

A flamenco immersion

Mixed-age language immersion learners experience Spanish culture

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A rhythmic mystery unfolds... The children paused at the base of the stairs, their chatter softening as a faint rhythmic pounding echoed from above. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* “What’s that noise?” one of them whispered, eyes wide. They climbed the stairs, the sound growing louder with every step. At the top, they opened the door to reception. The steady beat continued, now pulsing through the floor beneath their feet. They followed the sound down a dark hallway, curiosity pulling them forward. Then, just behind an open door, it happened. Cristina gently invited them to get closer to the door. “*Podemos entrar...*” There, in the center of the room, a dozen flamenco dancers moved with intensity and grace. Feet stomped in perfect rhythm on the wooden floor, skirts swirled, arms rose and fell like waves. The children stood motionless, their eyes wide with wonder. “*Mira!*” The mystery of the sound had become something more, a moment of living art.



On a sunny March morning, fourteen students of a mixed-aged Spanish immersion class are exploring a marketplace close by their school. The students attend the International School SEK Santa Isabel and their ages range from 6-12 years old. Located in the historic Barrio de las Letras district in the center of Madrid, the bilingual school serves 350 pre-K through 6th graders. Since the pandemic, the teachers have been developing “learning paths” –sequences of learning experiences in places outside of school and with people in their local community. “I created this learning path so they could learn words together and listen to the language in real situations,” Cristina their teacher explains. “There’s a range of skills in the group, but for all of them I want them to help one another recognize and practice words while being in our neighborhood, talking with real people and feeling Spanish culture. The nearby Antón Martín Market is a perfect place.”

On the Learning Path

“Looks like everyone has their packet so let’s go,” Christina leads the students out the school main entrance and onto the narrow cobblestone street. A few of the younger students hold hands as they walk, while some older students flip through the packet. Its pages hold colorful photographs of things they need to find (and questions to consider) during their hour of exploration. As they walk the quiet narrow streets of the old city center, one of the younger students spies a local fruit market ahead.



“I love strawberries! Are there things there we need to find?” She opens her packet to look. A few students pause with her in front of the store. “No, I don’t see any fruits here,” says a boy looking at his packet. “Is this one?” he points to a picture and asks Cristina. She explains that it isn’t and after a short discussion about what fruits they enjoy they continue along the sunny sidewalk.



“Let’s look around for the face of the mysterious woman in the packet,” Cristina announces. On the center of the first page is a photo of a painting: a black-haired woman, flowers in her hair, with a painted face and arms. The students eagerly search as they walk together – peering into shop windows and closely scanning the doors and walls of the old stone buildings they pass by. The streets are becoming more crowded with local shoppers and pedestrians. “Is that graffiti? Is that her?” An older student points to a building ahead. Cristina guides the group across the street so they can see the painting better. After some discussion, one of the older students says it’s a flamenco dancer. She knows this because she took some classes there, on the top floor of the famous Antón Martín Market.



“Do you know what female flamenco dancers are called?” Cristina asks the group. The children glance at each other in silence. “Flamencona!” a young boy ventures. Cristina smiles, a hint of mystery in her expression. “No... Think about it. Someone who dances — what do you call her?” “Bailarina...” one of the children offers.



“And someone who dances flamenco?” Cristina begins the word slowly, shaping it with her hands, inviting them to complete it. But they’re stumped. “Bailaora,” she reveals, smiling as the students repeat it a few times, letting the unfamiliar word roll off their tongues. “And what about a man who dances flamenco...?” “Bailaor!” An older student shouts proudly.

Cristina nods and asks them about male and female nouns as they approach the market entrance. The strong smell of foods wafts from the entrance, which is lined with colorful

signs and posters of the food within the three-story building. Christina reminds them to stay together and their mission: to find all the foods in the packet including the two that are not typically Spanish.

Ready for the search, Cristina leads them inside and downstairs. A few shoppers pause and smile at the students as they weave through a small crowd to their first stop: a butcher shop. Most students peer excitedly into the glass counter at a variety of meats, glancing back at their packets. But two girls groan and turn away, covering their faces with their packet. They explain that they are vegetarians, the sight of meat makes them think of the animals. While they stand slightly away, the others talk quickly about what they see, toggling back to their packet to check for images. Cristina asks questions from time to time, gathering their attention to practice vocabulary: *what is the name of the place where they sell meat? What is this ticket dispenser for? Who likes ham? How much does this cost? Do you know why it is more expensive?*

The students spy another stall with brightly colored vegetables and fruits. Several students are looking at their packets to see if there might be a match. The shopkeeper smiles and Cristina encourages a girl to ask in Spanish if he has one of the vegetables in her booklet: a green chili pepper. He looks at paper then holds it closer so he can see the images better. "No," he apologizes and politely hands the packet back to her. "I don't have these in today, but good luck." After searching several other shops, they wind their way back to the staircase and up to the first floor.

