

Jardín Botánico: a place for authentic self-expression

Elementary School students explore their historical and natural environment through second language acquisition

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“¡Mira, una castaña!” exclaims Lucia, pointing excitedly to a tree covered in small brown fruits. Her group of three classmates gathers around her, curious about her discovery.

“Es como las que venden las castañas cerquita del colegio en la Plaza de Atocha,” says their teacher Cristina, recalling their classroom discussion about the tree, the fruit and the people who roast them and sell them on the street.

“Pero, ¿podemos comerlos?” asks Ana, gently touching one of the fruits.

“They are poison,” replies Marco, looking up at the canopy of the tree. “If you eat them you might have a tummy ache!” Their teacher, Cristina, overhears and encourages them to examine the chestnuts from the tree and the ones that are edible and that are brought from school.

“This one is the one you can eat!” exclaimed Diego. “I can see the difference!”



On a sunny November morning, a group of fifteen students ranging from 1st to 6th grade explore the Royal Botanical Garden in Madrid. The students, whose ages vary between 6 and 12 years old, have only been immersed in learning Spanish together for a few weeks. Most of them are new to the immersion program, which started in late September. They attend the prek-6th grade International School SEK Santa Isabel, located in the historic Barrio de los Letras district of Madrid. In recent years the school has been creating learning experiences outside of school, called “learning paths”, in which students learn in places and with people in their local community. This learning path is part of their first unit, *How We Are*, in which they practice introducing themselves, talking about what they like, writing simple sentences, and describing colors and shapes.

The goal of this experience is to integrate Spanish language learning with the cultural and natural heritage of Madrid, using the Royal Botanical Garden, a “Landscape of Light” — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — as an outdoor classroom. Divided into small groups, each student team focuses on a topic they selected in class, such as Carlos III and Blanca Catalá (the first female botanist in Spain), traditional *castañeras* and the chestnut tree, and the *madroño* tree with its connections to Madrid's coat of arms and the famous bear statue. Equipped with maps of the garden, the students engage with their new environment as a living expression of the Spanish language, exploring and representing their topics through guided investigation and collaborative work.



On the Learning Path

"Uno, dos, tres, cuatro..." The sound of children counting echoes through the garden as they shout up to one hundred in Spanish, waiting for some classmates to change behind the statue of Carlos III.

Suddenly, Max, draped in a cape and crown and holding a piece of paper, steps forward, confidently proclaiming in Spanish, "I am Carlos III. I am from Italy but I am the King of Spain. I am a good king, and I love science, art, and learning new things. Do you like this garden? I created it, which is why you remember me here—because I am very important."

Before the group can respond, Ali, wearing a white lab coat, interrupts in Spanish with enthusiasm, "My name is Blanca, and I am very important too. You can't see me here, but I was the first botanist woman in Spain. I love plants and drawing. I have my own herbalist. Look, this is a chestnut tree. It has five leaves and is very big. It's green, but in autumn, it turns yellow, orange, and brown. Here are some chestnuts!"

Watching from nearby, their teacher Cristina reflects, "My main goal was to get them to speak Spanish at a very basic level and in a context outside the classroom so that they could make their Spanish visible in the community outside of their school. To hear them speak in Spanish and I am amazed by their agency. They did it because they liked it and were interested in it. They are the ones who built the knowledge. They found out about the first woman botanist in Spain and they just wanted to represent her."

Laughter and chatter fill the air as the students animate the garden with their voices, blending Spanish vocabulary with playful storytelling. The teacher smiles, knowing the activity is doing more than teaching a language—it is sparking curiosity and creativity.

Beneath the sprawling branches of a chestnut tree and atop a cement bench, two students reenact the roles of the *castañeras*. These iconic figures, with their small stoves roasting chestnuts, have been a cherished winter tradition on the streets of Madrid since the late 18th century.



Historically, the role of the *castañera* was almost exclusively filled by women. These were often older ladies, hardened by the bitter cold of Madrid's winters. Dressed in black, they wrapped their heads in dark scarves and draped thick shawls over their shoulders. Their stalls, whether fixed or mobile, typically appeared from November to March, aligning with the colder months when their product was most in demand. These stalls were more than mere vending spots—they became fixtures of their neighborhoods. Many *castañeras* chose the same location year after year, becoming beloved and essential figures in the community, embodying the warmth and spirit of winter in Madrid.

"I am just surprised by the little ones," says their teacher Cristina. It's impressive how capable they are of expressing themselves in Spanish, giving meaning throughout storytelling and acting. It is amazing to see how much they discover by seeing what they've learned in class brought to life. Hearing their excitement, like when one exclaimed, 'Look at the chestnut on the tree! It's this one!'—you can feel their sense of surprise and wonder. It's so beautiful."



During the walk to the final stop, the children eagerly explore their surroundings, touching leaves, tracing the rough bark of trees, and moving around freely. Their curiosity turns the path itself into a living classroom, where every step offers an opportunity to engage with the natural world in a tangible way.

"Uno, dos... ¡acción!" Cristina shouts, clapping her hands to signal the start. At the final stop, Martha, Amelia, and Sarah prepare to present their findings on why El Madroño and the bear are symbols of Madrid. They scout the botanical garden to find a large strawberry tree under which to perform their scene. However, a team of gardeners pruning a nearby tree forces them to relocate. Amelia grows frustrated and looks to Cristina for reassurance.

Reflecting on the moment, Cristina remarks, "My challenge next time is to better prepare for unforeseen events that may arise during the Learning Path. Taking both younger and older students outside requires working on their mental flexibility and equipping them with tools to regulate their emotions because, when we're outdoors, things don't always go as planned."

The bear and the madroño hold deep significance for Madrid's heritage. The bear symbolizes the region's once-abundant wildlife before urbanization, while the strawberry tree represents the local flora common to the area. Together, they embody the historical and natural legacy of the region.

The bear is also connected to the constellation Ursa Major, whose seven main stars were visible from the Sierra de Guadarrama. According to legend, King Alfonso XI hunted a bear in the 14th century, a feat he chose to commemorate by including the animal on Madrid's coat of arms. This mix of myth, history, and nature deepens the students' understanding of their research, adding meaning to their performance and their connection to the city's identity. "I have gotten to know my classmates better. I have



learned about the plants, traditions, and history of Madrid.” A student reflects with a smile while walking back to school.

The connection between their classroom learning and the physical environment elevates the activities into something truly meaningful—a moment where language, culture, and personal connections intertwine. As Ali enthusiastically shares in Spanish, “Estoy Ali. Cuando ir al Jardín Botánico, me gusta mucho! Yo hacer un teatro con mis amigos y hermano. Yo aprender muchas cosas de plantas, ojos... (laughing, he corrects himself)...hojas y otras cosas también.”

These moments capture not only their growing command of the Spanish language but also their deeper engagement with the world around them, bridging learning with real-life experiences and meaningful human connection. At the end of the Learning Path, Ana remarks, “Fue muy corto. ¡Quiero volver!” Her classmates nod in agreement, already imagining what they might explore next time.

