

## Teaching English in Tijuana, Mexico

Year:

Project:

Work:

After several colorful postcards from friends in Mexico City, accompanied by enthusiastic invitations to visit them, I finally decided that I would have myself a Mexican adventure on my first uni summer holidays. Originally I just planned to visit my friends in the city and travel around for two months, but I soon started to feel that wasn't enough – I wanted to actually do something, experience Mexico in a richer way that would bring me into contact with its people and to learn about the lives they lived, away from the beautified tourist trail (in a country where a substantial percentage of the population still lives on less than \$2 a day).

When I arrived in the most visited border city in the world, Tijuana, I had already spent an amazing month in and around Mexico City. Tijuana was a big change of scene, but the reality was actually a nice surprise compared to the awful stories and bad reputation I had heard about in Mexico City. But TJ sure ain't pretty! It lacks the charm and prettiness of many other Mexican towns and cities. But if you focus on the people and character of Tijuana, it can be just as enchanting and fun as anywhere else I have visited in the country. It's got more than its fair share of delicious tacos (of a dazzling array of body parts, if you're so inclined), bizarre and hilarious and warm-hearted characters, and plenty of sunshine (even if it is might chilly in the mornings and nights!) – what more do you need?!

There are the nasty parts of Tijuana, too, but only if you go looking for them. Avenida Revolución is best avoided at all costs, unless of course you enjoy being heckled, ogled and confronted by the horrendous sight of poor donkeys painted as zebras, parked in front of painted 'Mexican' photo backdrops. Truly Tacky Tourism.

I was given an enthusiastic welcome at the airport by Ana and Hector -complete with sign!- and a very warm welcome by the rest of the T2T team when I arrived home. Guille, Jesús, Ana, Gato and everyone else I met from T2T all opened their arms and hearts to me from my very first day in Tijuana.

My first week in Tijuana ran on typical Mexican time – I spent a lot of the week organizing where and when I would be volunteering. To be fair, I arrived just after Xmas, so many of the places volunteers usually work, including schools, weren't operating on normal hours, if at all.

The second week, things really got going, and I had classes in an arts center, Artistika, where I taught about half a dozen young kids before their capoeira class three afternoons a week; and in Afabi, an HIV clinic, twice a week, where I was working with the amazing half-time-paid, half-time-volunteer staff. In my last two weeks in

Tijuana, I also worked five days a week at CRREAD, a drug and alcohol rehab center. I loved working in such different environments because it meant the people I was working with, the teaching itself and the atmospheres were so varied.

Classes with the kids in Artistika were very casual and relaxed. The kids were far more interested in testing (and improving) my Spanish, asking questions about Australia and playing Alphabet Bingo than they were in learning English. But I think the intercultural exchange is much more important than them remembering how to say the days of the week and the colors of the rainbow in English.

My most 'serious' class was with the staff at Afabi, who needed workplace English to deal with clients and write reports, but also wanted to practice their conversation skills. 'Serious' doesn't mean boring, though! Every day at Afabi was an absolute joy – they are a beautiful group of people to work with.

The guys at CRREAD were an absolute hoot! They constantly kept me on my toes, but were so enthusiastic and keen to learn, and made me truly welcome and comfortable in what was, for me, a very new environment.

Guille, T2T's Tijuana co-ordinator, reminded me one morning before I went to CRREAD that the most important thing with the classes wasn't that the students learnt English – it was that they felt respected, accepted and a part of society. I would add that the most important thing in the classes is never the English, but the cultural, and personal exchange that happens between you and your 'students'. All in all I had 25 'students', but I also had 25 teachers. I was shown so much gratitude for my work, but the truth is that the amount of English I taught was tiny in comparison to the amount I learnt about Mexico, its culture and people, and the lives of those I 'taught'.

Actually, make that about 35 teachers. Everyone involved in T2T in Tijuana became a special friend and a member of my ever-growing familia Mexicana. Guille and Jesús lived next door and were always there to help, have a chat, share a laugh (and the odd bottle of tequila!). Guille may not speak English, but she sure knows how to communicate, and you'll never be short of a conversation if you mention Cuba or Silvio Rodríguez!! Jesús was always ready to help and listen, armed with his infectious smile and laugh, and he's an amazingly patient Spanish teacher! Gato was the coolest TJ tour guide I could have imagined, and his truck is the reddest truck I have ever ridden in!! Ana was my other half for the first week, showing me around, making sure I knew where to go and how to get there, and generally being a wonderful companion and generous friend. Cooking classes with Nachito were delicious, obviously (even his name sounds culinary!). I even learnt how to shake my groove thing salsa-style with Pablo next door at the great night-spot El Lugar del Nopal.

My month in Tijuana with T2T was a super-special one. I had hoped to have a challenging, interesting and rewarding experience volunteering, and I did. What I hadn't anticipated was the number of great friends I

would make, and just how truly great they would be – William James.  
Mexico is an incredible country, full of amazing histories, diverse peoples, spectacular landscapes, delicious food, wonderful music, and beautiful hearts. It's got its share of chaos, poverty, and conflict.  
But I have to agree with William James that “Wherever you are, it is your friends who make the world,” and life sure is beautiful in Mexico.

## About the Author

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