you stay on course with it. And this is great for homeschoolers who need high school foreign language credits."

The Homeschool Spanish Academy curriculum builds cumulatively, starting with a basic language foundation. From there, there are four options for instruction: Traditional, Christ-Centered, Unschooling and Mixed. The program is broken into modules. Each module consists of 16 classes, which can be scheduled and paced to fit an individual student's need.

"Students can schedule one class a week, or have one every day," Perez says. "It all depends on their rate of learning."

Fortin is committed in to employing only the best instructors. Perez's family is a minor stakeholder in the company, which helps to ensure the highest quality instruction.

All the program requires is a computer and an Internet connection. Homeschool Spanish Academy relies on proprietary software for video and audio connections between instructors and students. Students have one-on-one conversations via video and text interface. Homeschoolers is the academy's core market, but Fortin says the program is also gaining ground with businessmen, travelers, high school and college students.

"This has been a once in a lifetime opportunity that I never would have taken if I didn't trust in God's calling," Fortin says. "In every aspect of this journey, there was doubt and worry about going to a new place, trying something new, learning a new language, meeting new people, concerns about finances and safety, and questions about community. At many points, I just had to give up all my worries and put it in the Lord's hands. And not surprisingly, in every detail, God has provided unbelievably!"

What do you think of cross-border homeschooling models like this one?