

## Teaching English...the real life

By Matthew Johnson

Both of my phone alarms sound simultaneously, startling my head from the pillow. I hit the snooze button on each, a quick nine minute siesta, until my bare feet actually have to touch down on the cold floor of my room. The sun's just started peeking through my shutters. It's Thursday. As an English teacher in Madrid, Thursday is the new Friday. Wednesday, the new Thursday. No one works Fridays – a constant string of three day weekends stretch throughout our calendar year. I'm not by any means a morning person, but the daily battle with my double snooze button is easier on Thursday. Everything is easier on Thursday – especially this Thursday because tomorrow is one of the dozen Spanish holidays so none of my students have to work. Today's going to be a good day.

I dress and eat quickly and pop in to the café downstairs for a small shot of hot liquid energy. Spanish coffee is one of the most powerful weapons of motivation in my alarm clock arsenal. Delicious, fresh, quick, and strong – and black. The barmen downstairs don't know me by name, but as soon as I pull up a stool at the bar with a groggy, "*Buenos dias,*" my coffee is already being poured. I feel like a local, like I belong. I feel like I've managed to elbow my way into having a place in this city. This feeling is another weapon.

Heart pumping with caffeine, I scurry along with the crowd across Plaza Colon to the metro station – a five minute uphill hike. The gigantic Spanish flag flutters with the light springtime breeze as the sun climbs its way over the skyline of downtown. There isn't a cloud in the sky. The flag, the plaza, the immaculate blue sky like a clean slate – all weapons in the alarm clock arsenal.

The metro's crowded, as usual. People all hustling, late, typical Spanish. No one speaks. I pop out my head phones while jogging down the escalator to better hear the daily morning metro performer of Alonso Martinez. With his karaoke machine and keyboard remixes of "Hey Jude" and "I Want It That Way" by the Backstreet Boys, his gold chains, sequined shirt, pot belly and bowler hat, he reminds me of a wannabe Vegas lounge singer. He must smoke two packs a day – again, typical Spaniard – but neither age nor lack of talent will stop him as he closes his eyes and belts out his hoarse lyrics for the enjoyment of all functioning eardrums coming and going this morning on line 5. Like so many other things in Madrid, none of this makes the slightest bit of sense – but it does give me a good laugh. Another weapon.

My first class is at a sports newspaper called Diario AS. It's my favorite class. By far. Not only are the students incessantly cheerful, but they are, without fail, at least 20 minutes late, every day. Now, this would appear to be a real inconsiderate hassle to the uninitiated. But you learn quickly that the Spanish do live up to some of their stereotypes – you can either take advantage of it or let them drive you nuts. I decide to run with it. During this down time I'm extremely productive. I plan lessons for the week, fill out my teaching paperwork, study Spanish, or write. Pre-class downtime: another weapon.

Class starts at 9. It ends at 10:30. My students arrive at 9:30. My paycheck doesn't suffer. If anything, I'm just happy to be here rather than in Torrejon de Ardoz, the industrial armpit of Madrid, where I have my other morning class. But whatever. At 9:30, my students arrive, telling me that since today is "Friday" we should forgo the phrasal verb worksheets, and opt instead for a Spanish breakfast at the café next door. My favorite class again, like I said. So, while sipping coffee #2 (this one with milk and sugar) and nibbling fresh tortilla (Spanish egg and potato casserole – also another weapon) my students drill me, as they always do, with questions concerning every aspect of my life. They study me like a museum exhibit, prod and poke my mind like a concerned psychotherapist, and, hanging on my every word, are prone to fits of spontaneous laughter like fascinated children. I am, essentially, the court jester. Their bi-weekly morning entertainment. Kids have cartoons. My students have me.

When class/breakfast is over I have four hours to kill until my next group. Once again, another half empty glass situation. I choose to be optimistic and continue demonstrating my Spanishness by taking a siesta. Who doesn't honestly love naps? Honestly? This type of thing would never fly in the Anglo Saxon world. Alas, Spain. Siesta: another weapon.

