



MARK VAN MANEN/VANCOUVER SUN

Spanish teacher Sochell Roman (front) with Judith Plessis (rear left) and Paula Brook (front right) at UBC.

Ole! Espanol

ADULT IMMERSION | Continuing studies at UBC prefers students with a goal



PAULA BROOK
VANCOUVER SUN

Me llamo Paula. Estudio espanol porque me gusta jubilar en Mexico.

You have no idea how long and hard I've had to study to get to the point where I can thus introduce myself and explain why I'm trying to learn Spanish.

They say the "window" for learning a second language slams shut in early childhood — which doesn't mean it can't be done later in life. Just that you have to basically shatter glass to get to those last few

wrinkled language neurons, and firing them up can cause collateral damage. For each word I gain in Spanish, I lose one in English.

And yet I soldier on, because I have a dream. Se llama, Casa Manana — a little adobe house that will one day rise from the rubble on a lot my husband and I bought last year in a fishing town in Mexico where, it seems, only the real-estate agents speak English. (Sold! to the gringos from Vancouver who have absolutely no idea what they're getting into.)

Which makes me the ideal candidate for adult immersion, says Judith Plessis. She's director of the Languages, Culture and Travel division in Continuing Studies at the University of B.C., where I go hard at it every Thursday night in Beginner Level II Spanish. "It's people like you who have a very concrete goal

who stick with it and do well," Plessis tells me.

She likes to describe us as "language enthusiasts," not merely students. This rings true. My Thursday-night classmates — the hardcore half dozen who have made it to midterm — are mostly my age and older, and have equally concrete goals, or at the very least vivid dreams involving travel, study, adventure and romance. And damned if we aren't determined to have all that despite the odds, which get worse with each passing brain cell.

Enthusiasm is our strong suit, says Plessis, who has no time for that old window theory anyway. She has been around the immersion block enough times — she speaks four languages and has been teaching in this program for 27 years — to have developed some theories of her own.

"What we see, and I don't

think there have been enough studies done on this, is that adults have a huge advantage over children in terms of their motivation," she tells me.

"It's the adult intelligence of knowing what you need and discarding what you don't," she goes on. "You might not get to the same kind of native fluency as someone who started as a child, but you will have what we call comprehensibility."

Meaning, I will be able to make myself understood, which is a goal I cling to as I slog through Beginner Level II for the third time this year. I breezed through Level I last year, which took me to "porque" in the paragraph at top. I had no idea back then how jammed up I would get at the next level, endlessly conjugating verbs in the present tense, the past and future beckoning faintly from down

Determined, curious and sociable typical traits of new language learners

From C1

the hall in Buchanan Block D where the
ster-learning enthusiasts — including
veral of my former classmates, some
lder, some younger — have by now
ogressed to Lower Intermediate.

This may sound like flogging a dead
orse, but it's oddly enjoyable — if
ou're the type.

Which is to say: determined, curious,
ociable. You get to meet interesting
ople from all over the world, includ-
g the teachers.

You park your ego at the door and
ush and blunder your way through
rely intelligible conversations on a
ide range of intimate subjects and
ugh hard at your own expense.

For \$300 per 10-week session, it's way
eaper than therapy.

And a lot of people are discovering its
enefits.

The 30-year-old UBC program, the
largest of its kind in the city and one of
the most ambitious in Canada, has dou-
bled in size over the past five years.

"This fall for the first time we've hit
1,000 students," says Plessis, who has
viewed radical changes to her city and
world through the lens of adult immer-
sion.

There was the French surge of early
official bilingualism in the '70s, the busi-
ness community's sudden yen for Japan-
ese in the go-go '80s, the race to get
Under the Tuscan Sun in the '90s, and
now the NAFTA-fed boom to sound bet-
ter than George W. Bush in Spanish,
which isn't hard.

That's not to say language fads come
and go. In fact, they just keep on com-
ing — it's the juggernaut of 21st-centu-
ry globalism, and it's great for business
at UBC. This fall, 16 languages are being
taught in 100 different classes at two
locations, on the Point Grey campus and

at Robson Square (where a younger,
more business-oriented market is court-
ed with niche offerings such as
"Tourism Mandarin"). There are class-
es almost every day and night, plus sea-
sonal immersion weekends and group
travel programs and cultural crossover
events — salsa in Spanish, cuisine in
French.

The seriously focused students in the
French and Spanish programs rise
through five levels of proficiency, clock-
ing 150 class-time hours to earn a cer-
tificate that looks good on a resume.
These are the folks at the peak of the
immersion triangle, as Plessis describes
it. The large lower ranks are mostly
dreamers like me, some of whom will
drop out before breaking through to the
past tense, while others hang in for years
— immersion aficionados who may never
become fully fluent, nor lose their
enthusiasm for trying.

Indeed, a handful of regulars have

been coming to these classes for
decades, recruiting friends and family
into the lifestyle. One man who started
in French 25 years ago has now com-
pleted Spanish and Italian as well.
Recently, due to popular demand,
Plessis introduced a \$50 discount for
adding a second language.

"We've even had people phone us and
ask us what language we suggest they
try next," she chuckles, "like an ice
cream flavour."

But I think I'll stick with espanol,
muchas gracias. Once I've licked the
future perfect, perhaps I'll be ready to
tackle English as a first language.

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EVA FREIDE/FOR THE VANCOUVE

ing of a pleasant beach life in places like Tulum, Mexico, has enticed more than one person into learning Spanish.