"Who knows what pickles are?" Cristina asks, as the children gather around a market stall with buckets lined up behind the glass. Inside, various types of olives and pickles float in brine, and the sharp vinegar scent fills the air. An older man is being served by the shopkeeper, his dog waiting patiently by his side. He glances at the curious students and offers a warm smile. "Who wants to try a pickle?" Cristina offers. "Me! Me!" several children shouted eagerly. "And how can we ask for that in Spanish?" she prompts. "Ouch! They sting!" one child exclaims after tasting. The shopkeeper laughs and explains that vinegar, salt, and spices give pickles their vinegary flavor. Cristina buys a small bag of olives, and the children crowd around excitedly to try one. "This is so good!" one of them says, savoring the last olive and sipping the briny juice from the bag.

Several students sit at nearby tables to fill in their booklet with what they have found so far. In the background, amidst the hustle and bustle of shoppers, a faint rhythmic banging can be heard.



As the students move through the rows of market stalls filled with fish, vegetables, and baked goods, Cristina asks, "Are empanadillas from Spain?" The children flip through their booklets, tasked with identifying two foods that do *not* originate in Spain. They gather around a display window showcasing dozens of savory empanadilla pastries, intrigued but uncertain. The shopkeeper, watching them with an amused smile, chimes in: "These here?" she says, pointing to the pastries. "These are Argentinian." A lively conversation follows about how different countries have their own versions of similar foods. Cristina explains that the original *empanada* was born in Galicia, Spain, and traveled across the Atlantic, becoming especially popular in Argentina, where they are often called *empanadillas*.

The group moves on down the bustling market aisle. The rhythmic sound they've been hearing grows louder—it seems to be coming from above.



"And now," Christina pauses the group at the main staircase, "there is a surprise!" The children look at her attentively and intrigued. "We still need to find this man in the photo, right?" She points to the last image that appears in the booklet. "Do you know this gentleman?" The students puzzle at the photo until, finally, Cristina explains that he is a famous flamenco dancer.

"How are we going to find him here?" a student wonders. Cristina suggests that the children ask a shopkeeper. Maybe they know where. They approach a stall and one of the students shares the picture with a man behind the counter.

"Well, there's a flamenco school on the second floor," he points above them and explains that its walls have lots of photos of dancers. "Turn that corner and go up the stairs." The students look at Cristina who smiles back nodding. Several students dart ahead to climb the staircase.



The rhythmic stomping of the flamenco dancers becomes louder as they wind up the stairs to the next floor. Many students are wide-eyed when they reach the doors of with a massive sign: Centro de Arte Flamenco y Danza Española "Amor de Dios". They open the doors and the sound becomes thunderous. A kind woman greets them as they enter.

"Come in, come in," she says and briefly speaks with Cristina. Several dancers sit in the lobby, tying shoes and readying for practice. Cristina leads the group down a hallway lined with photographs and posters of flamenco dancers. The students slowly scan the walls, searching for the man in their packet. They come to an open door where the rhythmic booming of feet is coming from: a flamenco dance class. The students peer inside. The dance teacher sees them and waves them in to watch.



Men and women of all ages practice complicated rhythms with their feet as the teacher counts and models in the front of class. The special wooden plank floor, called a flamenco tablao, reverberates through the legs of the students. When the dancers finish, the children applaud and cheer. The dancers smile, sweat dripping from many foreheads and through many shirts. It's hard work. As they make their way back to the hallway, many students try to repeat the rhythms of footwork they witnessed.



Down the final corridor, a student spots the photo of the mysterious man from their booklet. "That's Camarón de la Isla, a renowned and influential flamenco singer," Cristina says. Then she adds playfully, "Do you think 'Camarón' was his real name?" She explains that it was a nickname. In Spanish, *camarón* means little shrimp, and it's commonly used to describe someone who's gotten sunburned. "You're as red as a shrimp," people say with a laugh.

With all the photos found, the students thank the lobby greeter and make their way back down the stairs. The learning path, which had begun with a mysterious and, apparently, misplaced painting of a flamenco dancer on the wall of a market, ends up revealing that, behind that wall and that painting was precisely the school of Flamenco Art and Dance, so characteristic of Spanish culture. The students continue to talk about what they saw today as they walk the few blocks back to school.



"It was so much fun doing the treasure hunt and seeing the flamenco dancers," says one student.

"Yes, and by going to the market, seeing the food and even tasting it, I learned new words like *aceitunas* and *pepinillo*," adds her friend.

"I was very pleased to see so many students using Spanish spontaneously," Cristina reflects. "When they are excited, they sometimes they revert back to their first language. But I noticed many of them feeling surprised and then speaking to me in Spanish. And it was so wonderful to see some of the younger students teaching the older ones who are just learning Spanish."