My next class is at 2:30. I struggle but win snooze button battle #2, and hop back on the metro to the Picasso Tower, 20 minutes travelling in total. The company is Merrill Lynch, their office on the 39<sup>th</sup> floor. When I walk into the Merrill Lynch English is being spoken everywhere. It's like a strange dream where I've been teleported home but everyone's talking with a Spanish accent. I'm not certain, but this, I imagine, is what it must feel like to live in Miami. Although I've arrived on time, my students are still fifteen minutes late. So I commence spending my time wisely by studying Spanish. For the record, my Spanish is offensively awful. It is however, functional enough to communicate basic needs (i.e. ordering and paying for beer and coffee). Nonetheless, it needs work. My students, four women of about 30, take English classes because they actually use English in their jobs. Finally they all file in at 3:15.

Unlike my morning class, when tardiness is more or less acceptable, this is a frustrating nuisance. Like a well planned attack, they strategically time their entrances by ten minute intervals. This causes me to stop teaching, say hello, ask how they are, pass them the attendance sheet, tell them what page we're on, and restart. The Spanish salutation process takes about ten minutes. They come in every ten minutes. There are four of them. Therefore, I spend about half the class period studying Spanish and saying hello. Once again this has no effect on my paycheck. When we do cover a lesson, it's most often from a textbook provided by my teaching agency (teaching agencies are companies hired by businesses to hire teachers to teach their employees, if you follow me). Everyone I know works for one.

My next class, luckily enough, is in the same building, for one hour. Thankfully, my students are all on time today. They are three guys in their early twenties who do some type of computer work. I'm not sure exactly. Regardless, they speak a much lower

level of English than the women, which is exactly what I prefer. See, teaching advanced students can sometimes be difficult because the students have studied English for so long. It's hard to keep them entertained, and hard to teach them things they haven't already covered a hundred times before. But for more elementary English, no matter what you do in a lesson, the students are going to get something out of it. You can also witness their progression, and even take credit for some of it. This makes you feel great, like you're doing something useful with your life – spreading the English language, giving back to the global community. Basically at the end of the week, it makes you want to give yourself a great big pat on the back.

After the hour I have teaching the guys, I head to my last class of the week, two stops north, at AIG. My agency is on the way there, so I typically stop in to grab some teaching materials, sit down to eat a sandwich, and practice my horrible Spanish with our secretary who speaks no English. At 6:00 sharp I arrive to the AIG office and pull out my laptop to do some pre-class downtime writing. At 6:15, as always, my students show up, all smiles, ready for the long weekend. This class, like the one before, is elementary. Today we are learning how to give directions in English. But instead of learning how to give directions in English, all my students want to do is talk about their weekends, so I sit quietly and correct their mistakes on the whiteboard. One is going to visit family in Toledo. The other, to a park somewhere to enjoy the weather with his family. I tell them that sounds nice. I'll probably just stay in Madrid and relax with friends. By relaxing with friends I mean we'll go to clubs all weekend and stay out until the sun is up and cafes are open for breakfast. I don't tell them the last part. They nod their heads and smile as I talk. I think they understand about 50% of what I say.

For the rest of the hour, as we stumble through prepositions and street maps, my eyes can't help from darting to the clock every minute or so. The weekend is so close. I can smell it. It's the Thursday ritual of waiting for that school's-out-for-summer feeling. The rest of the week flies by, all four days stuffed together into one hour. 7:30 does finally come, of course, and it's all I can do to keep from flinging my textbooks into the air like graduation caps in celebration of my three day freedom.

Another week gone by. Another set of satisfied students. Another job well done. After giving myself a great big pat on the back I hop on a bus with the rest of the rush hour weekenders and head home to drop off my laptop and textbooks – the old workweek ball & chain. Now with anchor up, it's time to set sail once again on another madrileño weekend adventure. I've heard it quoted before, and I'm too lazy to check for sure, that Madrid has the highest percentage of bars and restaurants per sq. km than any other city in the world. I don't know for sure, like I said, but I believe it. The possibilities are endlessly overwhelming. Visions of tapas and frosty mugs have been dancing in my head all week, and now is the time to make the dream a reality. With a belly full of olives, chorizo, and Spanish beer, who knows where the night wind will blow us? Who knows who we'll meet? Who knows what we'll do? Who knows? That's the beauty of it all; this strange Spanish odyssey. And, well, that's my Thursday for ya.