This month’s Spotlight features Erin, a former History and Global Studies major who’s bridging communication gaps around the world, teaching English as a Second Language from Turkey to San Francisco.

Erin McGrath:  
ESL (English as a Second Language) Instructor

What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I am an ESL (English as Second Language) instructor teaching at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. As the name suggests, AAU is an arts university whose programs attract students from all over the world. The university has a large international student body, and so has a large ESL program to support the language needs of those students. I teach academic English in order to prepare our international students for their course content and careers.

How did you get to where you are?

At UCSB, I majored in Global Studies and History. I originally wanted to go into politics—specifically diplomacy—but realized early on that path wasn’t for me. Once I made that realization, it was difficult for me to figure out what I wanted to do instead. It was while studying abroad in Spain, working as a TA in an English course, that I realized that being an ESL teacher was everything I desired in a career. It would allow me to do something meaningful (teaching), while being able to live abroad, and it was actually directly relevant to my undergraduate major. One of the topics often covered when discussing globalization is how it affects language, and English is universally considered to be the “global language” (whether or not that’s a good thing is up to debate). For many people in non-English speak-

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ing countries, learning English is crucial in order to succeed, especially in certain fields, and I realized that by teaching, I had the potential to have the kind of widespread, positive impact that I’d been looking for.

After I graduated, I took a year off, and then applied to MA TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programs. I received my Master’s from San Francisco State University, and was immediately hired to teach at a university in Turkey. After Turkey, I moved back to San Francisco, and began working at the Academy of Art University. I love teaching. I love that every day, I not only get to interact with people from all over the world, but that I get to do something that makes a positive contribution to others’ lives.

What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?

The best experience from undergrad was definitely studying abroad. I had always wanted to travel and live abroad, and so UCSB’s large study abroad program was one of the things that drew me to the university in the first place. I spent my junior year studying in Granada, Spain, and I can say, with absolutely no doubts, that this is the single experience that has led me to where I am today.

First off, the experience itself was amazing, and I learned so much about myself and the world. I was forced out of my comfort zone every single day in adjusting to the new culture and having to use Spanish to get anything done. I got to travel all around Europe (and even Morocco!), visit places that I’d only ever heard about, experience the famous Spanish nightlife, eat tapas...I could go on. By the end of my year, I was kicking and fighting not to get on the plane back to the U.S., and swore I’d be back someday.

Most importantly, it was in Granada that I was introduced to the ESL field. While there, I and a few other UC students worked as teaching assistants in a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) course for Spanish students wanting to become English teachers. (Since we were native speakers, we were considered experts by default, and so asked to be TAs.) Without that experience, I don’t know if I would have ever considered entering the ESL field.
Finally, studying abroad, besides motivating my career, has made me more compassionate as a teacher here in the U.S. While I have taught abroad, it is a completely different experience than being a student. Entering a new country as an English teacher, you come in with a position of power as a coveted native speaker, and most schools will assist, if not provide, you with everything you need. As a student, you don’t have that. I remember the anxiety of having to try to find an apartment, of struggling to take classes in Spanish, of learning how the public transportation system worked, of trying to make friends. Because of this, I make myself available to my students now. They are experiencing the same things I did, and I make sure that they have someone they can turn to if they need it.

**What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?**

This is kind of tricky. When I began undergrad, the general belief was still, “it doesn’t really matter what you study, so long as you get a degree.” However, when I graduated in 2008, it was the beginning of the economic downturn, and it was difficult to enter the job market as a recent grad whilst people were being laid off. Looking back, I think if I had been more involved in college, it would have made me a more competitive applicant upon graduation. My first two years at UCSB, though I worked hard in class, I think I was too uncertain to take advantage of other opportunities, like joining clubs or pursuing internships or building relationships with my professors. What I did do was work part-time, and it was that, more than anything, that landed me my first job after graduating. Senior year, I finally felt comfortable enough to try to build relationships with my professors, and that was key for getting into graduate school. Though I eventually figured it all out, I wish I had started sooner.

**What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?**

Without a doubt, the sense of community at UCSB. I don’t know if it was the small town of Isla Vista, the proximity to the beach, the perfect weather, or the sense of solidarity from being the constant butt of party school jokes, but UCSB was always a place where I felt like I just belonged. Though everyone worked hard and was serious about their studies, there was never a sense of competitiveness or stress like in other places. We formed study groups, we let

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strangers borrow our notes, we edited each others’ papers, and we high fived when we all got As. Everyone seemed like they were on the same team, even if we didn’t have the same kind of intense school spirit that schools with football teams might have. I never felt pressured to be any one thing while there; I could just be. I believe that being a Gaucho means having a good sense of what’s important in life: work hard, get things done, but remember to take the time to sit and enjoy the sunset every so often.

Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?

Study abroad! Even if you can only go for a summer, do it. Isla Vista and Santa Barbara are great, but you owe it to yourself to take advantage of what an amazing opportunity EAP is. Also, I tell this to my current students all the time, but no one ever listens: remember to sleep and to eat healthy. I know it can be rough, but treat your body well. And go to office hours! Seriously—it’s lonely when you guys don’t come visit us.

Erin welcomes UCSB students to contact her via LinkedIn with questions about the field and for advice on how to use your time at UCSB to become competitive in the teaching world. Requests to look over student resumes or inquiries about open positions will not be responded to.

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