

Top ten tips for English language assistants

By Lyndsay Buckingham

As a former language assistant, I know the job is not easy. Different teachers expect different things from you. You want to help them as much as possible, but you might not have any teaching experience or know exactly what they expect. Your Spanish might not be good enough to understand the non-English teachers or the students in the hallways, or open a bank account or order chicken fillets at the neighborhood market.

But take heart! You are about to embark on an amazing adventure in a foreign country! You'll have days on which you feel you've made a difference and others in which you feel that you can't do anything right. But through it all, you will learn more about yourself, Spain, your own country, the education system and teaching English than you really thought was possible in nine months.

To help you make the best of the experience, I'm offering you a list of ten practical tips. These are based on my own experience as a language assistant in Madrid and my doctoral research on the role of language assistants. I hope you find them useful! Teachers can also make use of these tips as a conversation starter with the assistants in their classes.

1. Get involved, there is much to learn! If teachers ask you to join them for a field trip or help them plan a project, go for it! Just like being a teacher, being an LA is more than a 16-hour-a-week job if you want to do it well. You'll also learn a lot and probably have some fun in the process.

2. Get to know the students. They are the reason you are here, and your job is to engage them in English to allow them to practice their speaking skills. If you get to know their interests, you can make connections between the classroom and their lives.

3. Follow the school rules. Students will look up to you and often imitate you. Demonstrate your respect toward the school, principal and teachers by turning off your mobile and not chewing gum.

4. Patience is a virtue. Be patient with students – they are young and still learning; with teachers – some may not be used to working with someone else in the classroom and will need time to adjust; and with yourself – learning to do your job will take some time but you'll get there.

5. Be open to experiencing new things. You may not agree with certain ways of doing things in the school or in the classroom. Remember there are cultural and personal differences at play here, and learn what you can from the experience.

6. Reflect on what you can offer. Did you study chemistry? Ask if you can conduct a simple experiment in Science class. Are you a theater buff? Try engaging students in a short play or role play. When possible, apply your interests and strengths in the classroom and suggest new ideas to the teacher.

7. Communicate with the teachers. Ask them what they have planned for the next classes and tell them what you'd like to take part in or offer your ideas. Don't be afraid to speak up if you think you're being asked to do something that is outside of your role.

8. Be flexible. Each teacher has a different style and they will ask different things of you. Do your

best to adjust to each teacher's class rules and management style in order to foment a positive working relationship.

9. Planning is important. Take the time to plan with teachers, other assistants and by yourself. You'll feel much more comfortable in front of the class and your activities will go better.

10. Do some research. You will receive some basic training, but if it isn't complete, find out more. Read up on the education system in Spain, EFL teaching techniques, CLIL, Spanish customs, etc. (See Further reading section below.) Talk to other language assistants to see how they participate in their schools and make suggestions to teachers and administrators.

Above all, enjoy your time in Spain and do your best to fulfill your role as a linguistic role model and cultural ambassador. With some time and effort, it can be a very enriching experience for everyone involved.

Further reading:

- One language assistant's experience in Extremadura captured in a short video: <https://youtu.be/pwn-xkr5ia4>
- A brief description of the Spanish education system: <http://www.donquijote.org/culture/spain/society/customs/education-in-spain>
- More information on secondary education in Spain: <http://www.fulbright.es/ver/spanish-education-system>
- A collection of articles on EFL teaching techniques: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/>
- An introductory article about what is CLIL: <http://www.onestopenish.com/clil/methodology/articles/article-what-is-clil/500453.article>
- A search engine for accredited courses of Spanish for foreigners: <http://eee.cervantes.es/es/index.asp>

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